

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair, seen from the back and side. She is wearing a light blue denim shirt and has her right hand pressed against her ear, as if she is listening intently. In the background, a vast, dense crowd of people is visible, stretching across a field towards a range of blue mountains under a clear sky. The overall scene suggests a film festival or a large public gathering.

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**CINEMATIC CONTINUITIES,  
CHANGES AND CHALLENGES IN EUROPE:  
REFLECTIONS ON RECENT SHIFTS IN EUROPEAN CINEMA**

EDITED BY DANIEL BILTEREYST, ELENA GIPPONI AND ANDREA MICONI

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CINEMATIC  
CONTINUITIES,  
CHANGES  
AND  
CHALLENGES  
IN  
EUROPE





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

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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Looking back on *Napoleon's* world premiere in Paris and its global success, it is difficult not to see the historical reference to, as well as the similarities and differences with Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) [Fig. 2].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

## Keywords

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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/17vbhqq/vanessa\\_kirby\\_ridley\\_scott\\_joaquin\\_phoenix\\_attend/](https://www.reddit.com/r/joaquinphoenix/comments/17vbhqq/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 *Prearity 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 cinemascapes 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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# Neoliberalism and the Mutation of Social Realism in Contemporary European Cinema

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Over the last couple of decades film scholars have begun building a critical vocabulary to theorize the new kinds of social relations depicted in the new European cinema of precarity, from “flexible solidarity” and “precarious intimacies” to “the gift economy” and “cruel optimism”. Although the European cinema of precarity continues the legacy of older film traditions like French poetic realism, Italian neorealism and British kitchen sink realism, thus inscribing itself within a well-established European tradition of social realism, the realism of precarity films is often refracted through specific genre tropes or filmic devices—e.g., allegory, experimental cinema techniques, black comedy, cinema verité cinematography etc.—as though social realism is no longer able to render visual the hidden pathologies of neoliberalism or to capture the complexity of Europe’s current political, economic, and moral crisis.

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## DEFINING NEOLIBERALISM

The difficulty of defining “neoliberalism” has less to do with the fact that it is an abstract concept and more with the fact that it has become common sense, fully ingrained in our daily lives: think, for instance, of slogans like “design your thinking”, “design your life”, concepts like “the creative entrepreneur” and, of course, the economics of well-being, from step counter apps to tools for measuring emotional and mental health and the ever-expanding market for self-help books. It is helpful to distinguish between three main approaches to neoliberalism: Foucauldian, Marxist, and epochalist (Hardin 2014). In theorizing neoliberalism, Foucauldians like Wendy Brown and Maurizio Lazzarato draw on Foucault’s fourth lecture in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008). Brown (2003) defines neoliberalism as a political rationality that extends and disseminates market values to all institutions and social action. Similarly, and contrary to the common but erroneous view of neoliberalism as a form of market fundamentalism, Lazzarato insists that “for neoliberalism, the market is not the spontaneous or anthropological expression of the tendency of human beings to exchange, as Adam Smith believed. [...] [C]ompetition, like the market, is not the result of the ‘natural play’ of appetites, instincts, or behaviours. It

is rather a 'formal play' of inequalities that must be instituted and constantly nourished and maintained" (Lazzarato 2009, 116–17). Marxists like David Harvey dismiss the idea of neoliberalism as "a new economic theory or organization of world power [seeing it instead] as a variant of a very old concept: the current version of the dominant ideology that serves the class in power" (Harvey 2005, 160). Unlike Foucauldians and Marxists, epochalists use neoliberalism as one of a set of epochal concepts to describe recent economic developments in conceptual terms. Here neoliberalism loses some of its specificity as a term insofar as epochalists attribute different political, economic, cultural and social phenomena—e.g., globalization, financialization, deregulation, economic inequality, individualization, entrepreneurialism—to neoliberalism (Hardin 2014). The differences between these definitions notwithstanding, most scholars agree that neoliberalism, understood as a politico-epistemological program rather than simply free-market fundamentalism, as a particular production of subjectivity that constitutes individual subjects as "human capital" rather than simply as a way of governing economies or states, has led to the profound destruction of social bonds and to the production of economic, social, and political vulnerability and precarity.

Originally signifying a social condition linked to poverty, "precarity" refers to the reduction of welfare state provisions, the suppression of unions, the growth of the knowledge economy, and the rise in flexible and precarious forms of labour. The concept of "precarity" has become widespread in debates about labor conditions in the creative industries, e.g. the rise of "immaterial labor" (Lazzarato 1996), the collaboration between regional policymakers and global film industry corporations to use film and television production as a cure for sluggish economies by providing a steady stream of transient, low-wage workers for location shooting through legislated incentives (Mayer 2016), Hollywood's outsourcing of production to developing countries to realize cost advantages via flexible labor, low wages and tax incentives (Miller and Leger 2001), and the general exploitation of creative workers in the gig economy (Morgan and Nelligan 2018).

The term "precariat", on the other hand, was popularized by Guy Standing (2014), who argued that the restructuring of global and national economies in the last 40 years has produced a new global class characterised by chronic insecurity. While scholars initially welcomed "the precariat" as the latest incarnation of the "subaltern", a term that has allegedly lost its analytical power, "the precariat" remains a heavily contested concept because it "attempts to bring together too many different heterogeneous strata of the population and because it excludes segments of what Standing defines (too narrowly) as the working class, which still enjoys relatively stable and protected employment situations" (Fraser 2013, 11), in short, because it fails to acknowledge the various ways in which class is increasingly displaced by new modes of collectivization and social organization. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of "the multitude" (2005), which includes not only blue-collar labour traditionally associated with the working class but new forms of labour that have emerged in post-industrial society,

including “affective labour” and “immaterial labour”, offers an alternative way of thinking precarity beyond the type of identitarian or representationalist politics that Isabell Lorey criticizes in her compelling account of precarity as a form of political mobilization, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (2015).

## “UNBELONGING”: THE NEW EUROPEAN CINEMA OF PRECARITY

In line with these developments in political and economic theory, over the last couple of decades film scholars have begun building a critical vocabulary to theorize the new kinds of social relations that define our neoliberal age, from Michael Gott’s “flexible solidarity” (2018), and Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber’s “precarious intimacies” (2020) to Martin O’Shaughnessy’s “gift economy” (2020). This new vocabulary of social relations is part of a more general tendency to rethink precarity as a political tool rather than a socioeconomic condition from which there is no escape, and thus to envision new forms of solidarity and collectivity, as Martin O’Shaughnessy does in *Looking Beyond Neoliberalism: French and Francophone Belgian Cinema and the Crisis* (2022), or as Francesco Sticchi does in *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (2022), in which he tries to identify ethical alternatives to the risk-taking, self-optimizing neoliberal “entrepreneur of the self”.

My aim in this article is not to discuss precarity in terms of government policies or changes in the conditions of film production but rather to consider some of the stylistic shifts in the representation of precarity in what has come to be known as “the new European cinema of precarity”, a term that might, at first glance, seem to resurrect a now obsolete notion of “European identity” which, up until the 1990s, still figured in studies of European cinema. However, recent studies of European cinema (Morgan-Tamosunas and Rings 2003; Berghahn and Sternberg 2010; Harrod, Liz, and Timoshkina 2015; Ravetto-Biagioli 2017; Trifonova 2020) have sought to rethink the idea of “European identity” and “European cinema” and to refigure positively the decline of “national cinema”—one of the three main categories through which European cinema has traditionally been theorized, the other two being “art cinema” and “auteur cinema”—as an opportunity rather than a sign of what Thomas Elsaesser calls European cinema’s “new marginality” (Elsaesser 2018).

For film scholars who explore European cinema in terms of different affective responses to the growing ethnic, racial, cultural and religious diversity in Europe, the question of identity (national and/or trans-national)—i.e., the constant writing and rewriting of the self, and thus the ongoing exploration of identity’s *conditions of possibility*—continues to be one of the distinguishing features of European cinema. However, in a growing number of recent European films, largely in response to what Lauren Berlant describes as the attrition of social fantasies like upward mobility, job security, meritocracy, and political and social equality,

questions of *national and trans-national identity and belonging* are increasingly displaced by a sense of *unbelonging* experienced by a growing number of Europeans, regardless of their national or citizenship status. This profound sense of *unbelonging* finds expression in the affective language of anxiety, contingency and precarity that pervades different national cinemas, both within Europe and beyond it, giving rise to a "cinema of precarity", whose precarious protagonists constitute a new "affective class" (Berlant 2011, 72). Importantly, in the films Berlant discusses precarity extends beyond the expression of an economic condition—and thus beyond a particular social class—to indicate an entire "affective environment" (2011, 201–02), a sense of individualised insecurity, and the loss of social and existential status. Ultimately, Berlant remains ambivalent about the political potential of the cinema of precarity: while she acknowledges the ways in which these films investigate "new potential conditions of solidarity emerging from subjects not with similar historical identities or social locations but with similar adjustment styles to the pressures of the emergent new ordinariness" (2011, 202), she is skeptical of the perverse adjustment strategy of "cruel optimism" that she locates at the centre of these films.

## THE POETICS OF THE NEW EUROPEAN CINEMA OF PRECARITY

The question what makes a film political has always preoccupied film scholars. While some locate the political significance of a film in its formal properties—e.g., the blurring of fiction and documentary techniques in *Life Is Ours* (*La vie est à nous*, Jean Renoir, 1936) is said to account for the importance of that film in the history of Left filmmaking in France (Buchsbaum 1988, 283)—others caution that an excessive focus on aesthetic form might divert attention from the political issues a film sets out to explore (Wayne 2001, 58). In the long history of this debate realism, specifically "social realism", has enjoyed a privileged status: to categorize a film as an example of "social realism" has generally meant to see the film as socially and/or politically engaged. The "new European cinema of precarity" (Bardan and O'Healy 2013) clearly inscribes itself within a long-standing European tradition of socially conscious realist cinema, building upon the legacy of late 1920s–1930s British documentaries of working-class life, 1930s French poetic realist films permeated by a sense of pessimism and fatalism, postwar Italian neorealist films featuring working-class characters, real locations and documentary style, 1930s and 1940s Hollywood melodramas populated by suffering protagonists dealing with conflicts between personal desires and mounting social pressures, the British New Wave, particularly kitchen sink films exploring the fragmentation of the working class, and French "New Realism".

Yet the realism of the new cinema of precarity is often refracted through particular genre tropes or filmic devices—e.g., allegory, experimental cinema techniques, black comedy, cinema vérité cinematography—suggesting



Fig. 1  
*Early One Morning* (*De bon matin*, Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011)

that traditional social realism might no longer be sufficient to capture the complexity of Europe's political and moral crisis. The post-industrial nostalgia that permeates much of the new cinema of precarity points to the vanishing—or, more precisely, the mutation—of both the traditional working class, whose experiences and struggles used to constitute the main subject of social realist cinema, and of the tradition of social realist cinema itself now that the latter has lost its main subject. Furthermore, films centered around white-collar protagonists tend to explore the reasons for, and the experience of, precarity not within the framework of social realism but rather through the conventions of what appears to be an emerging hybrid genre—what I would call the “workplace thriller” or “corporate psycho-thriller”—which combines elements of film noir, psychological thrillers and corporate melodramas and privileges subjective over objective approaches to storytelling. Think of the opening sequence of *Early One Morning* (*De bon matin*, Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011), in which Paul, manager at the International Credit and Trade Bank, arrives in the office as usual, takes out a gun, shoots his boss and another employee, locks himself in his office and, as he waits for the police to arrest him, reflects on the events leading up to this day [Fig. 1]. The film engages directly with the 2008 financial crisis—the dialogue is full of references to sub-prime loans, refinancing, and foreclosure—and reveals the deepening psychopathologies of neoliberalism through the recurring motifs of psychotic breakdown (Paul's hallucinatory visions of his boss), suicide (Paul's suicidal thoughts following his demotion to another position in the “middle office”), and murder (Paul's murder of his boss). Like *Early One Morning*, films made after the 2008 global financial crisis reflect the deepening pathologies of neoliberalism: Vincent's symbolic or metaphorical suicide in *Time Out* (*L'Emploi du temps*, Laurent Cantet, 2001) gives way to Kessler's psychotic breakdown in *Heartbeat Detector* (*La Question humaine*, Nicolas Klotz, 2007), Gregoire's real suicide in *Father of My Children* (*Le Père de mes enfants*, Mia Hansen-Love, 2009), Paul's murder/suicide in *Early One Morning*.

Many of the films representative of the new cinema of precarity hark back to

older film traditions that are not necessarily part of their own respective national film histories: e.g., Cornish director Mark Jenkins' *Bait* (2019) invokes silent cinema, British kitchen sink realism and Luchino Visconti's early neorealist film *The Earth Trembles* (*La terra trema*, 1948); *Happy as Lazzaro* (*Lazzaro felice*, Alice Rohrwacher, 2018) combines elements of time-travel and ghost story films with the magic neorealism of the Taviani brothers; *White God* (*Fehér isten*, Kornel Mundruczo, 2014) updates the tradition of allegorical, socially critical Hungarian films of the 1960s and 1970s with elements of fantasy and horror films; *The Nothing Factory* (*A fábrica de nada*, Pedro Pinho, 2017) combines British kitchen sink realism with French Nouvelle Vague influences; *The Measure of a Man* (*La Loi du marché*, Stéphane Brizé, 2015) and *At War* (*En guerre*, Stéphane Brizé, 2018) recall neorealist working-class chronicles of unemployment; *Glory* (*Slava*, Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov, 2016) continues the legacy of pre-1989 subversive comedies while recalling the darkly absurdist films of the Czech New Wave. The particular way, in which these films imagine precarity—as a state, an event, or a process—has bearing on where the films locate the possibility for social and political transformation—in a particular class, in fighting for a particular good or cause, or in a particular political stance. For instance, while one film might present precarity as a historical contingency, a consequence of the replacement of one political utopia (communism) with another (capitalism)—e.g., *Glory*—, another might depict precarity as an endless, sustainable apocalypse (*The Nothing Factory*).

## BEYOND SOCIAL REALISM

The new European cinema of precarity is thus distinguished by a wider range of genre and stylistic responses to the precarity of life under neoliberalism: from allegory and magical realism (*White God*, *Happy as Lazzaro*, *Transit*, Christian Petzold, 2018), experimental films (*Bait*), comedies (*Glory*, *My Piece of the Pie*, *Ma part du gâteau*, Cédric Klapisch, 2011; *Crash Test Aglaé*, Eric Gravel, 2017), social dramas (*The Measure of a Man*, *At War*), psycho-thrillers (*Early One Morning*, *The Origin of Evil*, *L'Origine du mal*, Sebastien Marnier, 2022) and factory musicals (*The Nothing Factory*).

In Kornel Mundruczo's *White God* 13-year-old Lili and her mixed-breed dog Hagen are subject to a large mongrel fee imposed by the Hungarian government, which permits only pure "Hungarian" breeds. Lili's estranged father refuses to pay the fee, drives Hagen to the outskirts of Budapest and abandons him there. The film follows Hagen's journey through the city as he befriends other street dogs before being caught by a homeless man who sells him to a dog fighting ring. During his first fight Hagen kills his opponent and runs away but is caught by animal control officers and taken to the city dog pound, from where he eventually escapes but not before freeing the other dogs, who follow him into the city, where Hagen methodically kills everyone who had harmed him. In the film's climactic scene Hagen is about to kill Lili and her father when

she decides to play Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* on her trumpet, bringing Hagen and the other dogs to their knees. *White God* continues the tradition of allegorical, socially critical Hungarian films of the 1960s and 1970s, but it expands the genre palette to include elements of revenge fantasy, adventure film, melodrama, Soviet cinema, Alfred Hitchcock, and post-colonial literature (it was inspired by Coetzee's *Disgrace*). The film received mixed reviews: e.g., while Michael Sragow objected to the hypocritical depiction of Hungary's and Europe's outcasts as both "naturally loyal and affectionate" (like dogs) and as potential terrorists once they decide to rebel,<sup>1</sup> Samuel La France pointed to Mundruczo's ignorance of the implications of his choice of Liszt's piece—written by a German composer who "infamously overstated the piece's roots in Gypsy folk songs and downplayed its actual heritage in Hungarian verbunkos, recruitment songs used for nationalistic-militaristic ends"—as evidence of "the wrongheadedness of his allegorical construction".<sup>2</sup> Mundruczo has spoken at length about his dissatisfaction with what he calls dismissively "sociological films": "I couldn't tell the story of a gypsy family in Hungary even if I wanted to. I think that if you make a sociological film, you move even farther away from the truth. [...] [F]olktales and fables say more about our reality and life than realism can. Of course, I can watch a realist, minimalist movie, but I always have a sense of 'Yes, but that's journalism.'"<sup>3</sup> Mundruczo's words, which recall Michelangelo Antonioni's reflections on his break from neorealism—"Nowadays it's no longer important to make a film about a man whose bicycle has been stolen. It's important to see what is inside this man whose bicycle was stolen, what are his thoughts, his feelings"<sup>4</sup>—suggest that it's no longer sufficient to make a social problem film about the precarious lives of minorities. Leaving aside Mundruczo's reluctance (or inability?) to distinguish "realism" from "reality", one wonders whether by leaving the terms of his allegory about racial relations and rising nationalism in Eastern Europe broad enough to accommodate any marginalized, dispossessed and victimized group—including the "precariat", Hungarian ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, and the homeless—the director invites us to see them as interchangeable. The *allegorical* approach to precarity—a subject Mundruczo apparently sees as interchangeable with related subjects like immigration policies, racism, colonialism, and class struggle—ultimately determines the film's vision of a possible response to the political and ethical crisis the film depicts. Insofar as allegories, like fables and parables, have a pedagogical value, they appeal to common sense and *presuppose* the existence of shared universal

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1 <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/white-god-kornel-mundruczo-review/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

2 <https://cinema-scope.com/currency/white-god-kornel-mundruczo-hungary-germanysweden/>. On how Hungarian Liszt actually is, see <http://faculty.ce.berkeley.edu/coby/essays/liszt.htm> (accessed March 1, 2023).

3 <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/ndnf-interview-kornel-mundruczo-white-god/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

4 <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/category/directors-antonioni/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

Fig. 2.  
*Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019)



values like “humanity”, “hospitality”, and “love”; yet it is precisely *the absence* of such shared values that the film seeks to expose. Ironically, Mundruczo’s allegorical approach, which deliberately challenges traditional social realism’s implicit didactic tendency, ends up simply rendering that tendency explicit.

If Mundruczo’s reluctance to make “a social problem film” pushes him in the direction of allegory, Mark Jenkin’s strategy of escaping the social problem film “ghetto” in the visually experimental *Bait* is to tap into the melodramatic address of silent cinema (expressive close ups, Eisenstein-inspired editing, post-dubbed dialogues), the mythic quality of *The Earth Trembles*, the visual poetry of Robert Bresson’s partial images, and the realism of British kitchen sink drama, and to refract the “social problem”—the disappearance of Cornwall’s traditional way of life—through an aesthetic one, the obsolescence of 16mm film. Shot on 16mm film and hand-processed, *Bait* centers on Martin Ward, a taciturn fisherman who resents the gentrifying intruders taking over his once-thriving Cornish fishing village. Martin and his brother Steven have been forced to sell their father’s harborside cottage to the Leighs, posh Londoners who have transformed it into a holiday retreat. While Martin still scrapes a living selling his catch of fish and lobster door-to-door, Steven has adapted to the new times by using their father’s boat for sightseeing trips. The escalating tensions between the two brothers, and between Martin and the incomers, threaten to boil over into physical violence, while the Leighs’ daughter Katie hooks up with Steven’s son Neil, with tragic consequences. Unlike Mundruczo’s allegory, which distances us from the story and the characters insofar as it asks us to split our attention between the story and the allegorical frame, Jenkin’s marriage of form and content—the fishermen’s precarious life is rendered visual through the precarious status of film in the digital era—is both aesthetically and narratively satisfying.

The post-industrial nostalgia that permeates *Bait*—numerous close ups



of Martin's hands lowering lobster traps, coded visually as "authentic" and "beautiful", are repeatedly contrasted with shots of Steven's boat full of drunken tourists [Fig. 2 e Fig. 3]—is a recurring motif in the new European cinema of precarity, which repeatedly imagines class solidarity in the narrow context of manual or industrial labour posited as the last outpost in the struggle against the neoliberal technocratic order. Charity Scribner reads post-industrial nostalgia as a response to the waning of the collective and of labour solidarity, as well as to the waning of material history in the age of the virtual, which leaves us "longing for History itself—for the touch of the real that post-industrialist virtualization threatens to subsume" (Scribner 2005, 9). A distinguishing feature of the new European cinema of precarity is the consistency with which it maps two different conceptions of work—work as a core part of one's sense of identity versus work as mere occupation—onto two different types of labour: manufacturing labour, whose decline is linked to moral and spiritual decline and, on the other hand, service sector occupations, which are generally depicted as inauthentic and degrading.

This is evident in the Bulgarian black comedy *Glory*, which begins with the stuttering railroad technician Tsanko coming upon a large amount of money on the tracks and duly notifying the local authorities. The cynical, ambitious, and literally and symbolically impotent PR executive Julia (who is undergoing IVF treatment) jumps on this opportunity to use the country bumpkin's good deed

Fig. 3.  
*Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019)



Fig. 4.  
*Glory* (Slava, Kristina  
 Grozeva and Petar  
 Valchanov, 2016)

to distract the public attention from a corruption scandal involving Bulgaria's Minister of Transport. Her PR team organizes a sham ceremony in honor of Tsanko's working-class hero [Fig. 4], at which he is rewarded with a digital watch, while his own Russian Glory/Slava-brand watch—a gift from his deceased father—is taken away from him. The rest of the film alternates between Tsanko's unsuccessful attempts to reclaim his watch and Julia's attempts to prevent him from exposing the corruption scandal at all costs (including blackmail). After a series of absurd situations, the abrupt and tragic end (Tsanko kills Julia with an axe) comes as a shock. Here post-industrial nostalgia—evident in the contrast between Tsanko's "honest" manual labor and Julia's PR shenanigans—is complicated by post-communist nostalgia for communism's stereotype of "the ordinary man" (Tsanko) who used to be "one of us" and who is now no more than a relic from another era, a part of Bulgarian history of which the neoliberal present is a malformation, "a misshapen branch extending far beyond the trunk".<sup>5</sup> The film suggests that the communist past is not dead but simply "dressed up" in neoliberal garb: the award ceremony sequence, "curated" in exactly same way as communist ceremonies, shows that "Big Brother" is still watching, party politics giving way to the politics of the image (PR). The parallels with *Bait* are unmistakable: there the brothers' family cottage is sold to wealthy Londoners, forcing Steven to abandon fishing and sell his soul to the tourist industry; here an "honest and poor" railway technician is deprived of his family heirloom and offered, as part of a cunning PR campaign, a "better" digital watch, which has no

<sup>5</sup> <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/glory-review-slava-1201831700/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

personal value for him. While *Glory* continues the legacy of Bulgarian pre-1989 subversive comedies, the film's re-coding or re-enchantment of the communist past from "authoritarian" and "ideological" to "authentic" and "real"—in contrast to the morally and spiritually sterile and precarious neoliberal present—betrays the nostalgia of many post-communist Bulgarian films for the supposedly classless communist past.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, while the potential of genres like black comedy and satire to engage critically with the neoliberal present is unquestionable, the risk of re-mythologizing the past—whether the past in question is a communist one, or one that represents an earlier stage of capitalism—is equally real.

Populated by nonprofessional actors, Pedro Pinho's quasi-musical *The Nothing Factory*, an unlikely mix of avant-garde and neorealist elements, explores the struggle of workers in an elevator factory on the outskirts of Lisbon after they learn that the factory is about to be closed. The film calls to mind kitchen sink dramas like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), but while Reisz's film depicts manufacturing work as dehumanizing and oppressive, Pinho presents it as something to fight for, rather than fight against, and as constitutive of personal identity, with workers speaking of "their" machines as extensions of their bodies ("Factory, your neck veins are here, pulsating") or addressing them as interlocutors ("Machine, you are going to get out of this torpor and get back to work"). As the workers debate possible lines of action—strike, occupation, or self-management—the factory, with its imposing silent machines, transforms into a surreal space in which to revisit the history of labor, the legacy of communism and trade unions, and the after-effects of postcolonialism. In a series of Godardian voiceovers Daniele, an Italian filmmaker interested in documenting the workers' strike, discusses precarity as the legacy of Cold War politics (the welfare state was merely an ideological response to the "threat of Communism") and colonialism ("The present crisis is not a classic crisis [but] an endless end, a sustainable apocalypse. [...] 200 years ago, European elites accepted the end of slavery only because capitalism promised much cheaper and better qualified labor"). Importantly, in the film "precarity" refers not just to precarious employment in Portugal and beyond (an Argentinian factory, also self-managed by workers, calls to place an order) but also to precarious intimacies (Zé's relationship with his Brazilian girlfriend disintegrates) and precarious national identities (there is a discussion of the decline in fertility rates across Europe and the increasing reliance on Danish sperm banks). Like the other films discussed above, *The Nothing Factory* departs from the conventions of social realism, alternating between Godard-like sequences, in which a voiceover comments on the social, economic and political effects of neoliberalism, extended dialogue scenes reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's chamber dramas, and hyper self-aware scenes in which the workers burst (unnaturally) into song. There is no attempt to synthesize these very different—stylistically, tonally, and narratively—parts of the film; instead, the director foregrounds the Frankensteinian, collage-like

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<sup>6</sup> <https://vagabond.bg/sweet-power-nostalgia-854> (accessed March 1, 2023).

nature of his film to underscore the difficulty of producing an objective, logical, coherent reading of our neoliberal present.

The tension between the tradition of social realism and the difficulty of rendering visible the abstract logic of neoliberalism is particularly evident in the recent films of Stéphane Brizé—often called “the French Ken Loach” because of his dedication to stories about working-class struggles—especially in the trilogy made up of *The Measure of a Man* (2015), *At War* (2018), and *Another World* (*Un autre monde*, 2021).

In the first few scenes of *The Measure of a Man* Thierry, an unemployed factory worker, meets with an unemployment agency employee, a financial advisor, who tells him to sell his apartment so that his loved ones are taken care of “after he is gone,” and a HR recruiter who confirms Thierry’s willingness to work flexible hours for less money only to inform him that he has no chance of getting the job he is interviewing for. Such scenes—already a genre trope of the new European cinema of precarity—foreground the central role that formerly supporting characters—bank advisers, unemployment agency employees, recruiters, often present as nothing more than disembodied voices on phone/computer platforms—now play in sustaining/determining our lives, while another scene, set at a performance management workshop during which Thierry’s peers dutifully dissect his poor body language, rhythm of speech and vocabulary, dramatizes the value of “performance” i.e., the self-management and disciplining of the neoliberal self. Once Thierry gets a job as a supermarket security guard [Fig. 5]—in another instance of post-industrial nostalgia his personal crisis follows the loss of factory work and his “demotion” to the service sector—his work life is presented as a series of ethical tests as he is asked to monitor and discipline both customers and co-workers, one of whom (Mrs. Anselmi) commits suicide after she is caught stealing coupons, or risk losing his job. The scene in which Mrs. Anselmi is fired

Fig. 5.  
*The Measure of a Man*  
(*La Loi du marché*,  
Stéphane Brizé, 2015)



(her dismissal is conveniently framed in psychological terms—she “betrayed” the company’s trust—making downsizing appear no different from a “break up”), and the scene in which HR organizes a grief management workshop to deal with feelings of guilt among employees, give the lie to an earlier retirement party scene, in which Management was seen sending off another worker with a “heartfelt” goodbye. The HR Director’s speech seeks to psychologize away the structural violence to which all employees are subjected: work did not define Mrs. Anselmi’s identity, he tells them, and so no one can really know the reason (i.e., be accountable for) for her decision to end her life. If the retirement scene celebrates the importance of work to one’s sense of self, the grief management session simply denies the feelings of dehumanization and derealization that accompany the loss of work.

Throughout the film Brizé’s hand-held camera follows Thierry from behind. In the three crucial scenes set in a little back room in the store—where “store thieves” are taken for “processing”—Thierry is positioned off to the side, the camera remaining behind him, denying us access to his face and thus to his reactions to what is happening. The camera puts the viewer in the position of an observer, a position that mirrors Thierry’s own position in these scenes, forcing us (just like Thierry) to ask ourselves what we would do in his situation. By framing every encounter in the film as an ethical test Brizé’s camera provides an alternative to neoliberalism’s reduction of social relations to quasi-metric aggregates.

*The Measure of a Man* is not “about” unemployment but about the human limits or costs of neoliberalism: as Thierry tells the agent in the office of unemployment, “You cannot treat people like this.” “You”, in this case, is not synonymous only with “the boss” or “management”—it includes everyone: e.g., when Thierry and his wife are forced to sell their mobile home by the sea, the family interested in buying it try to get Thierry to lower the price, framing their demand as an opportunity to “plan for the future, move on to other things”, echoing the way in which management usually presents the loss of jobs as an exciting opportunity to pursue new plans. Every conflict in the film is motivated by the extension of economic logic and market values (such as “performance”) to social and personal relations: selling the family mobile home at a heavily discounted price means putting a price tag on the many happy years Thierry spent there with his family; mock job interviews are about disciplining bodies to make them marketable (measuring rhythm of speech, amiability, expression).

In *At War* an automotive parts plant in Agen is deemed non-competitive and ordered closed by its German CEO (Hauser). The workers, having agreed two years prior to forego bonuses and work additional unpaid hours, vote to strike, led by Laurent. Alternating between negotiation scenes filmed like TV debates, protests and their news coverage [Fig. 6], and long stretches of waiting, the film explores the nature of collective identity and solidarity under neoliberalism. One of the biggest obstacles to the workers’ Kafkaesque struggle is identifying and gaining access to the authorities before which they can make their demands: they spend most of their time trying to identify the seats of real versus symbolic



Fig. 6.  
*At War* (*En guerre*,  
 Stéphane Brizé, 2018)

power, demanding of various government officials: “What is your purpose?” It doesn’t take them long to find out that a CEO has more power than the president but, as their union rep argues, although the State might not be all powerful, it has a moral right to side with the workers—it’s a matter of social dialogue, which takes place *outside* the justice system. What is the ultimate authority, the film asks, that dictates the resolution of such conflicts? Is it the Kantian imperative, which describes how things ought to be, or the justice system, which describes how things are? Hauser’s response is clear: he dismisses the workers’ demands as “fantasy” or “utopia”, preferring instead to “live in this world and follow the rules of this world, not the utopian one you imagine”. But as Jean-François Lyotard has argued (1989), this is not merely a matter of litigation, for these two regimes—the unwritten moral law and the judicial system—can never be reconciled.

In *The Measure of a Man* Thierry is fighting to put food on the table, while preserving his personal integrity. In *At War*, when the workers finally meet Hauser, Laurent declares forcefully that the aim of class war is not a paycheck at the end of the month: “We have come here for money? No, we don’t care about money. We want work!” Laurent is fighting for the fundamental right to have rights, including the right to work i.e., for the workers’ right not to be treated as second-hand citizens. While Brizé’s dynamic *vérité* cinematography paints the industrial debate as a class conflict, with workers and management in a perpetual face off, he is attentive to the ways in which the nature of the struggle has changed. In an early scene Laurent lectures another worker on the importance of fighting “intelligently”, a strategy illustrated by numerous scenes set in meeting rooms and hallways, during which Laurent demonstrates the importance of knowledge capital: it is because he is knowledgeable about the

company's operations in a transnational context that he is able to argue that the factory is not "non-competitive", that the real reason for closing it is to relocate operations to Romania, in a factory with fewer workers, working for less. In fact, Hauser, the CEO of the German group Dimke, of which the French company is a subsidiary, is so impressed by Laurent's knowledge of "the Market" that he tells him he would make a great CEO. To fight "intelligently" workers must think like accountants and political economists and understand the workings of global capitalism—*la loi du marché*. In fact, the failure of the strike and Laurent's symbolic act of self-immolation can be attributed precisely to the fact that the workers understand all too well *la loi du marché* inasmuch as many of them see their struggle in merely financial terms: having internalized the logic of neoliberalism, they fight for a bigger paycheck or severance package, and see their relation to other workers not in terms of a shared past, values and goals, but in economic terms. Tellingly, in *The Measure of a Man* the depressing scenes dramatizing the extension of the economic logic of neoliberalism to social and work relations alternate with intimate family scenes, in which Thierry is seen preparing dinner, dancing with his wife, and taking care of his disabled son. The absence of such intimate scenes of care from *At War* points to a failure to imagine an alternative to the cut-throat logic of neoliberalism. For a while, convivial scenes of workers drinking or celebrating together suggest the possibility of such an alternative realm of care and solidarity, but eventually even this realm is invaded by market logic, splitting the workers into factions.

Brizé closes his trilogy with *Another World*, which reverses the perspective of the previous two films. Here Vincent Lindon (who also plays the protagonist in the previous two films) plays Philippe, a regional plant's Executive Manager overseeing his multinational corporation's new layoff plan. Philippe must answer to the Paris office, whose efficiency-minded head Claire Bonnet-Guérin has, in turn, to please her US-based conglomerate. The pressures at work that Vincent Lindon's character experiences in the first and last film of the trilogy are strikingly similar: in *The Measure of a Man* a former factory worker-turned-security guard must discipline and punish those whose precarious status he himself shares; in *Another World* an executive manager is expected to act as an enforcer, punishing rather than managing those under him. Opening with a tense scene of domestic crisis, a divorce hearing, *Another World* brings the personal front and center. Following years of marital discord, Philippe's wife (Anne) has finally asked for a divorce, with her lawyer demanding a payout of €375,000. The couple's lawyers' heated deliberations about the proper way to calculate the damages suffered by either party and properly "compensate" Anne for sacrificing her career to motherhood set the tone for the film's exploration of the real human costs of neoliberal work practices.

Narratively, *Another World* picks up the thread of the previous two films: Thierry (*The Measure of a Man*) is happily married with a young disabled son; Laurent (*At War*) is separated, his grown-up daughter living in another city; Philippe (*Another World*) is in the process of a painful divorce while his disabled son Lucas, who has recently suffered a nervous breakdown, is recovering from

mental fatigue in a mental health facility. There are also echoes of other films dealing with precarity, notably the Dardennes' *Two Days, One Night* (*Deux jours, une nuit*, 2014). Philippe, essentially an honest man, tries to avoid downsizing by developing a plan that would require all managers, including him, to give up their bonuses, just as, in *Two Days, One Night*, Sandra can keep her job only if her co-workers give up their bonuses. In both films sacrifice is defined in utterly unheroic and literal—monetary—terms. Just as many European films about migrants and refugees test the ethical limits of belonging to Europe by presenting a white European citizen with the dilemma of evaluating, literally, the value of a migrant's or refugee's life against that of their own, in the new cinema of precarity the protagonist must often choose between themselves and another European: Thierry is forced to spy both on his fellow workers and customers, while Philippe is asked to denounce a colleague to prove his loyalty to the corporation. The question of the "price" one has to pay to stay financially afloat is framed in ethical or moral terms i.e., monetary debt is "translated" as ethical/moral debt, highlighting the dependence of neoliberalism's ostensibly objective, empirical socio-economic nature on normative/ethical presuppositions. Of course, the logic of neoliberalism is to deny the validity of any ethical limits to the unbridled accumulation of capital: Claire informs Philippe, in response to his critique of downsizing, that "everything is precarious: romance, love, and work", while the American corporate chief reminds him that "No one cares about your attempt to act like a Samaritan. The only law is that of the market".

The film follows the quasi-neorealist, ciné-vérité style of the previous two films in the trilogy, while also departing from it, particularly in the extended scenes of characters arguing from behind conference tables [Fig. 7] and in the extensive use of close ups, which underscore the irreducibility of affective relationships to the logic of the market, but also prioritize a psychological over a social

Fig. 7.  
*Another World* (*Un autre monde*, Stéphane Brizé, 2021)



reading of the film's central conflicts. Thus, questions of class struggle become subordinated to a character study: the film is mostly interested in *what kind of man* Philippe is, rather than in questions of class interests and class struggle. In the closing scene Philippe, reunited with his family, reads (in voiceover) a letter he wrote to Claire, in which he rejects "the deal" she offered him: "What you call 'courage', the courage to do whatever is necessary to make a company profitable for the shareholders, I call something else. The fact that you thought I would accept your 'deal' means you assumed I had become the kind of man I would not want to have as my father, son, or husband." Like *The Measure of a Man*, *Another World* ends with a gesture of refusal and redemption, affirming human values and emotions, which cannot be monetized, over neoliberal logic, without however exploring the very real and no doubt unpleasant consequences of the protagonist's moral victory.

Although the second film in Brizé's trilogy is inspired by a true story, the trilogy stakes its claim to reality and authenticity not on this fact but rather on the stylistic and ideological characteristics it shares with Italian neorealism: the focus on ordinary people, the preoccupation with current socio-political events and debates (the neoliberal restructuring of national economies, the 2007–2008 Great Recession and its repercussions), the abstention both from narrative closure and facile moral judgments, the emphasis on emotions rather than abstract ideas, the preference for a cine-verité style, and the use of the same non-professional actors across all three films, who take turns impersonating different government and corporate figures, as though Brizé meant to suggest, through this intertextuality, the mutual imbrication of corporate and state interests. Brizé's trilogy shares the episodic structure of quintessential neorealist films like *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, Vittorio De Sica, 1948). De Sica's film follows Antonio, played by a non-professional actor, as he searches for the bike stolen from him on his first day of work. Structuring the film as a (fruitless) search for the stolen bike allows De Sica to comment on various Italian institutions, including government bureaucracy, political parties, the Church, popular beliefs, the divisions within the postwar city, the decline of family values, and even sports (soccer). The "search structure" of Brizé's trilogy—the first film follows Thierry's search for a job, the second tracks Laurent's attempts to secure a meeting with the CEO of the company for which he works, and the third focuses on Philippe's attempts to negotiate between his employees and his bosses—allows Brizé, like De Sica, to paint a detailed picture of life under neoliberalism from the perspective of diverse players and institutions, from workers, trade unions and unemployment agencies, to executive managers, corporate lawyers, CEOs, and government officials.

Yet Brizé's films are no longer traditional social realist dramas. They are not set on the shop floor, like earlier social realist chronicles of unemployment, but in soulless boardrooms and various institutional settings, testifying to the director's awareness of the new context in which struggle takes place. Furthermore, while Brizé's cinema verité cinematography reveals his dedication to the search for objectivity that has traditionally distinguished social realist films, the director's

decision to cast the same well-known actor (Vincent Lindon) alongside non-professional actors, to have him occupy what were previously assumed to be mutually opposed class positions—that of a working class man and that of an executive manager in the last film of the trilogy—and to create a thematically unified trilogy that invites us to read it as a self-contained commentary on the current stage of neoliberalism and underscores *the parallels* between different social classes' experiences, ultimately endows the trilogy with a *self-reflexivity* that is not typical of traditional social realist dramas.

## CONCLUSION

All the films considered here are concerned not so much with representing a particular social problem, along the lines of "social problem films", but rather with exploring "adjustment strategies"—usually the *failure* to adjust—to "the new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Regardless of whether they focus on office workers (e.g., in workplace thrillers) or on working-class protagonists, the films share a deepening concern about the ethical/moral/human costs of neoliberalism and a keen awareness of the dramatic ways in which the nature and the location of class struggle has changed. In the wake of the dissolution of the traditional working class, and the emergence of the new affective class of "the precariat", which is difficult to define in classic Marxist terms, the generic/stylistic frame of "social realism" within which European films have traditionally explored pressing social issues is proving increasingly limiting, prompting filmmakers to bend it in new genre (and hybrid genre) directions. As a result, social realism has begun to mutate beyond its traditionally didactic model (exemplified by Ken Loach's films) towards a more nuanced—although, as we have seen, not without its aesthetic problems and challenges—synthesis of genre cinema (including genres typically seen as un-realistic or anti-realistic e.g., black comedy, thriller, musical), art cinema, avant-garde cinema, allegory, and sociopolitical commentary.

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# Theatrical Release Windows: A Playground for “Cultural Exception” Policies?

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In recent years, cinema culture in Europe has undergone a substantial reorganization of production models and a profound change of public intervention in favor of the film industry. This article aims to reconstruct the different combinations between protectionist and liberalist policies through a comparative analysis of the contemporary European national cinema aids, identifying differences and shared trends and verifying the existence of a “continental” cinema support model. Therefore the article will analyze public support policies on cinema production, distribution, and exhibition in the EU and in several of its member states (including France, Germany, England, Spain, and Italy) from 2018 to 2022. Focusing on theatrical release windows, this essay will attempt to answer the following main questions: is there a “European” mark in policies in favor of cinema? Can we speak of a “European” model (even outside the European Union) of support for the cinema? What are the elements and actions that define it? What are the sectors of the industry in which it is most fully expressed (production, distribution, exhibition)? And what are the themes and areas in which, on the contrary, national differences (sometimes driven by resurgent nationalisms) are most marked?

## Keywords

Public Cinema Funding  
Cultural Exception  
Release Windows  
Pandemic Crisis  
Nationalism

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## INTRODUCTION

Disregarding optimistic forecasts about the digital switch and its ability to usher in a new season for film and media, characterised by the collapse of borders and logics of dialogue and free exchange (Iordanova and Cunningham 2012; Tryon 2013; Hartley, Wen, and Li 2015; Smith and Telang 2016), recent studies have highlighted the persistence of mechanisms of separation and localistic policies in cinema and media.<sup>1</sup> Phenomena such as geoblocking, for instance, demonstrate the downsizing that the “digital promise” has undergone (Lobato and Meese 2016; Lobato 2019).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Applying here the observations that James Hay made in 2012 about the boundaries erected within the web, similar to those conventionally drawn to divide airspace, and which undermined the free movement of content (Hay 2012).

<sup>2</sup> These studies also raise important methodological questions. Ramon Lobato for example questions the appropriateness of categories such as global, national and international when it comes to describing and evaluating the trajectories of cultural

The difficulty in developing a supranational or community vision in the cinema and audiovisual sectors in Europe, in particular, is shown in a number of ways: from the differing speeds of development of screen industries, even between markets that are usually considered comparable (EAO 2023); to the lack of a common set of indicators and metrics to assess the industrial, employment, economic, social and cultural value of screen industries (see article by André Lange in this theme issue), transversally to the national markets (Nieborg, Duffy, and Poell 2020), to the heterogeneous public support, by mode and amount of aid that each country offers to the sector (EAO 2019).

This essay aims to focus on this last issue, examining the solutions that five major European filmed entertainment markets—France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain—have identified to balance liberalist drives and protectionist instances. The policy of the “cultural exception”, inaugurated in the early 1990s to protect the European specificity of film and audiovisual products, has in fact been transposed and implemented differently, even by countries that, in terms of history and size of the film and audiovisual sector, are traditionally considered comparable.

Specifically, the essay’s intent is to examine an exemplary place of comparison, in which the trajectories of many players in the theatrical supply chain intersect: the theatrical release windows. This exemplary case study can help to understand which direction European cultural policies are taking, and highlight the ever-lively debate on public support for the audiovisual industry as a whole. Moreover, analysing these differences and their effects on the structures of the film and audiovisual industry means being able to assess the progress of the process of establishing a European film and audiovisual policy, even in the face of the challenges posed by the entry of platforms, that is capable of negotiating between national identities and maturing a supra-local and community vision (Bergfelder 2005).

## THE CULTURAL EXCEPTION AND THE PLATFORMING TEST

The term “cultural exception” was introduced in the early 1990s as part of the debate related to the redefinition of free market agreements (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade or GATT) (Buchsbaum 2006; Richieri Hanania 2019). The expression soon became a “symbol of resistance” of the cultural industry to neoliberal logics (Farchy 2008) and turned into a collector around which broader reflections and debates were gathered: from the one on globalisation (Kim and Parc 2020) to reflections on the role of cinema as a tool of soft power in cultural diplomacy (Dagnaud 2011; Vlassis 2016).

With the new millennium, the term “cultural exception” began to be replaced,

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products across new touchpoints (Lobato 2019).

both in public discussion and in official documents (UNESCO 2005) by the term “cultural diversity”, perceived as less radical and more acceptable (Acheson and Maule 2004). More specifically, “cultural exception” has come to denote a composite set of measures whose aim is the protection and enhancement of the diversity of cultures and within cultures (Farchy 2008). Concurrently, its scope has been progressively widened: from actions safeguarding national productions and their presence in distribution channels, to interventions aimed at protecting local cinemas, in particular those located in smaller urban centres or screening national and quality films, as opposed to international multiplex circuits, as a place of memory and expression of community identity.

Moreover, compared to an initial phase characterised by a broad agreement in the academic sphere on the good will of such a policy, recently critical voices have increased, expressing reservations about the effectiveness of the measures ascribable to the principle of “cultural exception” in promoting the *genius loci*, supporting independent producers, guaranteeing pluralism and enhancing innovation (Naldi, Wikström, and Von Rimscha 2014). Added to this is the diverseness of the ways in which the cultural exception paradigm is interpreted and applied, which risks promoting localism and nationalism. Although the “cultural exception” is rooted in a pro-European perspective, it has not given rise to a unified policy, accentuating national primacy even when the aim was to foster maximum product circulation. For instance, in order to bypass the stumbling block of differing regulations on the copying right of works, which made their international circulation complex, the European Union decreed the primacy of the “country of origin”, instead of working on the establishment of a common, at least European, system of governance of the works and copyright protection (Cabrera Blázquez et al. 2015 and 2019b). More generally, the EU has limited itself to pursuing a “prominence” of the European audiovisual film product, which would guarantee at least its availability (Cappello 2022).<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the mechanisms regulating public film funding clearly reveals the persistence of substantial differences between countries (Weiss 2016). The incentive techniques, that Lucia Bellucci calls “cultural welfare”, aimed to “support national cultural production, thereby maintaining and developing not only a national industry, but also a certain diversity in the supply of cultural content and therefore a plurality of choices for the public” (Bellucci 2017: 200–01), take on, in fact, different features depending on the country being considered and is also subject to local and international political pressures that make these sets of tools not only dissimilar but also unstable (Bellucci 2019).

If we limit the examination to the main markets and a few traits<sup>4</sup> in France

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**3** “The findability and discoverability of European audiovisual content is first and foremost a matter of cultural diversity. Only if a variety of voices can be effectively heard, and a multitude of works effectively enjoyed by the greatest numbers, can there be real cultural diversity.” (Cappello 2022, 4).

**4** Refer to the report on the mapping of public financing criteria of the audiovisual enterprise in EU countries published by the European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO 2019).

and, to some extent, the United Kingdom<sup>5</sup> for instance, they tend to adopt a centralised model of public aid, while Spain and Germany, despite their administrative division into autonomous regions, have both a centralised line of funding, as well as distinct regional measures. In Germany, for example, the national funding agency for the audiovisual industry, the Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA) administers its own funding lines as well as directing to other federal funding lines, linked in particular to the Federal Delegate for Culture and Media (Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, BKM). Italy also has a regional public support system, which offers possible complementary financing for approximately 10% of the overall volume of state commitment (MIC 2022). Besides the different structures, the forms of public contribution also differ from country to country: in the case of France, the national agency, the CNC (Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée) manages over 90 different funding lines, which obviously do not have a direct correspondence with the options and paths chosen by other countries.

The scale of public financing also differs: in 2021, for example, the UK allocated more than £700 million to support movie industries; the CNC managed over €600 million in funding; Germany's public investment in the audiovisual market exceeded €480 million in total; while funding managed by the Spanish Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisual (ICAA) was just under €70 million. Finally, the Italian government, aside of the extraordinary interventions in the field to counter the effects of the lockdown, awarded over €885 million (MIC 2022) to the cinema and audiovisual sector.

Finally, there are no specific and reliable indexes that are able to evaluate the effectiveness of "cultural welfare" policies transnationally. Sarah Walkley, in her assessment of cultural exception policies, does not believe these can be referred to European policies, but considered only at a national level and in comparison, with the big US player. "That said, France is most concerned about unfair competition from the USA and its potential to dominate the market", and Walkley (2018, 240) argued that the indexation she proposes mainly concerns the French film industry in opposition to the American one, relegating third countries (not only from the EU) to an outsider position. Assessing the effectiveness of protectionist policies is also complicated (and almost impossible at the moment) by the lack of data regarding the performance of platforms; in fact, this absence is likely to become a problem when it comes to defining possible logics of coexistence between new and old channels of distribution of film content, as Antonios Vlassis (2021) recently observed questioning the direction taken by the media system and, specifically, platforms in the post-pandemic era.

While Walkley suggests considering balance, disparity and variety for

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**5** The organization of support for the audiovisual industry in the UK is divided into two paths: on the one hand, a selective funding model linked to public bodies (state entities, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, educational institutions and training agencies in the first place), on the other automatic access to tax relief models.

measurable indexes (238), the European Audiovisual Observatory attempts, if only to be consistent with its mission, to overcome the national industry barrier; however, it has to limit its criteria to two indicators of mere product circulation: findability and discoverability. These indeed give us an intuitive reference of the impact of regulations, however without being able to delve into economic impact assessments, nor actually into considerations on the contents and messages of the products distributed.<sup>6</sup>

## PERIMETERS, MAGNITUDE AND TRENDS

The following analysis will examine the five main European markets (the so-called big 5: France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain), highlighting their pre-eminence in the European scenario and pointing out the structural assets of the theatrical supply chain: production, distribution, exhibition. The choice of these five countries is motivated by the size of the industry and the industrial set-up of the sector, which, unlike other markets on the continent (for instance Russia), sees all the nodes of the supply chain, including exhibition facilities, significantly represented.<sup>7</sup> As regards the size of the income, in 2021 France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain together generated 70.5% of the total turnover of the audiovisual market of the EU-27 and the United Kingdom, and produced a share of European theatrical market receipts exceeding 70%: €5.184 billion in the pre-pandemic year (72% of the total box office of the area comprising the EU-27 and the United Kingdom) and just over €2 billion in 2021 (71%) (EAO 2022). If we consider them both as a whole as well as how each of them impacts its own national market, these five countries are also able to compete in Europe with the US offer, as is shown not only by theatrical box offices, but also by the data on the presence of films produced in these countries on European digital Video On Demand platforms. If we look at the EU-27, 34% of the films (individual titles) offered on the TVOD (Transaction Video On Demand) platforms are in fact produced in the five countries mentioned, against 37.5% of US origin; moreover, the share of product from the "big 5" exceeds that of the United States if we consider the Subscription Video On Demand platforms: 31.7% compared to 28.6% of US titles; only on the FVOD (Free Video On Demand) platforms does the ratio appear more clearly in favour of US products, with 40.7%, against 27.68% by major European producing countries.<sup>8</sup>

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**6** "In the EU context, there is unlikely to be harmonization on the type of content concretely to be regarded as having public value or being of general interest as these are aspects closely linked to cultural and democratic traditions in the member states." (Cappello 2022, 8).

**7** In 2021, 70% of the operating facilities in the EU-27, including the UK, were concentrated in the five markets taken into consideration, with relative stability over the five-year period (EAO 2022).

**8** In September 2022, French films represented 10% of the titles in TVOD catalogues and 9% of the titles in European SVOD catalogues, compared to 5% and 6%

Finally, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain are the countries with the highest volume of public investment in the film market, although, as mentioned, differing in terms of size and allocation logic. The same is true for the general volume of the film production sector, as can be seen from the average resources invested per year, again with reference to the period 2017–2021: over 2 billion for the UK, more than 1 billion for France, 436 million and 383 million respectively for Germany and Italy (EAO 2022).<sup>9</sup>

In fact, although these five markets are highly comparable, and have seen an overall growth over the five-year period 2017–2021, they differ in size, characteristics, and trends. Cinema aids, or, in Bellucci's sense, "cultural welfare" actions, and specifically theatrical release window policies, enter this scenario as a further element of differentiation, both because they take on different forms and because they operate in diverse realities. Though we can't reconstruct these differences here point-by-point, the following tables allow us, at least, to grasp the complexity of the scenario where cultural welfare is exercised.<sup>10</sup>

To begin with, in the theatrical supply chain, production has shown a general upturn in both investment and the number of titles produced,<sup>11</sup> in the case of France and Italy, the value invested in 2021 in the production of feature films also destined for theatrical release was even higher than in 2019: +21% in France, with 340 new titles compared to 301 in 2019, and + 8% in Italy, with 313 works produced compared to 325 in 2019. But the reaction in Spain and the United Kingdom has been slower (EAO 2022) [Tab. 1].

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>France</b>	300	300	301	237	340
<b>Germany</b>	247	247	265	152	185
<b>Italy</b>	235	273	325	252	313
<b>Spain</b>	301	283	252	193	154
<b>United Kingdom</b>	241	266	263	215	263

Table 1. Number of theatrical feature films produced (source: EAO 2022)

Similarly, distribution and exhibition show some common trends, and

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of Italian films (Grece 2022). French film production also enjoys an important share of visibility on television, where in 2020 it represented, with reference to the first TV broadcast on free national channels, 47.6% of the films broadcast, compared to 14.2% in Germany and 30% in the United Kingdom (CNC 2022; SPIO 2022; BFI 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Spanish data are not available.

<sup>10</sup> The analysis will use data from the European Audiovisual Observatory, country reports and data from survey and field agencies: more specifically, for France, the Bilan du CNC, for Germany the reports of the national agency dedicated to audiovisual public financing, the FFA, and the statistics office of the SPIO trade association, Spitzenorganisation der Filmwirtschaft (SPIO 2022); for Italy the evaluation reports on the impact of the so-called "Legge Cinema" by the Italian Ministry of Culture (MIC); for Spain the annual reports of the Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisual (ICAA), and for the UK the statistical yearbooks of the British Film Institute (BFI).

<sup>11</sup> A partial exception is Germany, whose recovery has been slower.

concurrently a series of transformative processes of a local nature that highlight those enduring specificities mentioned at the beginning. In particular, the health crisis and the lockdown accentuated the screen concentration process in Spain and in the United Kingdom, by a decrease in the number of active movie theatres (respectively, -3.9% and -5%, again with reference to the period 2017–2021) and an increase in the number of screens, reaching a ratio of 5 screens per cinema in these two countries, against a 3:1 ratio in France, Italy and Germany (EAO 2022) [Tab. 2 and Tab. 3].

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>France</b>	2.046	2.040	2.045	2.041	2.028
<b>Germany</b>	1.672	1.672	1.734	1.728	1.723
<b>Italy</b>	1.204	1.210	1.223	1.309	1.221
<b>Spain</b>	739	734	764	750	710
<b>United Kingdom</b>	977	1.061	1.080	985	928

Table 2. Number of cinemas (source: EAO 2022)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>France</b>	5.913	5.983	6.114	6.127	6.193
<b>Germany</b>	4.803	4.849	4.961	4.926	4.931
<b>Italy</b>	3.510	3.541	3.545	3.667	3.482
<b>Spain</b>	3.618	3.589	3.695	3.701	3.631
<b>United Kingdom</b>	4.512	4.640	4.782	4.682	4.610

Table 3. Number of cinema screens (source: EAO 2022)

Above all, however, what is significant is the data on the trend of film viewing in theatres in the post-pandemic period. The recovery has in fact registered different speeds and dynamics in the 5 countries: in 2021, admissions in the United Kingdom amounted to 74 million, +68% compared to the year of the pandemic; Spain and France also saw a significant recovery (respectively 54% and 46%); the restart was slower in Germany, with +10% of tickets sold between 2020 and 2021, amounting to 42.1 million admissions, and in Italy, which saw even fewer admissions in 2021 than in 2020 (EAO 2022) [Tab. 4].<sup>12</sup>

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>France</b>	5.913	5.983	6.114	6.127	6.193
<b>Germany</b>	4.803	4.849	4.961	4.926	4.931
<b>Italy</b>	3.510	3.541	3.545	3.667	3.482
<b>Spain</b>	3.618	3.589	3.695	3.701	3.631
<b>United Kingdom</b>	4.512	4.640	4.782	4.682	4.610

Table 4. Number of admissions (mill.) (source: EAO 2022)

<sup>12</sup> It must be said that the 2022 figures are all positive compared to 2021; even in Italy, ticket sales were almost 80% higher than in 2021 (<http://www.anica.it/documentazione-e-dati-annuali-2/cinetel-i-dati-del-cinema-in-sala-nel-2022>). The drop in theatrical consumption during the pandemic period was, as we know, offset by an increase in ticket prices (MIC 2022).

# RELEASE WINDOWS: A TEST BENCH FOR “CULTURAL WELFARE”

A central issue in the film market organisation concerns the so-called windows, i.e. the time period between the theatrical release and the possible subsequent exploitation in the different modalities available today. A recent study by the European Audiovisual Observatory defines windows as “piliers fondamentaux de l’exploitation des oeuvres cinématographiques et audiovisuelles en Europe” (Cabrera Blázquez et al. 2023, 1). A part of the relationship between the different elements that make up a country’s audiovisual industry is played out on a symbolic level through the management of windows, obviously with a specific focus on distribution and exhibition. In general, specialist literature over the years has recognised on the one hand the idea of a defence against the “cannibalisation” of the theatrical sector and, on the other, a need for product marketing: “Distributors prefer longer windows to the extent that they protect box office revenues (cannibalisation effect), but shorter windows in so far as this lets them capitalise on DVD sales while a film remains fresh in the minds of the public (marketing effects)” (Bakshi 2007, 2).<sup>13</sup> A key issue in this framework is obviously also the defence of copyright and piracy.

In European Union countries, the windows policy refers to a regulatory framework which, from an initial stringency (the initial two years as a general interval from cinema to broadcasting determined by the ECTT, European Convention on Transfrontier Television of 5 May 1989), was later relaxed to represent, in the current Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), in fact only a moral suasion aimed at ensuring dialogue between the different stakeholders. The ways in which windows are organised therefore vary structurally from country to country and a systematic comparison is not possible.

Generally speaking, in Spain<sup>14</sup> and the UK (even before Brexit) there is no compulsory legislative intervention and windows are set by the distributors themselves on the basis of a market self-regulation logic. Moreover, this is the logic that directs sector policies in most European countries.<sup>15</sup> France, on the other hand, opts for a more regulated system: sector legislation, the Code du cinéma et de l’image animée, defines release windows to be applied to all sector operators which are renewed at pre-established intervals of one to three years,

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**13** For a historical analysis of the evolution of windows see Cabrera Blázquez et al. (2019a, 5–8).

**14** The Spanish government decided to abolish the release windows proposed by the so-called “Ley del Cine” No. 55/2007 requested of national productions aspiring to public support by Royal Decree No. 1084/2015 of December 4, 2015. The current new proposal for an emended “Ley del Cine” does not contain any difference in this respect.

**15** Only in four countries with freedom of regulation have framework agreements been reached for the whole sector: Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Sweden. See Cabrera Blázquez et al. 2023, 38.

although they require the agreement of field representatives on the one hand, and of the major platforms on the other.<sup>16</sup> Germany and Italy have a mixed system, in which all titles eligible for support in their respective public financing systems are subject to regulation.<sup>17</sup>

An evaluation of windows and their impact is particularly difficult. The EAO itself does not put forward an impact assessment. Research on the impact assessment of public funding interventions in the sector in those countries that provide for them has not revealed sufficient parameters to define their effectiveness: neither in Italy, in the general evaluation reports of the so-called "Legge Cinema" (MIC 2022), nor in Germany in a specific dedicated study by the Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA) following a parliamentary mandate (FFA 2022). Nonetheless, if we look at the publication of specific data by the Spanish exhibitors' trade association (FECE, Federación de Cines de España), and analyse the market data of the Italian case (Cinetel, the official box office system of the national film industry), we can highlight some useful data for a circumstantial comparison.

Let us start with market data, analysing the recent Italian box office. How long is the actual exhibition period of films in theatrical release? The analysis focuses on the titles with the greatest impact as these are obviously the ones with the longest-running release. For titles grossing less, the period is consequently shorter, and we know it is the cinema itself, that will not necessarily favour their continuation beyond the initial weeks. So, let's look at the Italian Cinetel's data on box office receipts for the last year with consolidated data, that of 2022, and select the top twenty box office movies.<sup>18</sup> For the most part, these are foreign films, which do not have to follow window regulation rules. Together, these twenty titles grossed €199,647,872 in Italy. Of these almost two hundred million,

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**16** Among other EU countries, only Bulgaria has opted for a similar system, but with much shorter windows even than the European average, see Cabrera Blázquez et al. 2023, 42.

**17** The legislative reference for Germany is the law for the public financing of German-produced films, the "Gesetz über Maßnahmen zur Förderung des deutschen Films" (Filmförderungsgesetz – FFG), Abschnitt 4, Sperrfristen, Absatz 4 FFG 2022. For Italy, Law No. 220/2016, known as "Legge Cinema": it should be noted that the ministerial decree of March 29, 2022, reduced the deadlines from the previous 105 to 90-day operating windows. Similar policies are also adopted in Austria and Ireland (Cabrera Blázquez et al. 2023, 38).

**18** In order of box office in Italy: *Avatar: The Way Of Water* (James Cameron); *Minions: The Rise Of Gru* (Kyle Balda); *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* (Sam Raimi); *Top Gun: Maverick* (Joseph Kosinski); *Thor: Love And Thunder* (Taika Waititi); *The Batman* (Matt Reeves); *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (Ryan Coogler); *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets Of Dumbledore* (David Yates); *Jurassic World: Dominion* (Colin Trevorrow); *Uncharted* (Ruben Fleischer); *Death On The Nile* (Kenneth Branagh); *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Jon Watts); *Strangeness (La stranezza)* (Roberto Andò); *Black Adam* (Jaume Collet-Serra); *Il Grande Giorno* (Massimo Venier); *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* (Jeff Fowler); *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* (Joel Crawford); *Me Contro Te. Il Film: Persi Nel Tempo* (Gianluca Leuzzi); *Elvis* (Baz Luhrmann); *Morbius* (Daniel Espinosa). For each title, the entire release period was taken into account, even if it began in 2021, or ended in 2023.

42.18%, or €84,220,595, were grossed in the first week of release. In the following weeks, only *Avatar: The Way of Water* initially kept pace (almost twelve million in the first week, almost ten and a half million in the second), but the other titles in general fell steadily. The average of the first twenty (including *Avatar*, therefore) sees a weekly decrease in earnings consistently close to 40% in the first five weeks following the premiere (in detail: -44.55% from the first to the second, -42.19% from the second to the third, then respectively up to the sixth: -36.60%, -48.38%, -40.59%). Over a month and a half, earnings were reduced to a tenth: more precisely, by 89.51% at the end of the fifth week (€8,836,075), and even by 93.77% at the end of the sixth (€5,249,480).

It is no chance occurrence then, that not even all the top twenty highest grossing films of the year made it to the regular four-month release period: only the first seven titles of 2022 made it to sixteen weeks, with a peak of twenty-two (*Top Gun: Maverick*), while the average of the top twenty is thirteen and a half weeks (i.e., 115.5 days). Only ten titles exceeded twelve weeks, the three-month quota. We would like to point out again: all other titles, from the twenty-first place of the Italian box-office chart of 2022 downwards, generally had even shorter theatrical release periods. The theatrical performance data therefore show that only a very small proportion of the titles distributed reach a three- and four-month theatrical release period range. Let's then try actually evaluating how consistent the distribution's push to shorten windows is. Let's analyse a partially regulated legislation framework, for example the German one, which provides legal limits only for publicly financed titles. The FFA's dossier *Evaluierung der Sperrfristen* does not evaluate the overall window system, but focuses on one detailed element of German legislation, namely permission to deviate from the statutory limit. We must bear in mind that the legislation for the public financing of films places strict obligations on German production titles admitted to the financing itself (§53), but also provides for two lines of possible exceptions: the first (§54) with time periods defined as regular in cases where there are economic motivations prevalently due to the possible brevity of the exploitation in theatres (for example documentaries); and defined exceptional in the case of particular necessities (for example the thematic correlation with particular events, anniversaries, celebrations). The windows may thus shrink from 6 to 5 or 4 months for home videos and TVOD, from 12 to 9 or 6 months for pay-TV and from 18 to 12 or 6 months for free-TV and FVOD offerings. The second option (§55), on the other hand, establishes ad hoc timing, and even the cancellation of the window, for special reasons (e.g. multimedia launches of innovative products).

The number of films for which a waiver is requested allows an assessment of the distribution needs. In detail, on average for three quarters of the eligible films at least one application for a pre-defined waiver according to §54 is made, either regular, exceptional or both (applications are platform-specific and therefore can be multiple for each film). But in almost no cases are extraordinary requests made on the basis of §55, which would allow for a window of less than 4 months.

We can therefore assume that the drive by national distribution to go below this threshold is not equal to the drive to ensure a timeframe of between four and six months for all distribution platforms: in other words, the interest does not seem to be in the abolition of the 120-day window, but in the inclusion of all platforms under that limit. As a matter of fact, what is taking place seems not be interpreted as a “cannibalisation” process, but as a policy attentive to marketing possibilities and to the construction of a value chain based on theatrical exhibition/performance. Let us try to ask exhibition itself, shifting our gaze to an unregulated market case. The Spanish association of film exhibitors FECE in its annual 2023 dossier points to the decrease of average window durations particularly after Covid: until 2019, only 6% of films were available on other channels before the customary 112-day threshold (de la Prida 2023). It should be noted that the variance indicated is three days short of minimum, i.e., with windows between 109 and 111 days. In 2022, however, this share had risen to 38% of films, with a 60% incidence for titles programmed by American majors, whereas national and independent films appear to have remained prevalently on pre-pandemic thresholds. The minimal gap seems to indicate, in a country with no agreed or compulsory windows, that even in this case the market can guarantee a self-regulation of exploitation times. Yet even the warning signs should not be downplayed.

Indeed, exhibition’s concerns are understandable in light of trends and how reduction is impacting strong box office titles. We can assume that the option of windows agreed upon by national governments and industry associations at round tables may be the best solution to satisfy the many stakeholders.

## CONCLUSIONS

The literature review described a switch from an approach to the “cultural exception”, based on an attempt to separate culture from market in toto, to a broad, elastic and multi-level model, that aims to promote cultural exchanges through cooperation, while maintaining policies to safeguard the “cultural diversity” and “prominence” of the European product. However, the discipline of the “cultural exception”, in its narrower sense as a set of rules and regulations, in order to sustain the critical judgment to which—more than thirty years after ECTT—it is rightly subjected, must be evaluated.

This assessment must be carried out on at least four levels: a. the actual possibility of measuring the impacts of the actions carried out, with specific reference to the theatrical release obligation of national works that have benefited from public support; b. the form taken by the regulation and the way it is applied; c. the data currently available to assess the impacts of the actions carried out and the conclusions that can be drawn from them; and d. the consistency of these rules and politics with the overall European policies on cinema and audiovisuals.

On the first point, according to the literature review, the sector lacks a shared

and continuously applied methodology to assess the protectionist actions, building a comparable base of insights, at least on a European level, which is a necessary premise to try to think in terms of EU—and not only national policies.

On the second point, the analysis conducted highlighted, even within the so-called comparable markets, different ways of understanding and applying for “cultural welfare”, with reference to the specific measure of film release windows: from contexts where there is no specific regulation, to contexts where, on the contrary, the obligation is provided for, but with different rules—exceptions included; this second level of analysis also shows the *elasticity of the regulation system*, characterized by various and flexible application modes, which provide for a wide range of derogations, *and its complexity*, that risk building a framework characterized by overlapping and exceedingly localistic rules.

Concerning the results of the analysis carried out, the film release window regulations, perhaps also due to the many derogations, do not seem to have a discriminating impact both on the average tenure of national works in the theatrical market or on the “health” of the movie-theaters networks. On this second point, the data relating to the recovery of the theatrical market in the post-Covid period are also emblematic, showing different trends in the five comparable countries, and independent of the presence or absence of the obligation for the works to be shown in cinemas (in Italy, for example, the recovery was slow and the gap with the pre-pandemic situation continues to be important, despite the fact that the country has one of the most stringent regulations on film theatrical release).

Finally, if we move on to assess the broader level of political necessity of protectionist politics, the traditional European position in the negotiation of trade agreements (at a multilateral, regional, and bilateral level) is to maintain the widest possible cultural policy space for the film and audiovisual sector, by providing different degrees of “exceptionality” agreements, and placing them within the framework of guaranteeing the cultural diversity and prominence of the European product.

In summary, on the basis of the above insights, we can conclude that the specific rule of distribution windows has no demonstrable impact at an economic level (of increased tenure of works in the theatrical market) or at an industrial employment level (strengthening of the exhibition sector). On the contrary, it seems to us, also by virtue of the many exceptions provided, that it currently serves as a tool to govern the mediation between the parties involved, with specific reference to the different distribution channels. Also and above all in a panorama of platformisation and the push towards digital consumption, we must conclude that this “cultural welfare” model continues to guarantee the background of operability for national, sectoral, or multinational and cross-sectoral regulatory or steering choices. And it is precisely in its ability to build a dialogue between all operators, supply chains or member states, rather than a one-size-fits-all regulatory system, that its strength and future lie.

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# Cinema Co-production, Film Distribution in Multiple Languages and Inequality in the Global Language System: A Call for Robust Public Data

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Language has proven to be an important factor in film performance models, film finance considerations, and festival program selections. This essay uses multi-year global data sets (UN and supplementary databases) to analyse the relationship between the languages in which a film is produced and offered to cinemagoers on the one hand, and the co-production activities and dynamics which engender these patterns on the other hand. While European Commission policies, underlining the peculiar “linguistic polity” of the European Union, have been influential in the making of multilingual cinema productions motivated by subsidy rules, taxation and grant schemes, the pattern is rather global, reflecting uptake of cinematic product in many “territories” and the mobilization of film across national and regional language divides. The analysis shows that Europeanization has much wider implications beyond Europeans’ cultural consumption and identity construction, with Europe’s co-production policies casting a wider net of cultural resistance to Global Hollywood and its majority of English-language blockbusters as well as attending to language preservation in the European neighborhood in addition to Europe, where local and regional heritage policies are well instituted. The study examines the results against Abram de Swaan’s theory of the Global Language System, examining the Q-value theory to the language patterns emerging from film productions with multiple languages, which must be assessed in its relation to cultural consumption that may not follow from formal schooling and habitus formation.

## Keywords

Cinema Co-production  
Multilingual Cinema  
European Languages  
Global Language System  
Q-value Theory

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## INTRODUCTION: THE DOMINANCE OF ENGLISH IN WORLD CINEMA

The cost of making a film means that, even if subsidized or sponsored, it must usually find large audiences to generate a profit. Falling prices of camera hardware and editing software have not eased the pressure, as low-budget films must now compete with the no-budget films shot by gifted amateurs and video shared for free. Digital and video piracy (UIS 2009; Hern 2021), and negligible streaming royalties (Dalton and Associated Press 2023), add to the challenge of keeping revenue above cost. Even Hollywood struggles to break even on its box-office and streaming receipts within the US: often only the addition of international sales makes American-made films profitable (Marvasti

and Canterbury 2005). But the export of English-language films intensifies the competition for filmmakers in other languages. Even when these are spoken internationally, none matches the global reach of English, which has become “hyper-central” in terms of the proportion of humanity that can engage with it (de Swaan 2013) and the dispersion of cultures that find affinity with audiovisual work expressed in it.

A survey of feature films conducted in 2005–2006 (UIS 2009) found that in the majority of the responding countries (n = 75) the top ten admissions were for film originating in the US. Although “local” languages were used for feature films in most of the African, Asian and Arab countries that had responded, 36% of the films were produced in English, which remains the most widespread language used. According to a cited study of the films exhibited in Nigerian cinemas (1997–2003), English was the primary language of production, accounting for 44% of films, followed by Yoruba (31%), Hausa (24%) and Igbo (1%).

For films shot in languages other than English, export—if achieved at all—is largely limited to countries that are economically and geographically proximate to each other. In 2005–2006, most foreign films in Switzerland were from France, Germany and the United Kingdom; in Malaysia, most were from Australia and China. The origin of foreign films was often related to language, such as in Austria, where most foreign films were from Germany, and in Morocco, where Egypt was the main source. The limitation of films’ travel distance in Europe, as well as in lower-income regions, suggests that both cultural proximity and restrictions to commercial distribution play a part (UIS 2009). In 2013, the most popular feature films were by the US majors, while “the distribution of feature films beyond the borders of the countries that produce them is a serious problem in regions such as Europe and Latin America” (UIS and Albornoz 2016, 13). Whether due to cultural or market barriers, the “gravity model”—that successfully predicts most global goods and services trade flows falling rapidly with geographical distance (Tubadji and Webber 2023)—appears to apply with particular force to non-English film.

This essay probes available data from the audiovisual policy domain (UIS 2009, 2012, 2013; UIS and Albornoz 2016; UIS, Benhamou, and Peltier 2011) to examine filmmakers’ response to the unrelenting rise of English in global cinema. It asks whether co-production and other strategies to promote consumption of a film in more than one language can counter natural language erosion, especially where minority (or lesser used) languages are distribution strategy targets. We inspect a raw data set provided by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) on national film production by language of film, currently recorded yearly for 2007 up to 2017 and publicly available as spreadsheet at [www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org). Other commonly data sources used in cinema research (e.g., IMDb or the European Audiovisual Observatory) are not considered as they lack sufficient information from which to derive any parameters for language distributions and—as in the case of European Council information—do not correspond with the world language system as a unit of analysis.

# WHY ENGLISH “HYPER-CENTRALITY” IS HARD TO SHAKE

Language, as a communication tool, is a prototypical “network good”, its utility increasing to each user as more people use it (Klemperer 2018). The voluntary learning of English across multilingual states such as India and South Africa before and even after they attained majority rule, and of Chinese around Asia today, reflects these network externalities, which have also allowed a small number of multinational channels (e.g., TikTok) to dominate the social media space. Network effects have turned English into a “hyper-central” language (de Swaan 2013), with a significant proportion of humanity forced to learn or at least engage with it because of the associated opportunities for communication, work, trade and travel.

At the same time, national languages remain part of humanity's cultural wealth (Bair and Wherry 2011, 1). Much information, literature and other cultural production contains (or is contained in) languages specific to one community or region, and not easily translatable into others. It may be necessary to learn these languages to appreciate and absorb the culture they contain (Alexander 2018). The cultural wealth of the local language may be one reason why those who are raised in it choose to stay within it, and not acquire a more widely spoken or global language. Other reasons for staying monolingual, even in a language with comparatively few users, are the cost and time of language acquisition and the number of community members who are already multilingual and can translate for those who are not.

Language groups typically consist of a core of monolingual users and multilingual users. The bridging and brokering functions of multilingual speakers are key to establishing the centrality of a language (de Swaan 2013). As a result, the exchange of texts (culture) between the major and minor language groups proceeds on highly unequal terms (de Swaan 2020). Multilingual agency as one social form of “brokerage” (Stovel, Golub, and Meyersson Milgrom 2011) has received little attention. Backed up by national and colonial policies, which encourage, demotivate or constrain individual and family choices, monolingual competency has typically been promoted, while nationalism still had to develop pathways for brokerage, mainly doing so through specialists as in diplomacy, international trade, and conflict negotiations. Competition among indigenous languages also seems to favor persistence of colonial languages formerly introduced (see also Laitin 1988). Entrepreneurs present individual efforts to bridge into other economic spaces (Tubadji and Webber 2023; Selmier and Oh 2013).

De Swaan (2013) models the global language dynamics by drawing on a language's communicative potential, assuming people adopt, use and abandon language(s) based on a set of preferences apart from the network propensity of languages to connect speakers. Sociologists of language designate a minority language group where the language in question is specific, relates to a

recognizable culture, and has little relevance for everyday usage in that group. The relative lack of ideological, institutional and political structures encourages the relative significance of minority language grouping (Nelde et al. 1996, 1).<sup>1</sup> De Swaan argues that a person picks a language X over another based on the perception that it will add value to her communication repertoire. This so-called communication value Q ("Q-value") is formally derived from the person's perception of the proportion of existing language speakers (prevalence P) as well as the proportion of multilingual speakers, which identifies the centrality of the language (centrality or C). (In this way multilingual speakers are counted twice, both as monolinguals in P and multilinguals in C.)

$$Q_x = P_x C_x$$

Since the Q-value derives from the repertoire of languages held by a speaker, Q measures the language-learning cost that people are willing to incur. When speakers of a language X learn the language Y, both X and Y gain in the numbers of multilingual speakers. But when within one speaker group a certain number of multilinguals exist, the wish to learn that other language may go down (de Swaan 2020, 2013). This perceived lesser worth may be due to diminished competition value (an advantage to speak X in addition to Y) or cost-saving provision of bridging services (such as easy translation tools or low-cost providers). Learning English en masse in China, for example, results in perceived lesser urgency by others to learn Chinese (see footnote 8 in de Swaan 2020, 208), creating less demand for Chinese language instruction.

New technologies for moving artists and artwork around the world, along with reproductions of their work, have resulted in culture—and with it, language—becoming globally more accessible to consumers independent of socioeconomic status. While some artists can survive as "big fish" in the small pond of their native language, this is increasingly a low-profit option, despite being low-cost and low-risk (de Swaan 2020, 210). Local-language artists face competitive pressure from imports that may appeal to the same audience, even if embedded in a different culture and language, with the competition increasing as more of their audience responds to pressure to get familiarized with the more "supercentral" foreign languages such as Arabic, Russian or Swahili (de Swaan 2013). Artists can turn this threat into an opportunity by starting to work in a more widely spoken language or redesigning their work to be more translatable and cross-culturally appealing.

Competition has intensified because the most successful producers of artwork in the larger and more linguistically unified countries can often still recover

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<sup>1</sup> An example told by Vanhaelemeesch (2021, 171): "In most Central American countries, there is a large and diverse presence of indigenous peoples whose ancestry predates the Spanish colonization of the Americas. In Guatemala alone, there are 23 officially recognised languages spoken, but all educational programmes are held in Spanish, limiting the possibilities for people who live outside the urban centres."

their costs, and make a profit, just by selling to their domestic market. They can then make additional profit from any sales to foreign markets, even if these are “dumped” at a price below cost, as has become typical for TV series (de Swaan 2020; Chalaby 2016). When producers of artwork in linguistically smaller markets respond by going outward, making their products more exportable, the international competition becomes even more intense. Independent cinema (Perren 2012) is one example of the problem text creators of small language communities have. Artists must choose between creating for a limited domestic audience, with competition initially low but potentially rising due to foreign imports, or trying to gain attention by creating for those in a larger or major language. They can “be a big fish in a small pond or a small fish in a big pond” (de Swaan 2020, 210). “Big fish” text creators tend to do well where centrality C is lower and P very high.

The production decisions of filmmakers and cinema distributors are shaped by knowing that consumers have made “sunk cost” investments in the capacity to receive a particular language; and that, overall, social institutions help maintain those competencies, since consumers have invested to this extent in the cultural norms and assumptions associated with that language. In an original study of early foreign engagement with China (Selmier and Oh 2013), the authors show that “pidgin” forms of the language were adequate for commodity trade, whereas fuller language acquisition was needed for the investment of larger sums of capital, which required an ability to understand contracts and the social norms underlying them. The “hyper-centrality” of English today is reinforced by its association with diverse cultures: investment in English “buys” access to a wider cultural range than most other languages (Mair 2013; de Swaan 2020).

Real-world developments add challenges to the theorizing of the Global Language System (de Swaan 2020; Vogel 1995), as the control of language competency training today shifts away from national education policies toward the digital economy and artificial intelligence (AI). This greatly eases translations, albeit not without weakening the bond to the exclusivity of a national language and its adjacent cultural markets, which is also intermediated by position in the world language system and the dynamic global economy. Translation (for books see Heilbron 1999) can be regarded as a measure of domestic retaliation against foreign imports, and as trade-promoting when successfully spreading text as export away from where it has been produced. Text creators can also be or become multilingual or acquire translation of their product. Increasingly low-cost or no-cost technology often expands both text creators’ ability to expand attention for their products and their dependency on translators and a foreign-language market corner in the destination country. Cultural exchanges broadly encourage the tendency for producers and consumers to learn the major language, as do smaller-community language users.

De Swaan highlights the self-reinforcing advantages a larger language confers on its users, referring to “the profits of occupying a particular place in the system that is not of their own making” as a position rent (de Swaan 2020, 211). We may restate this as a natural resource rent, a premium comparable to

that enjoyed by owners of prime quality land. He sees “linguistic justice” as the sum of efforts and policies to compensate “the inequities of the World Language System” (de Swaan 2020, 211), while stressing the paradoxical situation of English: the more languages are diversified, as in Southeast and South Asia, South Africa, Nigeria, and India, the more English will be spoken (Mair 2013; Swaan 2020). Simultaneously, variety in smaller-language communities remains, with people not discarding their home language while learning English and joining its global speaker community. Threats to their collective cultural capital come from speakers’ inability to decode their own language, which most affects indigenous communities. Unlike so-called minority groups—such as Frisians in Europe (Williams 2002)—indigenous groups face problems from orally transmitted knowledge and financial resource strain which they need to overcome to rescue language as intergenerational cultural wealth (de Swaan 2020, 212).

Policy research analysis on Europe’s diversity policy almost three decades ago identified “language prestige” as a motivational force,<sup>2</sup> finding that “the vast majority of language groups suffer not only from a lack of support [by state and/or civil society] but sometimes from open hostility to their existence and activities”. Demographic size rarely acts as a shield from language use erosion, which can even affect severely “some of Europe’s largest language groups” (Nelde et al. 1996, 8). The report found success where language groups carved out economic niches such as local tourism, rather than general market integration in the EU, as commanded by Union accession policy (Nelde et al. 1996, 8).

## SURVIVAL STRATEGIES FOR NON-ENGLISH FILM

Turning to cinema, there is political resistance to the decline of minority languages, especially when their speakers associate displacement by a majority language with loss of autonomy to majority rule. This resistance is stiffened by language being the vehicle, and storage unit, for much of the culture and tradition that binds a community. Governments respond to these pressures by subsidizing the production and replication of literature and film in minority languages and promoting vehicles such as film festivals to support the cause (Elsaesser 2005; Falicov 2016; De Valck 2007; Bisschoff 2009). State subsidy is now a principal survival strategy for non-English language film, the costs of which are often repaid by the preservation of cultural value, with the added political appeal of gaining support from strategically important linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> The Euromosaic Report includes only European autochthonous language groups, i.e. groups laying claim to a territorial base that links language and society. This excludes, for example, languages like Romani and Hebrew (Nelde et al. 1996, 14).

minorities. A film showing in Urdu as well as Hindi, for example, may be adding value to the language perception per se but also to its speakers—if the effect is long-lasting, or if it keeps expanding, as when Urdu became the standard additional language to any Hindi-language film. In India, where states support film industries associated with minority language groups, only 2% of films are shot in English (UIS and Albornoz 2016) despite its being widely spoken. India produced 1,724 films in 2013, a growth of 66% since 2005 and understood as a reemergence of regional film production for several language markets. In Nigeria, Yoruba and Hausa are supported through the film industry and its popular video format (Austen and Saul 2010).

Beyond subsidy, the “multilingual” film uses audio content in several languages or dialects (Chan 2008).<sup>3</sup> This is highlighted by the 2005–2006 data on film production (UIS 2009) with information on 38 countries, identifying 44 distinct languages. More than one-half of these countries indicated more than one language of film production (range of languages 1–6). Among these, only half of the films identified in the survey were truly multilingual, as distinct from multi-language production for distribution and consumption in several languages. UIS data includes, in its “multilingual” count, films made in countries where more than one language is widely spoken. This may exaggerate the number of authentically multilingual films intended for, or capable of, international distribution.

A more common route to new audiences appears to be the “multi-language” film, which may be shot in only one language but is designed for markets abroad. Translation may be achieved by technological means such as re-recording, dubbing or subtitling; or by film-making techniques such as visual effects and simplified dialogue, all of which facilitate understanding by foreign-language audiences. But these approaches often strip the film of its more linguistically sophisticated and culturally specific elements—frustrating the aim of using film to preserve a region’s cultural uniqueness, and promote its understanding by an international audience. In fact, writers and filmmakers in most non-English languages seeking international sales have to keep their “language intensity” low, so that viewers can get value from the film with minimal knowledge of its language. They may also have to limit their “culture intensity”, focusing on norms and styles that are most easily understood by other cultures. This drives the use of cartoons, visual imagery, or simple scripts that can be translated or subtitled easily, when a product is intended for export, at times becoming a new global cultural phenomenon. Makers of films and other products in English can afford to be more “language intensive” and appropriative from different cultures, because of the number of people worldwide who have invested in English’s “hyper-centrality”. This raises the question whether cinema co-production can stem the inequality in the global language system.

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3 As confusingly used in UIS technical papers and as addressed in this essay.

# CO-PRODUCTION: A EUROPEAN FORMAT AFFECTING THE LANGUAGE SYSTEM

International co-production (Council of Europe 1992), linking production teams and locations in more than one country, can be an effective way of extending a film's appeal (Lim 2006; Yan and Yu 2021). As well as combining talent from different countries on the production side, before and behind the camera, it can extend the range of visual and cultural influences that may draw an audience in. Co-production, including both trade bloc initiatives and national promotion schemes (e.g., for Japan see Shackleton 2007; UNIJAPAN 2009), may also enable distributors to break through cultural trade barriers, when governments impose quotas or local content requirements on imported film (Hong and Sun 1999; Parc 2020). A study by Kanzler in 2008 (cited in UIS and Albornoz 2016, 10–11) suggests a number of results regarding European co-productions (2001–2007): that their release is on average in twice as many markets as the national counterparts, that their revenue is on average 2.78 times higher than for those counterparts and that the “international market provides 41% of co-production revenue compared to 15% for national production” (UIS and Albornoz 2016, 11). This final figure implies that more profit is made abroad, or that co-productions are not primarily for the national audience to consume, representing an export good that attains prestige only abroad (Wu 2007).

Survey results (UIS 2009) reveal that international co-production of films is mainly a phenomenon involving big producers in developed countries, particularly the EU. In 2006 France, Germany, Italy and Spain were the biggest coproducers of films, with rates ranging from 47% to 78% of annual feature film production, contrasting with China's co-production rate of 14%. This can be explained in part by cooperation agreements (Council of Europe 1992). The European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production encourages the development of European coproduced film.<sup>4</sup> Europe's major policy instrument and fund (Eurimages 2021) distributes soft loans and subsidies for international co-productions as well as subsidies that also include the promotion of exhibition, targeting mainly features and independent filmmaking through cooperation agreements with various festivals and film markets, while also promoting gender equality in the film industry (Loist and Prommer 2019).<sup>5</sup>

The aforementioned convention formulates the broader terms for regulating and overseeing the conduct of business regarding bilateral and multilateral co-production based on the Council's goal to “achieve greater unity” between the Member States, to “safeguard and promote the ideals and principles which

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**4** Film is a “work of any length or medium, in particular cinematographic works of fiction, cartoons and documentaries” (Council of Europe 1992).

**5** The Eurimages fund's overseers are the 39 national representatives on the Board of Management; the top feature producing countries (France, Germany, and Italy) are permanent members on the highest executive committee.

form their common heritage”, defending freedom of creation and freedom of expression as well as “cultural diversity of the European countries” as one of the goals of the European Cultural Convention (CETS 220 1992, 2017, 1). This path appears as different from domestic policies in many multilingual countries in the Global South, where historically consumption in several languages is necessary to balance communal interests and to reach speakers. The same goes for region-spanning languages, e.g. Egypt's central role in Arabic-spoken cinema. In Europe, co-production policy also aims to reduce the influence of English-spoken blockbuster cinema product (Stringer 2003) which nonetheless enjoys robust success (de Grazia 2005).

Funding eligibility in Eurimages involves rules on the number and diversity of the coproducing agents, rules defining minimum and maximum contributions of total production cost of a work, rules assigning rights to the coproducers, rules on national employment and national location for production of the work, and financial rules. Co-production status can be granted to works that signal a real “recognition as a national work in the country” and help promote the European identity through co-production. Export trade is regulated as to quota attribution, language of the film and festival participation. Article 14 on languages stipulates that “the competent authority of a Party”, which is the overseeing authority for a co-producing party in question, “may demand from the co-producer [...] a final version of the cinematographic work in one of the languages of that Party”, while Article 15 on festivals stipulates that co-produced works “shall be shown at international festivals by the Party where the majority co-producer is established, or, in the case of equal financial participation, by the Party which provides the director” (Council of Europe 1992, 5). In 2006, the EU ratified the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity.

In practice, a co-production can have two or more “nationalities” so that tax incentives and other public support can be picked up in more than one country. More recent reports (UIS and Albornoz 2016) confirm activities concentrating on western Europe—with France ranking top, its co-productions involving Belgium, Germany and Italy. Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands are also co-production leaders despite not having a large production base. Belgium's 2013 co-production share, for example, was 76%, the highest among top coproducers in 2013. Ireland, following with 62%, also likely benefitted from a tax advantage for co-production location.

The growth in films co-produced between Global South and EU countries has remained “modest”, even though such films have generally been successful and facilitated EU-market access and increased attendance for co-productions (Vogel 2012; Falicov 2016). The EU has supported external co-productions, e.g., to address the absence of public funds in African countries. As with strategic partnerships and joint ventures in other industries, filmmakers from the Global South are incentivized to enter co-production with EU (or US) filmmakers by the prospect of access to finance, distribution, technology and training that are concentrated in the higher-income countries. But these potential gains may be outweighed by the “heavy administrative burden, possible impediments to the

development of African film production companies, the dominant influence of European taste and the homogenisation of production" as observed by Cocq in 2006 (cited in UIS 2009, 5). In the survey, 70% of countries that produced less than 30 films also had a co-production share below 40%, which is likely to relate to the lack of resources to produce film according to traditional industry conventions in the first place.

European co-production policy can be interpreted as an attempt to tax away the extra profit that producers gain by adopting a dominant or "hyper-central" language. The position rent attached to this (de Swaan 2020) can be measured, for example, as the box-office revenue that film-makers in the UK or US can gain by distributing their film to other English-speaking countries outside the respective domestic market. If the costs of production have been fully recovered via domestic sales, any additional revenue from exports counts as economic rent. The scope for foreign sales depends on the extent to which the producing country's language is used or understood abroad. Effectively there will be big rents to US-made films, and Indian films shot in English; much smaller rents to Chinese films shot in Mandarin or Japanese films in Japanese. The incentive for co-productions to break into new languages rises as the centrality of the home language falls.

## MEASURING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN CINEMA AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Diversity in cinema productions relies on many different factors, including the ability of producers to work with filmmakers and actors from different places, the number of films released and the level of technical standardization. As argued by UNESCO researchers, a strong definition of cultural diversity is needed because the meaning has been "analytically neglected" and in need of "systematic or robust understandings" (UIS, Benhamou, and Peltier 2011, 11). They see diversity in terms of two complementary dimensions, where the first involves the criteria that apply to individuals, such as their choice of genre or filmmaker profile, and the second relates to more material criteria that apply to products, like the nationality of a film. These human and material criteria may be linked, and while some aspects are easily quantifiable, others are more qualitative (UIS, Benhamou, and Peltier 2011). The authors associate diversity in cultural-economic goods with "industrial structures and in the governance of companies" in the creative-cultural industries, concluding that governments should be targeting the growth of SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) directly or indirectly, including subsidies (UIS, Benhamou, and Peltier 2011, 11; on subsidization of film business see the debate in Parc 2020).

One useful measure appearing in other cultural policy papers (UIS 2012) is that of internal and external language diversity. Internal diversity denotes that the languages of domestic film production mirror the linguistic characteristics of

the country, whereas external diversity observes the use of foreign languages in domestic film production. Production and consumption of multilingual (or multi-language) films may indicate both internal and external diversity. This measure concerns attributes of cultural-economic goods rather than linguistic properties, such as for example the notion of the “distance between two languages” (Ginsburgh and Weber 2011) or the proportion of language speaker groups (de Swaan 2013).

These linguistics-focused analyses focus on language diversity, whereas UIS explorations have sought to observe diversity on many dimensions. For example, a 2014 survey of UIS feature film production in 2012 and 2013 (UIS and Albornoz 2016) with data for 97 countries (22% of the data being estimates rather than national-government information) defines audiovisual diversity as diversity in sources (content producers, distributors and the diversity of firms' personnel in the sector), diversity in and of feature film (diverse genre, gender/ethnic diversity of people making the films; diversity of ideas in feature films); and diversity of audience exposure to feature films, “distribution of audiences” and content diversity. As the report notes, “contents should mirror the multiplicity of groups co-existing in a given society [...] and echo the expression of foreign cultures”; they should secure that consumers have audiovisual choices, create and disseminate audiovisual content (UIS and Albornoz 2016, 6).

These discussions direct attention at shortcomings in the data and the conceptual approaches related to the important feature of language in cultural-economic production, including feature co-production. The UIS survey was designed to ensure more comparability “and better quality data in the field of cultural statistics” in the light of changes to film industries in “certain developing countries” (UIS 2009, 1). While raw data have been added, now presenting information on 2007–2017 for a great array of countries, it still remains the most detailed comparative survey of language in film production to date whose potential for research with publicly accessible data remains unlocked. While fuller assessment cannot be given here, a few further observations critical of the range of possible observation and measurement biases that need to be addressed shall be given.

For example, a reported measure of distance (vs linguistic disparity) may be whether the language is spoken in a neighboring country. Finnish is a prime example as it is very dissimilar to Swedish on linguistic diversity measures, such as the Dyen matrix (concept discussion in UIS, Benhamou, and Peltier 2011). Producing films in Swedish, Estonian, and English in addition to 62% in Finnish, films can essentially be exports to neighboring countries, while English may be for the EU market. This may relate to cultural and regional proximity but not to linguistic similarity (UIS and Albornoz 2016). Intriguingly, the notion of the multilingual film may be unsuitable in economic research because in each market where it sells, i.e. competes with other goods, it enters the marketplace as “monolingual” rather than retaining linguistic diversity. To use the same regional example, a Finnish co-production showing in Swedish in Sweden is not competing on the Finnish-language attribute. A film can also succeed in one language and not in another, which is not the same as saying it can succeed in one country but not in another.

Truly multilingual films essentially require a multilingual speaker competence, which makes them unattractive for many film-distribution territories, including the profitable US American theatre screen. US majors “operate in coordinated fashion in foreign markets” which curbs local production and independent distribution, leading to narrowing diversity of feature film, in relation to number of screening slots in the domestic theatres of those countries and the dynamics surrounding pricing and admissions cost (UIS and Albornoz 2016, 13).

Marked shortcomings include the persisting fact that most UIS data still come from the Global North-countries and here also from the core of Europe and Northern America. The 2005–2006 data exemplify this imbalance, showing a coverage rate of 88% for Europe and North America, 54% for Asia and 45% for the Arab world. Inspected at the national level, this shows a “development bias”, as data majority comes from more developed countries. Looking across the data supply, the monitoring of the UIS data reflects macro-socioeconomic inequality, the more recent diversity likely resulting from co-production.

Among the available data, some entries of countries and languages in which films were produced do not give the number of films, except for a total annual country figure. There are three years of Czech Republic data (171 films in total), one year of Kazakhstan data (11 films), one year of Togo data (16 films), two Mozambique years (54 films), 2 years of Madagascar data (87 films), and two years of Netherlands or Dutch data (174 films) which were not shown by language specifics. The vacant category of “Other languages” is a further obstacle to precise diversity measurement. It potentially conceals events that could add to those “supercentral” and “hyper-central” languages which may help in corroborating assumptions about the tendency for English to prevail not just in the context of cultural diversity policy instruments but also perhaps because of it.

Another major methodological problem is transparency in enumeration of works, preventing effective statistical error calculation. For example, there are no entries for Poland and Germany, which would have had national production during 2007–2017. This does not mean that there are no films produced in Polish or German: in a Belarus-recorded film made in 2009 in German, Polish, and Russian, or in many Austrian and Swiss films in this dataset those languages emerge, albeit as minority effects. Similarly, data from the now large producer China are not included, except for productions in Macao SAR. Hong Kong, with an old and prestigious film industry, is also omitted. While no Afghanistan data are listed, a film made in Great Britain in 2014 is produced in Dari, Afghanistan's major language (local Persian); and there are many others where Dari is included in the multiple-language set.

The simple measures of language diversity in UIS reports are not theory-driven despite the obvious social science interest in cultural diversity and inequality. Cinema language data can therefore not be approached by primarily adding up language counts for a film, as relative impacts from language attributes in their real-world effect through distribution and consumption by speaker groups differ in decisive ways that theory aims to model. With more enhanced data, language diversity could be measured using comparable indicators to those developed

in economics for the distance between product categories or the distribution of market shares.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this essay we introduced the study of cinema language pertaining to its importance to the global language system and to film production, exploring UNESCO's UIS dataset and related staff reports. Beyond the more technical papers there has been scant attention by researchers—despite the importance of language diversity as good protected through cinematic works and its wider role in the survival of languages, and despite its significance as a film factor that drives commercial release strategy and consumption choices. There remains a need to show that public measures such as co-production, as part of “cultural governmentality”-driven agendas (Reckwitz 2017), actually have the intended social consequences such as the prospering of languages and communities that maintain them, and that cultural diversity and expressivity policies are worthwhile taxpayer-money spend on cultural economies like cinema.

With the original theory of the Global Language System (de Swaan 2020) we aim to show that language, proposed as a hyper-collective good, is a network good affording position rents. Only when “other-language proficiency” expands to a point where speakers move toward that other language (or other languages), can the network benefits be challenged (de Swaan 2020, 211). English as “hyper-central” cultural text influences people's language usage and cultural consumption and also serves as status marker, conferring difference in labor markets in non-English speaking language communities.

Today's lesser central languages struggle to survive the domination by “hyper-central” and “supercentral” languages and to maintain intergenerational transmission. Additional erosion of minority languages emerges from the “march” of images as global symbolic brokers of the “iconic turn”, able to pass by the boundaries which texts provide by image as an affordance. This “stab in the back” by (other) culture increases through yet another threat, the bundle of programming languages known as “coding”, which has made its way into research logics and communal expressions regardless of natural-language differences. Against these, communal efforts to mobilize around traditions of culture and language, and state efforts to assist these according to national policy ideas, may also weaken—unless they may be “enriched” or “museumalized” (Vogel and Shipman 2023; Boltanski and Esquerre 2020).

Co-production studies are difficult to perform empirically due to methodological constraints emanating from data collection efforts that mostly remain incomplete for such a highly complex creative good as cinema. Overall, the UIS reports and exploratory data analysis provide first clues about the inequality that cultural diversity instruments cannot fend off easily. More research and more sophisticated statistical analysis are needed, as are resources for the provision of robust public data to make such analyses worthwhile.

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# Audience Impact of European Co-production: The Case of *Quo Vadis, Aida?*

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European co-productions are usually the most ambitious European films, combining multiple sources of financing and targeting both transnational audiences and critical acclaim. However, their success with audiences is often quite limited in terms of admissions. In this article, we investigate the sources of this audience challenge for European co-productions adopting the perspective centered on audience design. We look at what we define as “ideal European co-productions”—films of high artistic value with festival visibility, an “ideal script” and clear socio-cultural and political value. We identify, drawing primarily on literature in theatre studies, four different groups of target audiences for these films—average spectators, emancipated spectators, spect-actors and emancipated spect-actors—and offer a framework for understanding what mobilizes these audience groups to seek out and view films. We then use *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, a 2020 film by Jasmila Žbanić, as an in-depth case study to show how, in practice, a lack of strategy at both production and distribution stage can result in failing to reach the target audiences even for films that show significant audience potential and have well-defined socio-political goals. We end the study pointing to the limitations of our work as well as offering suggestions for further research and policy development.

**Keywords**  
European Co-productions  
Audience Design  
Audience Activation  
*Quo Vadis, Aida?*  
Srebrenica Genocide  
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## INTRODUCTION

Co-producing has been a pivotal tool in European audiovisual policy since the end of WWII, fostering increased financing sources, broader release territories, and heightened production value, while facilitating a cross-national exchange of creative ideas and talent. Heavily funded by public subsidies, co-productions sustain numerous independent European production companies, ensuring high artistic freedom for European auteurs, elevating the volume of European production, and garnering festival awards (Hammet-Jamart, Mitrić, and Novrup Redvall 2018).

However, distribution reports reveal that the audience success of European co-productions remains constrained. With few exceptions, European co-productions seldom attract significant mainstream audiences, as viewers increasingly turn to US streaming platforms. The pervasive digitization and the enduring impact of the pandemic have only accelerated this trend in recent

years (Eskilsson 2023; Gubbins 2022).

Several evident political-economic factors contribute to this audience challenge. Chief among them is the lack of sufficient distribution and marketing support within the European independent film sector (Drake 2018). With a focus on supply rather than demand, European film funds often prioritize financing production over distribution, resulting in the overproduction of European films and market oversaturation. Another factor is the global unavailability of European films, even those with world sales agents attached. The dominant territory-by-territory sales and distribution model, intended to maintain film exclusivity and increase income through multiple territorial sales, paradoxically renders many films unsold and invisible. Additionally, the language barrier poses a significant challenge, as many co-productions are crafted in local European languages, limiting their connection with global audiences.

Yet, European filmmakers themselves may bear some accountability for the audience challenge. Depending heavily on public subsidies and facing few consequences for audience failures (especially if they perform well at festivals), filmmakers may prioritize catering to the taste of selection committees of public film funds and programmers of A-list festivals over reaching the average spectator. In this article, we explore the necessity for filmmakers to design an audience for their films and examine how the co-production status aids in reaching audiences. Our focus centers on a representative European co-production—*Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020, hereinafter *Aida*) by Jasmila Žbanić. It serves as a paradigmatic and (possibly) generalizable European case, being a well-crafted and award-winning film co-produced by nine European countries, with the potential to reach a broader audience. Being directed by a Bosnian director and set in Bosnia, *Aida* has been a subject of studies within the fields of Balkan cinema and memory studies (Jelača 2021; Lovrić and Hernández 2022). However, we treat *Aida* as a European, rather than Balkan, co-production, as the audience challenge it illustrates is a European concern that equally impacts the entire European film industry.

*Aida* boasts wide European distribution, universal themes, high production value, and an Oscar nomination. However, official distribution reports indicate modest cinema attendance in Europe, totaling 178,000 admissions across nineteen release territories (LUMIERE).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, during the same period, some other films attracted large audiences, both in ex-Yugoslavia (e.g., *Toma*, Dragan Bjelogrić and Zoran Lisinac, 2021, with almost 1.5 million admissions) and elsewhere in Europe (e.g., co-production *Another Round*, Thomas Vinterberg, 2020, with 3 million European admissions), suggesting that the pandemic, online releases, and piracy were not insurmountable obstacles.

Why did *Aida* experience low admissions, and why do many European co-

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<sup>1</sup> The audience numbers for *Quo Vadis, Aida?* and other films by Žbanić come from the European Audiovisual Observatory's LUMIERE database, which collects data on admissions of the films released in European cinemas. Data by country can be accessed here: <https://lumiere.obs.coe.int/movie/88929>.

productions face similar challenges? By introducing the concept of the “ideal European co-production” and a typology of European audiences, this article delves into the sources of the audience challenge for European co-productions and explores the extent to which these challenges can be mitigated.

## TOWARDS “THE IDEAL EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTION”

Through an examination of the funding guidelines of European public film funds and comprehensive interviews and observations of the funds’ administrators concerning their funding policies, we have distilled a definition of “the ideal European co-production” as perceived by European policymakers.<sup>2</sup> As we discussed in a previous work (Mitrić and Kolarić 2021), these ideal European co-productions encompass specific elements. Foremost among these is their policy-driven nature. Official recognition as “official co-productions” is granted only after meticulous scrutiny by competent national authorities, ensuring alignment with the formal criteria outlined in co-production treaties.

Moreover, an ideal European co-production must strategically combine selective public financing, validating its cultural and artistic merit, with market-driven financing that underscores its audience potential. On the distribution front, it should secure nominations and, preferably, awards at A-list film festivals. While an ideal scenario involves combining festival accolades with box-office success, the latter is considered a bonus rather than an essential element. Importantly, regardless of its apparent commercial and entertaining nature, the ideal European co-production, even if borrowing from conventional genres and Hollywood narratives, must avoid being low-brow. It should always maintain some level of socio-political, cultural, or artistic engagement (Mitrić and Kolarić 2021).

From a creative standpoint, the crux of the ideal European co-production lies in having “the ideal script”. This script is built on meticulously researched or personally experienced stories, devoid of unnecessary localisms that might impede its transnational appeal. While adhering to prescribed dramaturgical conventions, techniques, and narrative forms, the film’s story must inherently possess clear socio-cultural value. This value should persist, even at the potential expense of the film’s marketability.

To foster an environment conducive to generating more ideal scripts, European policymakers have initiated various measures promoting what Mitrić has termed “international co-development”: the development of film scripts and projects transcending national borders. This international co-development at

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<sup>2</sup> A longitudinal research on European co-production policy was conducted between 2012 and 2019 when the authors had access to the annual MEDICI workshops for the administrators of European film funds as well as to documents and personnel of individual public film funds like Eurimages.

the European level is nurtured through initiatives such as international training and networking programs, co-development funds, and co-productions markets (Mitrić 2020, 62–65).

## WHY *QUO VADIS, AIDA?* IS AN “IDEAL EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTION”?

*Aida* is the first film about the genocide in which the army of Bosnian Serbs killed over eight thousand Bosniak-Muslim men in the UN-protected town of Srebrenica in July 1995. The film uses the female gaze of the main character Aida, a translator in the Dutch-UN base who is desperately trying to save her husband and two sons from an unavoidable death after the Serbian soldiers enter Srebrenica. The Srebrenica genocide is officially the biggest war crime in Europe after WWII. *Aida* reminds us of its forgotten brutality, just as it problematizes the bureaucracy of international organizations and massive denial of the genocide among both ordinary people and elites in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (the Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

*Aida* effortlessly meets the above idealness criteria. It is a policy-driven, official co-production of nine countries made in line with the Council of Europe's Convention on European Co-production. The collaboration between the co-producing countries is visible both on-screen and off-screen. We hear and see Dutch and Bosnian actors on screen, while the film was shot by an Austrian cinematographer and edited by a Polish editor. The film also combines multiple sources of selective public funding for European co-productions with the market-driven financing from broadcasters, distributors, and the reputable sales agent. As for the distribution, *Aida* had an exceptional festival life that started with the premiere in the Venice official competition and ended with 43 nominations and 30 festival and other awards, including the award for the Best European Film, Lux Prize, two BAFTA and one Oscar nomination (IMDb). It had theatrical distribution in 19 European countries and VoD release on over 80 European streaming platforms (LUMIERE). Finally, even though *Aida* has the classical film narrative and Aristotelian dramaturgy (Janjić 2020), this conventional storytelling is disrupted by the film's distinctive form and style (e.g., with the surrealistic opening, the flashback scenes, and the disturbing open-ended closing scene) and the film's ideology (e.g., political provocation and the feminist standpoint view).

*Aida*'s script is rooted in the true story of Hasan Nuhanović, a translator stationed at the Srebrenica UN base and one of the few male survivors of the genocide. In 2012, Žbanić's producer acquired the rights to Nuhanović's book, *Under the UN Flag*, with the intention of adapting it into a film. However, transforming the book into an ideal script proved to be a challenging journey for Žbanić. Initially planning to co-develop the script with Nuhanović, her early drafts sparked disagreements on the film's ideology, storyline, and form. Unfortunately, the collaboration came to an official end in conflict when the 3-year book option expired.

In an open letter and two interviews, Nuhanović critiqued Žbanić's script, characterizing it as a "construction" rather than a "reconstruction" of the Srebrenica genocide. He argued that it downplayed the responsibility of the Dutch peacekeepers and the brutality of Serbian soldiers. Nuhanović called for more emphasis on the local Bosniak soldiers defending Srebrenica and greater sympathy for the people of Srebrenica, who he felt were unfairly portrayed as "dirty Muslims" (Nuhanović 2019). He envisioned the film as a historical epic and thriller depicting an international conspiracy in a UN-protected zone betrayed by the international community (Nuhanović 2019).

Nuhanović also contended that the script's feminist standpoint distorted facts, highlighting that all ten translators in the UN base were men. He expressed dissatisfaction with a scene where Aida's husband addresses a woman with "what a stupid woman" ("ja, glupače") when she rationalizes his gullibility during their meeting with Serbian general Ratko Mladić. Since the character of Aida's husband is based on Nuhanović's killed father, he accused Žbanić of constructing his father's misogyny (N1 2019).

Having ended the collaboration with Nuhanović, Žbanić finished the script on her own. In 2017, the project was selected to participate in the *eQuinox Europe International Screenwriters Workshop*,<sup>3</sup> a competitive European development program where participants work towards their ideal script in collaboration with renowned international script-doctors and other fellow-scriptwriters. The project was also selected for the prestigious Berlinale co-production market. The final version of the script that attracted the co-production financing was based on a rather minimalistic story of a woman who makes a series of wrong decisions due to her helplessness. Instead of offering a national, middle-brow war spectacle and a historical epic targeting primarily Bosniak mainstream audience, the film focuses on the universality of the Srebrenica genocide, motherhood, and family, which makes it relatable to transnational audiences.

*Aida* attracted production financing from eight countries in the form of co-production subsidies from the public film funds combined with support from public broadcasters as well as MGs and sponsorships. The Venice premiere, an Oscar nomination, and the best European Film Award (to mention only the most important accolades) officially confirmed *Aida's* idealness in the eyes of European public film funders and policymakers. Yet, while the critical accolades were many, there was no wide audience response.

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3 See <https://www.equinox-europe.org/equinox-europe.html>.

# A POSSIBLE TYPOLOGY OF TARGET AUDIENCES FOR EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTIONS

Considering that most European co-productions are co-financed by public subsidies, they are expected to hold distinct cultural value for European citizens. European films obviously create a buzz by making box office successes, in which case their impact is easily quantified. However, when they are not blockbusters (and few of them are) their audience impact tends to be qualitative and difficult to track. For instance, the impact can be educational when films provide audiences with unconventional poetics or storytelling formats that people cannot see in Hollywood productions (Mitrić 2022). Likewise, European co-productions sometimes deal with controversial issues that trouble European societies and inspire discussions about them.

However, distribution reports reveal that many European co-productions simply do not reach audiences for various reasons. This lack of audience raises questions about the purpose of public subsidies for European cinema and the level of commitment European filmmakers have to cultivating audiences for their films. Constantly pressured to secure public financing, European filmmakers often deliver scripts and packages designed to satisfy the gatekeepers of European public film agencies rather than European citizens, who, to a large extent, finance European co-productions through their taxes.

The audience component is vaguely defined in the guidelines of public film funds' support schemes. While reaching the audience is considered a paramount goal, the available instruments and resources for studying and communicating with wider audiences remain scarce and conservative. With few exceptions (Freudental 2024), film funds allocate no funding for audience design during the project development phase. They offer limited support for alternative distribution practices and establish few mechanisms for measuring the qualitative audience impact of European co-productions or for training filmmakers who fail to achieve this impact. In this section, we discuss how European filmmakers and policymakers can concretely incorporate audience impact into their understanding of the ideal European co-production, drawing on concepts from theatre studies.

We focus on specific traditions of engaged and political theatre because their audience impact is predominantly qualitative, cultural, and social-democratic, aligning with the policy goals of European public film funds and many policymakers. Content creators in socially engaged theatre activate their target audiences in two ways. One approach nourishes the Aristotelian traditions, connecting audiences with a play on primarily sensuous and emotional levels. The spectator begins the journey by identifying with a story's character, situation, or sub-plot, culminating in a healing catharsis by the end of the play. Another approach builds on the Brechtian traditions, viewing theatre as a space

for political activism that generates revolutionary ideas, allowing the spectator to interact with the content on a cognitive and intellectual level.

Among several of the pioneers of translating these theatrical traditions into film theory was the filmmaker and theoretician Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. In his study, *The Viewer's Dialectic* (1988), Gutiérrez acknowledges the dual nature of film, suggesting that a film needs both emotional and intellectual touchpoints with target audiences to create a lasting impact. Hence, he blends both the Aristotelian identification effect and the Brechtian alienation effect to define a successful film. To be impactful, a filmmaker first needs to immerse the viewer in the film's universe through good storytelling, a powerful visual style, and music. Once sensually and emotionally engaged, the viewer is more likely to discover the intellectual touchpoints and use them to generate ideas for actions (Gutiérrez Alea 1988; Shroeder 2016).

If a film lacks sensuous or emotional touchpoints with the viewer, average viewers may quickly lose interest and never discover its intellectual touchpoints [Fig. 1]. European co-productions should ensure they include both types, as they may attract more viewers and transition them towards discovering cognitive and intellectual touchpoints that a film offers. Ideally, the interaction with intellectual touchpoints then converts into critical interventions that viewers undertake in their personal lives or societies (Mitríć and Sarikakis 2016).

A meaningful engagement with intellectual touchpoints of many European co-productions necessitates viewers to embody what Jacques Rancière terms "the emancipated spectator", possessing a well-developed ability to think, communicate, observe, learn, and act in the world (Rancière 2011). The emancipated spectator can interpret and challenge artworks, recognizing and resisting ideology through spectating, comparing, and interpreting (Shawyer 2019, 45). However, according to Rancière, becoming an emancipated spectator seemingly demands a solid education and cultural capital, suggesting that many "average" spectators may struggle to connect with arthouse films and be their target audience. The essential problem with European film co-productions is that both film funds and filmmakers often limit the target audience to Rancière's emancipated spectators, neglecting the option of presenting their film stories in a way that breaks the arthouse niche.

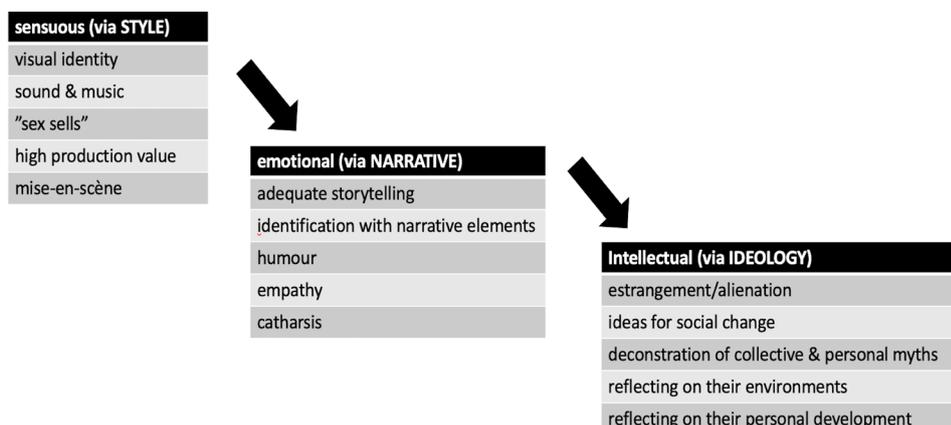


Fig. 1 Touchpoints between a film and the spectator

The challenge of activating the average spectator was addressed by the theatre practitioner Augusto Boal through his concept of *theatre of the oppressed*. Boal shifted theatre performances from traditional upper-middle-class venues to locations in favelas, suburbs, and rural areas in his native Brazil, where average spectators could see and afford them. This sparked dialogues through which content-makers, peasants, and workers learned about one another's lives, establishing a common language for the critical investigation of their social realities. Boal insisted that theatre becomes popular when performances are produced simultaneously for and by the spectator (Coudray 2017). He coined the term "spect-actors" for participant-spectators who act by joining the stage to recreate situations from their oppressive social reality and generate ideas about how to impact them. On stage, spect-actors are guided and moderated by designated professionals (jokers), compensating for the average spectators' lack of theoretical and technical theatrical knowledge and middle-class consecration (Boal 1979).

Boal adapted his approach to diverse audiences, tailoring his theatre of the oppressed to individualist First-World contexts where oppression and violence are often covert and symbolic. This resulted in various new forms of his theatre targeting middle-class (emancipated) spectators who suffer from internalized forms of oppression, such as "loneliness", "fear of emptiness", and "lack of individual freedom", leading to depression and physical illness (Babbage 2018, 23). This demonstrated that theatre of the oppressed could trigger individual and intimate processes, not only broad social ones. Unfortunately, there is limited knowledge about the extent to which European co-productions may exert this type of intimate impact on their viewers. This is primarily due to the lack of resources for exploring such potential in a film story during the script development stage and undertaking more sophisticated actions to identify and reach target audiences outside festival circuits and arthouse cinema theatres.

In line with the aforementioned theatrical notions and practices, we propose four basic types of potential target viewers for European co-productions [Fig. 2]. The first type is the *average spectator* who views films solely as entertainment and escapism. To reach them, a European co-production must ensure a

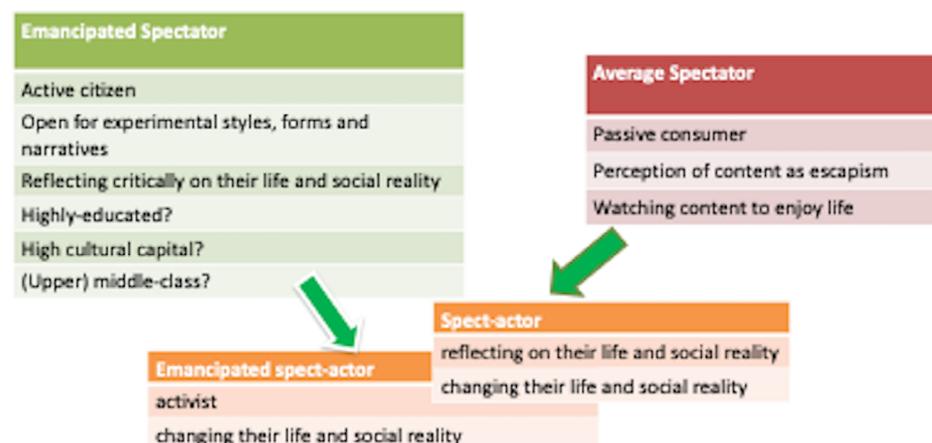


Fig. 2  
The typology of target audiences for European co-productions

critical number of sensuous and emotional touchpoints, fostering strong self-identification, a sense of familiarity, empathy, or catharsis within the film's story-world.

The second type of viewer resembles Rancièrian *emancipated spectators*—well-educated viewers with high cultural capital and good training in consuming film as art. They enjoy sensuous and emotional touchpoints with every film, but their focus is on cognitive and intellectual touchpoints. They a priori expect a film to help them understand reality better, rather than escape it. They typically attend film festivals and serve as eloquent ambassadors within the public sphere.

The third and the most demanding type of viewer mirrors Boal's *spect-actor*. They are former average spectators who, impacted by a film, convert partly or entirely into active spectators. Boal's practice, as mentioned above, insists on exploring the workers' and peasants' potential to become *spect-actors* and discover the intellectual touchpoints despite their modest education, cultural capital, and a low appetite for high-culture. The filmmakers can prioritize researching the potential of average film viewers in a similar way.

This transformative spect-acting process is not limited to average spectators; it extends to emancipated spectators as well. It refers to situations where discerning emancipated spectators detect hidden forms of micro-oppression and Bourdieuan "symbolic violence" (Milović 2006, 254) thanks to a specific film. The process in which the emancipated spectator discovers this subtle oppression and consequently decides to "undertake individual interpretive acts that offer collective alternative realities" transforms the emancipated spectator into what Susanne Shawyer calls "the emancipated spect-actor" (Shawyer 2019, 42). Inspired by Shawyer, we use the same term to define the fourth type of target audience for European co-productions—*emancipated spect-actor* who decide to use their knowledge, skills, and networks to practice activism inspired by eye-opening intellectual touchpoints with a film.

An ideal European co-production does not have to be a catch-all film that necessarily attracts all four types of spectators. However, its makers should have a clear idea about the specific community of target viewers (regardless of its size), as well as a set of specific actions and techniques for researching and reaching that community. When a European co-production targets spect-acting as its audience impact, filmmakers must make an additional effort to give agency to the pre-established target viewer in the development, post-production, and exploitation of the film. This agency is achieved when the target viewer—whether farmers, workers, middle-class individuals, or emancipated spectators—is treated as an active participant in the process of making and disseminating a film (e.g., as consultants, co-creators, ambassadors, testers) rather than an under-researched recipient or an imagined construct.

## WHO DID (NOT) WATCH *QUO VADIS, AIDA*?

Applying the audience typology outlined above to *Aida*, this section explores the reasons behind the film's failure to attract a broader audience despite its initial potential. *Aida's* classic narrative, Aristotelian dramaturgy, production value, dynamic plot, and universal themes, such as family and motherhood, promise authentic connections with diverse spectators worldwide. So, why has this film, seemingly relevant to many audiences at first glance, not gained a wider audience and spurred more social and political actions?<sup>4</sup> Below, we argue that this is primarily due to how *Aida* fails to specifically address different potential categories of spectators identified—at times in storytelling and at times in the film's promotion.

Our methodology for analyzing *Aida's* reception is constrained due to the lack of access to the film's creative and distribution team, VoD revenues, and a larger sample of test audiences. Nevertheless, the data gathered from available distribution reports, press clippings, interviews, media debates, and two surveys conducted in Spring 2022 among representatives of average and emancipated spectators provide sufficient insights to initiate a debate on *Aida's* reception and, ultimately, whether a European co-production with insufficient audience impact should qualify as an ideal European co-production.

Naturally, the film's core *average spectators* are Bosniaks, Bosnia's Muslim community, considering that the Srebrenica genocide is their national *lieu du mémoire* (Nora 1989). The genocide unites Bosniaks around one joint narrative about their collective trauma, which at the same time celebrates those who dared to confront the ruthless Serbian army as well as condemns the racism of Dutch soldiers and impotence of the United Nations. Thus, Žbanić first approached the activist and genocide-survivor Hasan Nuhanović to understand first-hand what happened in Srebrenica in 1995 and how it affects the survivors 20 years later. Nuhanović further connected her with other genocide survivors who provided authentic insights and audience touchpoints (N1 2019).

The film ended up not particularly strongly capitalizing on these audiences. Conflicts around the script involving Nuhanović likely alienated those who felt themselves close to the national narrative that integrates Srebrenica as a place of national tragedy, and who expected a film that would endorse that kind of narrative, rather than a progressive feminist depiction of events which—while certainly not shying away from depicting the perpetrators—does so in a manner that is relatively restrained and efficient. Žbanić's initial choice

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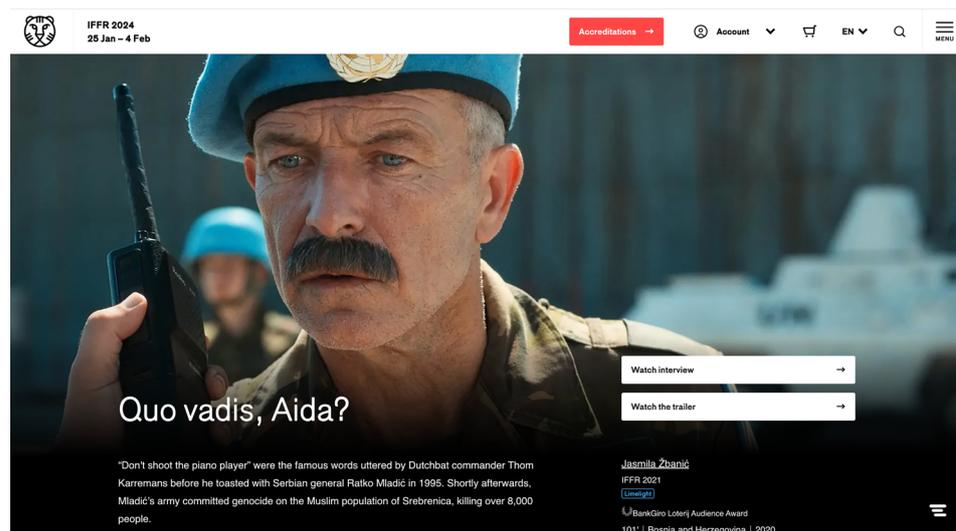
<sup>4</sup> This becomes visible when comparing *Aida* to Žbanić's debut *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams* (*Grbavica*, 2006) about war rape during the war in Bosnia and its present-day consequences. The film was credited as helping to push through legal changes that helped recognise—and compensate as such—rape victims as civilian victims of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina—an act that could partly be described as a consequence of mobilizing the already emancipated spectators into spect-actors, who have lobbied for this kind of change.

to build the film around the memoir of a real-life Potočari base translator capitalised on this understanding that the film will tell a "genuine" story of what had happened, offering a form of catharsis to those feeling in some way affected by the tragedy. But this may have also had a somewhat adverse effect: in 2019 Nuhanović himself publicly distanced himself from the (then not yet released) film, explaining in a lengthy Facebook post that the versions of the script he had read and consulted on departed significantly from his experience (Nuhanović 2019). There is an undeniable tension here between film as an artwork, film as a document and film as a means of contributing to a process of dealing with a difficult past. This tension was recognised by Žbanić, who in her public appearances simultaneously emphasized the difficulty of dealing with Srebrenica as "a huge trauma for all Bosnians" (Deblokada 2020, 13) and the hope that the film would contribute to "understanding, empathy and mutual solidarity between Muslim and Serb Bosnian nationals" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020), while also consistently stressing its status as a work of art, rather than a depiction of "truth" in some form. In other words, creating an ideal script came at a cost of alienating not only some prominent local voices for the story, but also potential "natural" viewers listening to those voices.

Žbanić has historically rejected the use of her cinema as a tool for building a sentimental, divided national narrative. Pavičić (2020) rightfully notes that her films have always been both activist and political and reflective of the nation, but they do not represent the radically victimisation-focused political narrative which has dominated the Bosniak public discourse. This makes Žbanić's film closer to the critical, active audiences, but has also made it unappealing to political leadership—which couldn't have found the film particularly useful for the national narrative (Higgins 2022). Žbanić's own public criticism towards both the ruling and opposition parties in Bosnia, as well as her explicit acknowledgement (in an interview given to Eve Ensler; NEON 2021) that she didn't want to engage in the political conflict over Srebrenica, but for the film to be "a part of reconciliation" (again stressing its activating potential) certainly didn't assist the film in finding its way to these audiences either. Finally, the feminist narrative does not align easily with the more passive role of women in not only Bosnian, but also other national narratives in the region. And so, despite what was deemed a successful domestic opening in the challenging time of the pandemic (Ljubčić 2020), *Aida* managed to gain only 11,757 theatre viewers in the domestic Bosniak market (LUMIERE)—not counting the viewers reached through national and regional streaming platforms. And as the viewers weren't many, even fewer of them were "activated".

The average spectators are also among the Dutch people who remember the responsibility that their government took for the genocide in 1995. *Aida* opened a limited public debate in the Netherlands. It was screened in the side programme *Limelights* at the (hybrid) 2021 International Film Festival Rotterdam. The festival page presented the film with a quote by the Dutchbat commander Thom Karremans, drawing attention to the film's relevance for the local context [Fig. 3]. The festival audience award gave it an initial boost with the

Fig. 3  
2021 International Film  
Festival Rotterdam page  
screenshot, showing  
the presentation of *Quo  
Vadis, Aida?* with a quote  
by Thom Karremans.



local audience, perhaps even beyond the festival-going spectators. It was then screened by the Belgian-Dutch distributor, Cinéart, to the Dutchbat veterans. Following the theatrical release, the national newspaper *De Volkskrant* ran an interview with Žbanić—and with the veterans themselves, who demanded an additional disclaimer to be added to the film, stating that some events have been fictionalised for creative and dramatic purposes. From their perspective, the film overstates the Serbian zealousness, which is in contrast with the perspective of the survivors, who claim that it is underplayed (Beekman 2021a). The same dialogue reoccurred along similar lines several months later in the same paper (Beekman 2021b), and in a public TV debate on the national broadcasting channel NPO1, which pushed the film into public discourse—as did the fact that its release coincided with a series of events titled *Srebrenica is Dutch History*. In a culmination of events, the Dutch Minister of Defense Kajsa Ollongren, in her speech delivered when awarding the Dutchbat members the Bronze Medal of Merit for their service in June 2022, referenced one of the veterans' quotes on the film from the abovementioned talk show: "Your first reaction is to be defensive, because of the past 25 years. But the film is not about Dutchbat. It's ultimately about the local people there." All this—including the reframe of the discussion—resulted in just barely over 22,000 cinemagoers in the Netherlands. It shows primarily some limited audience design on part of the distributor, which resulted in modest admissions.

Many average spectators around Europe could hear about *Aida* (and where to watch it) in the mainstream media when the film received the Oscar nomination and the best European Film Award. By opting to present the story through the prism of one tragic heroine, a relatable "woman in the middle" trying to rescue her family (Janjić 2020), the film draws away from the specifically local Srebrenica experience. The strongest weapon in promoting the film to European spectators was its universality. Both the film's narrative and its press materials emphasized the dramatic nature of Aida's choice, stressing her universal dilemma and the difficult ambiguity of her choice that can emotionally connect with the ordinary viewer (Deblokada 2020, 7).

Žbanić was also aware that many target audiences would not be familiar with Srebrenica. Thus, it was necessary to both make clear what was happening and tell the story in a way that makes it relevant,<sup>5</sup> relying first on emotional and then intellectual touchpoints: "The film must function for people who don't know it's [sic!] history. [...] Aida's drama and her emotions are the heart of this story. I want people to take away the feelings and questions the film raises" (Deblokada 2020, 18). The visuals for the film—e.g. the promotional posters all featuring some version of the main character in doubt (or sometimes, as in the French edition, in movement), with a stylised image of the crowds of people that the film singles her from—emphasized this identification through advertising the film as one about an ordinary woman acting in extraordinary circumstances [Fig. 4 and 5]. Yet a limited number of European spectators saw the film in cinemas (LUMIERE).



Fig. 4 and Fig. 5  
Aida (Jasna Đuričić)  
in *Quo Vadis, Aida?*.  
Source: Deblokada

<sup>5</sup> In the press kit, Žbanić mentions the test screening with film students of the Łódź Film School in Poland, many of whom had little or no knowledge of the genocide. It is, however, not clear how much, if any, of the film was modified as a result of these screenings (Deblokada 2020).

*Aida's emancipated spectators* emerged when the film premiered in 2020 at the Venice Film Festival and exponentially grew with every new award and nomination. The film won only accolades by all relevant critics and many emancipated spectators saw the film during its packed festival screenings. In the survey we conducted among 40 people from seven EU countries whom we identified as emancipated spectators due to their class, cultural capital and taste in film, everyone was extremely positive about the film. However, they all but one agreed that they would not see *Aida* more than once. They also were not surprised by low cinema admissions across Europe as "the film is too dark" for average spectators. Some commented that *Aida* "lacked an extra million Euro to become more audience appealing". They also concluded that *Aida* will be one of the "evergreen films" that collects audiences cumulatively over generations unlike many "one-month-films that become forgotten after one month of their audience-hype".

*Aida's* core *spect-actors* were obviously in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska where the majority of population still deny or relativize the genocide and celebrate the war criminals who committed it (see e.g. Stojanović 2021; Stojanović and Kajošević 2021). However, the film apparently failed to acknowledge and tackle on the textual level the vast difference between the narratives on the Serbian and Bosniak side and offer a point of entry to the Serbian average spectator who is deeply embedded in the domestic narrative. *Aida* presents complex characters—starting from Aida herself—rejecting the collective martyrdom narrative. Yet the film still—even if it tries to give many characters identities that go beyond the national/collective, specifically to avoid collective blame and guilt and deny the viewer easy identification of "good" and "evil" along national lines—deals with a contested national topic in a way that makes the ascription of national roles inevitable. And while this is understandable—after all, genocide is a crime specifically targeting individuals due to their group membership—in the context of a strong narrative clash, it makes the activation of average spectators extremely difficult. Moreover, as the film's narrative is a fictionalised version of historical events, every departure from factuality of what had happened becomes an opportunity to question the narrative altogether as fraudulent and biased. This happens mainly because of the political context in which the film is being interpreted. On the one hand, widespread genocide relativization allows the media and political figures, including convicted war criminals, to contest the events that took place—a narrative that is supported by the political structures. Moreover, the insistence on collectivisation (rather than individualisation) of the crime continuously enables equalisation between the nation and the crime, thus making any mention of the crime an attack on the whole nation, something Žbanić is aware of and stands firmly against (Higgins 2022).

On the flip side, while the director's evident intention was to mobilize potential viewers, her effort to grapple with the relativization and control of the media discourse on Srebrenica by the Serbian government, leading to a public conflict with the Serbian public broadcaster RTS over the films screening, likely did not contribute to altering entrenched attitudes. Žbanić's public insistence

that the film was not being shown on RTS due to political pressure (a claim refuted by a press release from RTS described as "made up") (RTS 2022), and her assertion that "symbolically, the war will be over once the public service RTS stops being in the service of war-mongering propaganda" (N1 2022), can easily be co-opted by political discourse emphasizing a clear and collective "us-them" distinction. This is facilitated by simplistic media framing that selectively distorts information, often in service of the ruling elites (Sejdinović 2022). The ensuing public discussion, with predictable positions, resulted in entrenching rather than shifting perspectives.

While writing this article, we struggled to trace any cases of obvious spect-acting process among the average spectators in Serbia and Republic of Srpska. There is, for example, no record of teachers showing the film to their students, local television showing *Aida* despite all odds, or viral social media posts showing that the film made some Serbian average spectators reconsider their denial of the Srebrenica genocide. At the same time, there is a lot of evidence of people who either refused to watch a film or watched it only to discredit it. They found no touchpoints with *Aida* whatsoever.

Yet, we still do not know how many Serbian people (il)legally streamed the film and started a discrete spect-acting process, in the privacy of their rooms, towards questioning their denial. The scope and resources of our research are too limited to discover and track these intimate processes. However, in April 2022, we tested it on a sample of seven Serbian viewers from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska whom we identified as average spectators based on their education, class, media habits and cultural capital. Asked to watch *Aida*, they gave us three kinds of responses. Two respondents refused straight away to watch the film dismissing it as anti-Serbian propaganda. Four of them saw it, but their feedback was based only on shaming Žbanić for conscious ignoring of "the genocide that the Srebrenica Muslims had committed against the Serbs in 1993 before the Serbs took revenge in self-defence in 1995". One respondent watched the film but refrained from giving any feedback. We can only guess if their silence signalled some kind of discrete spect-acting process.

There are two possibilities for why *Aida* did not trigger a trackable spect-acting process among the average spectators in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. The first is obviously external to the film and linked to extreme political pressures from the genocide-denying Serbian mainstream elite. Due to this pressure, Žbanić could not obtain the permit from the local Serbian authorities to shoot in Srebrenica. No distributor in Serbia or the Republic of Srpska dared to buy the film, while the headlines of the Serbian mainstream media massively dismissed the film as blatant anti-Serbian propaganda. It culminated with the aforementioned open conflict between Žbanić and the Serbian public service broadcaster when RTS refused to show *Aida* even after the Serbian actress Jasna Đuričić, who plays Aida, won the best European actress award in December 2021. Finally, the premiere of *Aida* coincided (accidentally or not) with the premiere of the Serbian national epic *Dara of Jasenovac* (Predrag Antonijević, 2021), which depicts the mass killings of Serbian civilians in the

Croatian concentration camps during WWII from the perspective of the little girl Dara [Fig. 6]. Dara easily created emotional touchpoints with the Serbian average spectators and likely distanced them even more from reflecting upon the crimes that Serbs committed. All this created a thick wall around Serbian average spectators that could have simply become impenetrable for the thought-provoking *Aida*.

Another reason for low spect-acting in Serbia could originate from *Aida's* team. Žbanić used time and resources to talk to the genocide survivors. She even tried to co-write the script with one of them to facilitate more touchpoints with Bosniak average spectators. Likewise, she talked to Dutch soldiers who were in Srebrenica in 1995. In one interview (Kožul 2020) she acknowledged how the time she spent with them made her less angry with them as she realized that most of them were only 18 in 1995 and Srebrenica was their first stationing abroad. She translated this into the film by humanizing young Dutch soldiers, increasing the number of touchpoints between the film and Dutch (or West European) average spectators. However, there is little evidence that Žbanić and her team tried to research the hearts and brains of the average Serbian spectators who live in media darkness, were too young when the genocide happened, or have been raised and schooled by genocide deniers. Thus, we do not know if time spent with them would have generated fresh ideas about their touchpoints with a film about Srebrenica.

A tiny segment of emancipated spectators in Serbia turned into *emancipated spect-actors* when they decided to use their resources to motivate average Serbian spectators to watch *Aida*. This included a petition by the Belgrade-based Regional Academy for Academic Development to screen the film on

Fig. 6  
*Dara of Jasenovac*.  
Source: Cineuropa (via  
Film danas production)



Serbian public broadcaster (ADD 2021). Few accomplished actors, filmmakers, former parliamentarians, and NGO directors advocated in public interviews for the film to be acknowledged rather than ignored, and a dialogue with Žbanić arranged. Yet all these initiatives spoke only to emancipated spectators, rather than activated the average ones. Only four screenings of *Aida* were eventually arranged in Serbia: in Novi Pazar, the centre of Serbia's Bosniak community, Novi Sad as part of the Autonomous Festival of Women, and in Belgrade for journalists (see Sejdinović 2022). These screenings, as important as they were, have likely reached an already knowledgeable or at the very least interested audience of emancipated spectators.

Finally, the authors of this article who grew up in Croatia and Serbia respectively during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, being exposed to anti-Bosniak propaganda, consider this article as their own act of (emancipated) spect-acting, which was inspired by *Aida*.

## CONCLUSION

The most ambitious European films, aiming for both international audiences and critical acclaim, are typically co-productions. However, they frequently fail to appeal to a wider audience. In this study, we asked the question: why do European co-productions, and in particular those we label as "ideal"—films of high artistic value with festival visibility, an "ideal script" and clear socio-cultural and political value—fail at reaching their target audiences? Moving beyond the typical justifications such as cultural specificities, arthouse style, and high-brow ideology, we hone in on a perspective centered on audience design: the inability to, even when target audiences are accurately identified, develop and subsequently promote films in a manner that resonates with those audiences during the distribution process.

To demonstrate this, we developed a model for analysing the audience impact of European co-productions. We identified four types of target-audiences for European co-productions: average spectators, emancipated spectators, spect-actors and emancipated spect-actors. We then used *Quo Vadis, Aida?* as a representative and generalizable case study to demonstrate how and where the process of targeting different audience groups for the film failed. Our analysis showed that, despite the director's conscious intention to target specific audience groups to achieve identified societal impacts, a lack of strategy at both the textual and promotional levels, particularly noteworthy given the intricate socio-political context surrounding the film's production, distribution, and reception, frequently hindered its reach to the intended audiences.

Our analysis, however, was severely limited by the lack of access to the film's creative and distribution team, and by the lack of data to draw on. Information on VoD viewership remains unavailable, audience practices with regard to illegal film streaming under-researched. Our study thus points to the need for European filmmakers to devote more resources to researching the target

audiences and creating genuine touchpoints with them even during script development (for which they need additional financial and professional help of European film funds and distributors), as well as for more dedicated academic efforts to both theorise and empirically research film audiences' engagement with European films.

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# Decentering Nations: The Role of National Institutes for Culture in the Promotion and Circulation of European Cinema

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When considering the circulation of European films across Europe within a post-national framework, an investigation on the role of national institutes for culture could offer a particular take on the “Europeanisation” (Carpentier 2021) process through cinema-related initiatives. If they were conceived to promote national heritage and values, they have found themselves in the ambivalent position of pursuing their main goal within a changing institutional and cultural context that requires more integrated approaches, since the beginning of the 1990s, namely after the end of the Cold War. Notably, since the creation of the European National Institutes for Culture network (hereafter EUNIC) in 2006, they have been asked to cooperate and to valorise the heterogeneity and multiplicity of European subjectivities and communities, according to the motto “unity in diversity” (Liz 2016; Bondebjerg, Novrup Redvall, and Higson 2014).<sup>1</sup> In particular, this research concentrates on the circulation, among European and Italian institutes for culture, of films that deal with *European issues*, and has reflected on how they affect the construction of a transnational European identity by addressing sensitive topics.

## Keywords

Post-nationalism  
Transnational Identity(ies)  
Policy making  
European Institutes of  
Culture  
Film Diplomacy

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## INTRODUCTION

This study originates from an investigation into the relationship between cinematic Europe and its multiple identities that has occurred over the last three decades and finds significant evidence in many scholars. Thomas Elsaesser and his study on European cinema are cases in point: here, by questioning its “conditions of impossibility”, he asks “on what basis, other than bureaucratic and

<sup>1</sup> Art. 128 of The Treaty of Maastricht on European Union (1992) explicitly claims that “The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore”. Similarly, the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production, established in the same year (1992) by the Council of Europe, was designed to “safeguard and promote the ideals and principles which form [a] common heritage” while being “an instrument of creation and expression of cultural diversity”. The Council of Europe Convention on Cinematographic Co-production was revised in Rotterdam in 2017, not only “by providing a platform to make cinematographic co-productions more systematic and easier to construct”, but also opening for accession by non-European countries. See also Paganoni 2015.

economic, a European cinema might build a sense of identity that was neither merely the sum of its parts nor the result of new lines of exclusion and 'other-ing?' (2005, 24). It follows that, to understand and conceptualise contemporary Europe on screen, it is necessary, according to Elsaesser, to enlarge the context and look at "Europe's bio- and body-politics" (2014, 17–32). It is a matter of representativeness, where at stake there is an idea of Europeanness that draws on "a common European history and cultural heritage, together with more contemporary issues addressing nationalism, migration, identity, and gender politics" (Rivi 2007). This approach seems to be in continuity with that used by Pierre Sorlin (1991) in his study on *European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939–1990*, where the author provides a comparative study on the main themes of European cinema—including urbanisation, immigration, sex and gender—drawing on examples from French, German, Italian and British films, and significantly moving from the question: what does cinema tell us regarding the contrasts between European nations?

For a finer-grained approach it is important to emphasise that the connotation of identity taken into consideration herein is that of *cultural identity*, which differs from the *civic* dimension of support to the EU as a political project, inasmuch as "people could feel European (identify as European) but not quite act upon it (identify with Europe)." (Ciaglia, Fuest, and Heineman 2018, 15). Hence, even though they do not necessarily evolve in conjunction, it goes without saying that these two facets of European identity are closely linked, as cultural activities are widely considered an instrument for fostering civic identification in EU policies by generating "new ideas, innovation and social cohesion" (Barroso 2023).

Given these premises, this study has attempted to answer the following questions: do the cinema-related initiatives held by national institutes for culture concur in building a transnational image of Europe? How and to what extent do they encourage the promotion and the successful circulation of a film that we can consider "European"? Does European cinema represent national identity first and cross-international identities second? (Comand and Menarini 2014).

As a consequence, having thoroughly examined the recurring topics in the field literature on contemporary European cinema, the investigation has been carried out according to three intersecting lines of enquiry: the first emphasises the occurrence of sensitive topics in cinema-related initiatives by considering them the litmus test of a discursive and intersectional approach to Europeanness and European multiple-identities (Carpentier 2021); the second highlights how cinema-related initiatives address a niche audience that could be deemed part of a "united European cinema sphere" (Biltreyst and Cuelenaere 2021); the third explores the status of national institutes for culture, as "diplomatic tools" and "unofficial cultural ambassador[s]" (Noto and Peretti 2016), as special sites to observe how European cinema fosters the construction of a transnational image of European culture, namely as sites "where Europeanity is discursively and materially performed" (Carpentier 2021, 237).

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Firstly, the research has moved from the assumption that the circuits of national institutes for culture could help the film promotion by integrating the main paths of circulation, thus partly compensating the historical fragmentation and “lack of a [...] distribution network covering Europe” (Bondebjerg, Novrup Redvall, and Higson 2014, 1); a lack even more clear if compared with the effort made in terms of co-production (Scaglioni 2020)—especially for those films that, despite their high cultural value, are less interesting for commercial purposes. Indeed, “[w]hile discussions of European film tend to only focus just on the cinema market, it is important to stress that cinema admissions do not show the whole picture, since Europeans are not only watching films in the cinema” (Bondebjerg, Novrup Redvall, and Higson 2014, 13). In this regard, it is worth disambiguating the concept of *circulation*, intended herein in its broadest sense as the wide network of formal and informal places and occasions (Lobato 2012) that valorise the cultural and political side of film experience (Holdaway and Scaglioni 2018, 2019; Scaglioni 2020). That is the reason why the circuits of national institutes for culture have been examined by considering them as a kind of IRL (in real life) “secondary window” (Curtin, Holt, and Sanson 2014), which have a significant role in film circulation beyond national borders, as in constructing the cultural value and identity of films.

Secondly, in trying to answer Randall Halle's questions “What is European film? How does European film differ from national film?” (Halle 2014, 15), one could assume that a film has to be deemed as European if it is a co-production—a so-called “Euro-pudding”—, or if it addresses European issues (Liz 2014)—namely if it reflects on the meaning of Europeanness and its representations. Nonetheless, this study concentrates on the second aspect. Indeed, if the WP1 of the EUMEPLAT project shows the growing popularity of European co-productions in terms of theatrical release and sold tickets (Biltereyst and Cuelenaere 2021), at the same time, co-production as a criterion to define the Europeanness of a film and its relation with the public preferences, fades into the background if we speak of non-theatrical release. In line with Harrod, Liz and Timoshkina the aim:

*[...] is to revisit the issue of the significance of European cinema as a category in the wake of the recent acceleration in transnational filmmaking and globalisation as a whole. [...] Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, scholarly work considered not only the industrial aspects of European film (Jäckel 2003), particularly the renaissance of co-productions (Rivi 2007), but also its relationship with national and transnational identities (Wayne 2002; Everett 2005b). (Harrod, Liz, and Timoshkina 2014)*

## STUDY SAMPLE AND TOOLS OF ENQUIRY

The present investigation has begun with a preliminary mapping of the cinema-related events held by seventeen among European and Italian institutes for culture, with the aim of understanding their importance within the institutes' cultural programmes. The research has focused on the cultural institutes belonging and/or taking place into the so-called Big Five Countries. Then, the study sample has been further circumscribed by taking into account the activities held by European cultural institutes in Italy: the Institut Français in Milan, the Goethe-Institut and the Instituto Cervantes in Rome, and the British Council Italy—the latter, we will see later in the text, provides a very peculiar exemplum. Moreover, the focus on the Italian cultural institutes in Europe has been on those located in the biggest cities and those deemed as important for their film tradition: Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Munich, Stuttgart, Madrid, Barcelona, Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Strasbourg, London and Brussels. In addition to these, even though Brussels is not located in one of the big five countries, it has been included by virtue of its peculiar geo-political and diplomatic position, and because it provides a movie-theatre with 250 seats.

By using the time frame considered by the EUMEPLAT project, this research has taken into consideration film programming from 1996 to 2019—but it also mentions more recent film seasons and single projections because of their relevance with the research question. Based on qualitative methods, it has proceeded through a comparative analysis via data collections, a literature study and interviews with the heads of cultural activities.

Each institution has a website with an archive of events, from which it has been possible to partially map the film-related activities—year by year and by focusing on film title and synopsis, some of which have been viewed for a deeper knowledge—, even though some web pages are no longer active, and it has not been possible to obtain specific information about all the films featured by the events mentioned below. Depending on the accessibility of information and documents, data-collection has offered a rather wide bird's eye view, which has been supplemented with surveys and interviews: these have been helpful in zooming in on specific cases and highlighting otherwise invisible aspects.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, paraphrasing Giorgio Avezzi (2022, 10), a study into the geographies of circulation entails looking at the data from afar, but also requires a closer focus on cultural contents.

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<sup>2</sup> I'm grateful for the helpful contribution to: Alison Driver (Arts Manager British Council Italia), Antonella Croci, Linda Marchetti and Agnès Pallini-Martin (respectively director of the Institut, responsible for cultural activities and attachée of cooperation of the Institut Français in Milan), Carmen Hof (Goethe-Institut Rome), Allegra Iafrate (IIC-Brussels), Maria Teresa De Palma (IIC-London), Gianfranco Zicarelli (Istituto Cervantes Rome), who read and approved the statements contained in this article.

# ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE PLAYED IN THE CIRCULATION OF EUROPEAN CINEMA BY THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTES FOR CULTURE IN ITALY

Film programming depends on many variables: the cultural policies of the country the institute belongs to; the cultural policies of the hosting country—with possible restrictions on sensitive issues; the degree of autonomy from the Ministry of Culture or from the Embassy; the availability of economic resources; the specific interest or competence of the head of cultural events; the cooperation with other institutes, or cultural events and festivals; and, not least, the public tastes, which are quite heterogeneous, given the wide geographical distribution of the institutes taken into consideration.

## Intitut Français

The Institut Français (henceforth IF) falls within the jurisdiction of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its presence in Italy acts under the bilateral cultural agreement signed by France and Italy in 1949 and regularly updated ever since. Its mission explicitly mentions the aim of “strengthening the French presence within the Italian audiovisual scene, especially in cinema, an art in which the Franco-Italian relationship has always been particularly rich and fruitful” (my translation). It follows that the promotion and circulation of cinema and other audiovisual media covers a specific and strategic operational area (alongside the linguistic and university cooperation, the promotion of artistic creation and the cooperation on heritage and museums, the debate on ideas and book industries).

Functions and roles change every three or four years; a fact that hampers from thinking about a wide-ranging programming with continuity, or to have a general vision in a diachronic sense on how the cultural offer of the institute has changed over the years. The choice regarding contents and film programming depends on both budget management and on the curators’ choice and competence—even though their particular training is not a precondition for recruitment. Its programming refers to a central film library (coordinated by a person in charge of the French Embassy in Rome), from which it is possible to draw films without right transfer costs.

One of the most interesting aspects of such a film library is that, alongside the section dedicated to French cinema, and to alternative contents—namely to new audiovisual forms—there is a special section on the *Cinémathèque Afrique*, that contains over 1,700 films of Francophone African cinema from its origins to the present, more than 600 of which are royalty-free for non-commercial use. Cases in point are: classics by directors such as Sembène Ousmane, Souleymane Cissé, Idrissa Ouédraogo and Moustapha Alassane; the winners

of the Yennenga Stallion Fespaco Grand Prix; the recent productions of young filmmakers, including the Ghanaian comedy *Keteke* (Peter Sedufia, 2017), the documentary *Roundabout in my Head* (*Fi rassi rond-point*, Hassen Ferhani, 2015) and the romantic drama film *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2018). Furthermore, and not by chance, among the thematic seasons such as *Cannes Film Festival* and *Carnets de campagne-Élections présidentielles 2022*, a season devoted to the *Auteurs de la décolonisation* could also be mentioned, as could a special collections dedicated to the *New Generation of Female Filmmakers and Young Audience*.

Particular attention to the platformisation processes is the distinguishing feature of the IF—alongside more traditional initiatives such as *New French Cinema*, a collaboration based on the theatrical release between Milan and Turin held since 2000. Indeed, it allows access to a wide range of online content through the *Rendez Vous Play* platform that acts as a collector of audiovisual content, available thanks to collaborations with other platforms such as ARTE, MUBI, Il Cinema Ritrovato and RAI Play. It also offers the possibility to watch eight feature films and eleven French and African shorts for free and through the online platform *IFcinéma à la carte*.

Moreover, not only cinema, but also new audiovisual forms have a certain weight in IF programming: initiatives such as *Théâtre à l'écran*, and both the production and distribution of the artwork presented at the French pavilion of the Venice Biennale (*Les rêves n'ont pas de titre* by Zineb Sedira), and at the XXII Triennale Milano (*De la pensée au visible. Design as a Large Ring*) are cases in point.

External occasions such as events and festivals significantly affect the film programming, with a number of collaborations with Milano Film Network, the Francophone month, the partnership with Cineteca di Bologna and MUBI.

## Goethe-Institut Roma

The information available on the Goethe-Institut (henceforth GI) dates back to the last decade, which was characterised by the coordination of Carmen Hof, Department of Cultural Programmes and film library. Whilst, data related to the 1990s and 2000s have been difficult to recover.

The organisation of a yearly thematic film selection, which shows a clear interest in sensitive topics, is at the core of the GI's strategy. In 2010 and 2011 two thematic exhibitions regarding gender issues were devoted to *Divas* from the early and modern cinema (Marlene Dietrich, Hildegard Knef, Hanna Schygulla e Romy Schneider), and to the new actresses of contemporary German cinema like Franka Potente, Nina Hoss, Martina Gedeck e Corinna Harfouch. While, more recently, in 2018–19, the exhibition devoted to female directors (*Frauenfilm*) included films by Maren Ade, Valeska Grisebach, Margarethe von Trotta, Doris Dörrie, Helke Misselwitz, Caroline Link, Karoline Herfurth, Sylke Enders, and Maria Schrader, authors that have been recognised for their “extraordinary diversity of themes and approaches”. As for LGBTQIA+ issues

the film programming in 2013–14 was devoted to the topic *Couples* “declined in all its possible variations: very young, elderly, gay, lesbian”.

With reference to the focus of this research, the most interesting initiative concerns migrations and multiculturalism, such as a longitudinal exploration of what it means to be Europeans: yesterday, today and tomorrow. Indeed, even though the title—*Hollywood is far away. Films, Stories and Protagonists under the European Sky*—refers more to the old opposition between the north-American and European approaches to filmmaking and storytelling, the selection features films by German directors of foreign origin, who depicted Europeans as a multi-ethnic society. In this vein, the film selection *Il migliore dei mondi possibili?* held in 2017–18 questions the recent history of Europe through the lens of the family.

A further aspect worth mentioning is that, similarly to the Institut Français, GI provides a film library with over 600 titles, including feature films and documentaries, which are available on loan and for non-commercial purposes, even for cultural practitioners operating outside the GI. It also offers other services, such as the collaboration for thematic exhibitions; a research service in the field of film and cinema studies; and support for programming on silent films with musical accompaniment.

## Instituto Cervantes

Similarly to the Institut Français, the Instituto Cervantes (henceforth IC) falls within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Founded in 1991, it represents an unicum within the panorama outlined in the present study, because its main goal consists in promoting not only the Spanish language and culture, but also those of the three other official languages of Spain—Catalan, Basque and Galician—and those of the all “hispanos hablantes” countries. It follows that its cultural programming covers a wide range of intrinsically transnational aspects, to the extent that since 2012 the IC organises *Scoprir*, a yearly *Muestra de cine Ibero-Americano* held with many Ibero-American embassies in Italy and hosted by Casa del Cinema in Rome.

Additionally, it collaborates with IBERMEDIA, the Ibero-American aid fund that promotes audiovisual activities in its member States: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Spain, Uruguay and Venezuela, to which Italy has been added in 2017.

The curators' choices are aligned with the address notes of the IC headquarters in Madrid and a considerable amount of the programming is devoted to cinema, also thanks to the collaboration with a number of local and regional events and festivals, such as the RIFF—Roma Independent Film Festival and Pesaro Film Festival, CinemaSpagna.

The online data concerning cinema-related events have been available since 2004. They show that the main trends consist of prioritising contemporary Spanish cinema, with a focus on young directors (*Il giovane cinema spagnolo*,

2004–05) and debut features (*Opera Primeras*, 2008), with the explicit intention of promoting young “directors who manage to enter feature film production for the first time”, and on auteur cinema (*Cinefilia e nuovo cinema d'autore*, 2016).

As far as European issues are concerned, the IC collaborated with *Festival Europa Cinema* (2007) and *L'Isola del Cinema* (2012), which is a summer event that presents European films released during the previous winter.

The attention paid to LGBTQIA+ topics is recent and took place mostly online via the IC's Vimeo channel, because of Covid-19 restrictions (*LGTBI+ en español* in 2020; *Te estoy amando locamente. Rassegna di cortometraggi LGTBI+* in 2021). Furthermore, the space devoted to gender issues is much wider and, so far, has focused on films directed by women (*Mujeres en la cresta de la ola*, 2009), on the presentation of single directors, such as Carla Simón with *Estiu* (1993) at the *Med Film Festival* in 2017, on debut features (*Opere prime: donne nel cinema*, 2018), on short films (*Cortos en femenino*, 2020) and on the women who debuted as film directors from the 1950s to the 1980s (*Espacio femenino. Pioneras*, 2021).

## British Council

Founded in 1934 the mission of the British Council (henceforth BC) consists of “promoting abroad a wider appreciation of British culture and civilisation [by] encouraging cultural, educational and other interchanges between the United Kingdom and elsewhere”.<sup>3</sup>

This case is quite different from other national cultural institutes because the British Council in Italy does not itself run film festivals or other film screening events which directly engage audiences, but its commitment goes through other channels and strategies. First, BC features a special website dedicated to the UK productions, with a yearly updated catalogue of films produced and co-produced in the UK, with information from leading experts in the field and conceived as a tool for festival programmers.

According to Alison Driver (Arts Manager for Italy), BC does not directly seek to engage with audience development, but performs an intermediary function and concentrates on offering “opportunities to film professionals—filmmakers, actors, platforms, festival programmers and film enthusiasts—and broker creative relationships between UK filmmakers and their international counterparts”, with a particular attention to issues facing our contemporary societies. Indeed, as for Italy, BC is among the partners of the network *Europe Beyond Access*—a four-year program conceived to internationalise the disabled artists' careers. Therefore, the role of BC Italy is focused on business connection, and over the years it has also worked with MIA – Mercato Internazionale Audiovisivo on events promoting inclusivity in the sector through invitations to share UK expertise.

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3 <https://www.bfi.org.uk/>.

The BFI Film Fund is the main tool used by the BC to sponsor new productions, previously testing them through a *cultural test* designed to certify whether they are properly “British” or not, by considering four sections: cultural content, contribution, hubs, and practitioners. As for the first section on cultural content, what is remarkable is that the list published by BC every year includes films considered as “British” if: they are set in the UK “or a *European Economic Area*”; are based on British “or EEA subject matter”; their lead characters are British “or EEA citizens or residents”; and where the original dialogue is recorded mainly in English or UK indigenous language “or EEA language”.<sup>4</sup>

In light of this, one could infer that even the national institute for culture representing a country that recently left the EU cannot avoid considering the film production as a cultural issue that, first and foremost, addresses the idea of a European identity and its less visible subjectivities, and accounting national culture and its cinematic representations in terms of transnational identity.

## ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE PLAYED IN THE CIRCULATION OF EUROPEAN CINEMA BY THE ITALIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTES IN EUROPE

Similarly to the Institut Français and to the Instituto Cervantes, the Italian Cultural Institutes (henceforth IIC) depend on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation: their mission and operation are regulated by the law n. 401/1990, updated with the D.M. 27 aprile 1995, n. 392, which has remained unchanged over the years. Within their general mission of promoting Italian culture and language abroad, cinema has always been one of the leading sectors of the cultural programming: its importance as a diplomatic tool has been confirmed in recent years through the creation in 2018 of the annual festival *Fare Cinema*—entirely dedicated to the promotion of the field’s professions and skills—by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Each institute in the world reinterprets the annual theme of the exhibition, by organising screenings, talks, masterclasses and meetings with professionals. As reported by Paolo Noto, “[t]he dissemination of film culture takes place in collaboration and overlaps with other public and private initiatives” (2019, 427). Indeed, Noto points out that, if the promotion of Italian cinema abroad is one of the MAECI’s diplomatic tasks, it also falls within

*the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economic Development, through the ICE—Agency for the promotion and internationalisation of Italian companies (cooperating with ANICA), and of the Ministry*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bfi.org.uk/apply-british-certification-tax-relief/cultural-test-film>.

*of Economy and Finance, which in turn supports the activities of FilmItalia, an agency specialised in the promotion of Italian films, through the Istituto Luce-Cinecittà, which operationally falls within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage. [...] In addition to these intersections with government agencies, the Italian Institutes often collaborate or act in parallel with private associations, foundations, or cultural institutions (Noto 2019, 426; my translation).*

As far as data collection is concerned, the information on cultural events available on various IICs' websites dates back to 2006. This first survey shows that the main trend over the course of the 2000s was to screen and support films directed by authors considered to be part of the Italian (male) canon related to Neorealism and the post-Neorealism period and to Italian-style comedy (namely Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Federico Fellini, Marco Bellocchio, Ettore Scola, Mario Monicelli), and to host tributes to leading female directors, professionals and actresses such as Liliana Cavani, Cecilia Mangini, Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Anna Magnani and Monica Vitti.

Furthermore, these years were characterised by the tendency to focus on the relationship between cinema and other aspects that are deemed to be qualifying the Italian cultural identity, such as gastronomy and fashion—and more sporadically with architecture, literature and music—sometimes with a regionalist declination: the IIC in Strasbourg (with *L'Italie et ses Régions: voyage à travers l'Art, le Cinéma, l'Histoire, l'Artisanat, la Gastronomie et l'Oenologie* in 2006); and the IIC Berlin (*Kino-di-Vino* in 2007, *CineFood - Basilicata tra cinema e cibo* in 2013) are cases in point.

Afterwards, similarly to the Istituto Cervantes in Rome, main trends consisted of prioritising contemporary Italian cinema, especially the new wave of Italian documentary filmmakers, a choice justified also by the intention to support the sector—as confirmed by Allegra lafrate (IIC-Bruxelles). In their study dedicated to the Italian cinema in the IICs abroad, Noto and Peretti affirms:

*The IICs regularly screen Italian films which even in Italy often do not benefit from theatrical distributions, or that are poorly distributed: this is the case of a huge number of documentaries which are screened abroad, and that over the last few years turned to be a sort of example of Italian cinema for diplomatic functions, if not an exportation product (2016, 409).*

It follows a diversification in programming that comprehends more films directed by women and/or addressed to sensitive topics, including gender and migrant issues, and, to a lower degree, LGBTQIA+ and disability issues.

Although, according to their mission, film programming doesn't draw on a distinctly European perspective, the IICs take part in events dedicated to European cinema such as *Les Rencontres du Cinéma Européen* (held since 1999). More specifically, what follows is an overview of recurring films in most

of the IICs' film programming.

During the 2000s, the IIC-Brussels programming undoubtedly presented the largest number of initiatives specifically addressed to European issues, also due to its particular geopolitical position and to the fact that the city hosts the EUNIC cluster. A case in point is the screening of *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (*Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2005), presented in 2008 at the EUNIC Film Festival dedicated to intercultural dialogue; and *FOCUS 89. Film e dibattiti su 20 anni di (r)evoluzione in Europa* (2009), alongside other recurring events such as the *Festival del cinema Mediterraneo*.

In 2006 the IIC Barcelona hosted the 2nd edition of the *Congreso Internacional de Cine Europeo Contemporáneo* (CICEC), focusing on the "need to create a 'eurocinema' capable of facing the challenges of the market and those of the new geopolitical scenarios, without erasing the differences".

In 2009 the IIC Berlin hosted the film season *La caduta della cortina di ferro*.

In 2010 the IIC Madrid collaborated with the *Atlantic Film Festival for the Screen Europe* section.

In 2013 the IIC Paris collaborated with the *ÉCU-European Independent Film Festival of Paris*.

In 2017 the IIC Lyon hosted *Métamorphoses. Focus sur le cinéma Européen* and, more recently, in 2022, *Vox Populi. Focus sur le Film Européen Engagé*. It also collaborates with La Maison de l'Image for *Les rencontres des cinémas d'Europe* (held since 1999), as well as that of the IIC Barcellona with the *Festival de cine de Menorca - Young European Cinema On the Move* in 2014, and with the *Festival del Cinema Europeo di Siviglia*—by supporting the presentation of *Martin Eden* (Pietro Marcello, 2019) in 2020.

In 2019 the IIC London presented the documentary film *Looking for Europe* (*Alla ricerca di Europa*, Alessandro Scillitani, 2019), and in 2020 collaborated with the *ArteKino festival*.

In the same year the IIC Paris paid attention to the relationship between the European East and West, by screening films like *Comunisti* (Davide Ferrario, Daniele Vicari, 1998) and *Verso Est* (Laura Angiulli, 2008).

In 2020 the IIC Munich hosted an event dedicated to the *LUX Prize of the European Parliament*.

Ultimately, it should be mentioned that the film with the greatest circulation among the IICs has been *Primo Levi's Journey* (*La strada di Levi*, Davide Ferrario, 2005), screened in Strasbourg, Barcelona, Lyon, and Marseille: a road-movie that follows the Primo Levi's journey from Poland to Italy, which depicts the image of a new Europe still linked to the remains of the Soviet Union and its neo-Nazi movements.

From the attention paid in recent years to contemporary Italian cinema has also sprung an increasing interest for films directed by women, especially when emerging. The most screened female directors are Alice Rohrwacher, Susanna Nicchiarelli, Laura Bispuri, Emma Dante, Valeria Golino, Francesca Comencini and Francesca Archibugi. In some cases the IICs organised or collaborated,

more or less regularly, with events or festival dedicated to female directors such as *Films, Femmes, Méditerranée* (IIC Marseille, since 2008); *Con gli occhi di lei* (IIC Munich, 2010); *Cinema al Femminile* (IIC Barcelona, 2013); *Festival Internacional de Cine Hecho por Mujeres* (IIC Madrid, 2019); *Sguardi Altrove* (IIC Brussels, 2021); *The Wave: Italian Women Filmmakers* (IIC London, 2020–21) and, more recently, *Femminile, plurale, una nuova generazione di registe italiane* (IIC Berlin, 2022).

Furthermore, and in a complementary way, great attention has also been paid to films that address gender issues such as *The Interval* (*L'intervallo*, 2012) and *L'Intruder* (*L'intrusa*, 2019) by Leonardo di Costanzo, *Lea - Something About Me* (*Lea*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2015) and *A Chiara* (Jonas Carpignano, 2021).

Similarly, when it comes to migrant issues there are recurring films and directors such as Jonas Carpignano with *Mediterranea* (2015), Emanuele Crialese with *Golden Door* (*Nuovomondo*, 2006) and *Terraferma* (2011), Gianfranco Rosi with *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016), Daniele Vicari with *The Human Cargo* (*La nave dolce*, 2012) [Fig. 1], Antonio Augugliaro, Gabriele Del Grande, Khaled Soliman with *On the Bride's Side* (*Io sto con la sposa*, 2014). In this case, it should be noted that the IIC Paris regularly takes part to the *Semaine des cultures étrangères du FICEP - Forum des Instituts Culturels Étrangers à Paris*, and organises events like *Destinazione Italia: cinema di migrazioni, migrazioni di cinema*; while the IIC Monaco collaborates with *Rassegna del Mediterraneo* by organising the season *Lontana terra: i migranti nel cinema italiano*.

Fig. 1  
*The Human Cargo*  
(*La nave dolce*,  
Daniele Vicari, 2012).





Fig. 2  
*A Ciambra* (Jonas  
Carpignano, 2017).

Conversely, much less attention is usually paid to LGBTQIA+ and disability issues, except as for few isolated occasions represented by *The Mouth of the Wolf* (*La bocca del lupo*, Pietro Marcello, 2009) and *Loose Cannons* (*Mine Vaganti*, Ferzan Ozpetek, 2010) in the first case, and by *All My Crazy Love* (*Tutto il mio folle amore*, Gabriele Salvatores, 2019) in the second one.

Finally, also the occasions devoted to new audiovisual forms are sporadic: indeed, the institutes that over the years had paid more attention to this aspect are the IIC Berlin and IIC Paris through their involvement in *Les Rencontres Internationales Paris-Berlin. New Cinema and Contemporary Art* (since 2011)—which also involved Madrid for a few years—; the IIC Berlin with the screening of artworks by Rosa Barba; the IIC Madrid, through its collaboration with the *Milano Design Film Festival* and the organisation of two screenings of the artists Francesco Jodice and R  di Martino. The reason for this lesser attention to new audiovisual forms (which IICs share with other national institutes for culture) may lie in the fact that such a kind of double relocation—of cinema in contemporary art and vice versa—, is not expected by their regular spectators and disregards their viewing habits. This kind of content, indeed, seems to be difficult to present within this context, if compared with other forms of contemporary audiovisual practices. Nonetheless, Maria Teresa De Palma (IIC-London) affirms that “in recent years, the action of the IIC has tried to focus more on the contemporary audiovisual culture and recent productions, in every artistic and creative field, as well as on sub-sectors and genres that have excellently established themselves in the film scene, such as documentary and animation”.

## THE CARPIGNANO TRILOGY

As far as the representation and the fostering of European cultural identity through the lens of sensitive topics are concerned, the projection of the Jonas Carpignano trilogy *Mediterranea* (2015), *A Ciambra* (2017) [Fig. 2] and *A Chiara*

(2021), is particularly emblematic and symptomatic of the way institutes approach cinema to address issues that are relevant for both national and transnational perspectives.

Moving forward from the Cinema-of-the-Real approach, Carpignano deals with the representation of marginal subjectivities, and his dramas genuinely adhere to the body of the non-professional actors he works with,<sup>5</sup> through whom the director suggests how civil rights and the right to search for a better life cannot apply just to a few social categories. Indeed, Ayiva (an African migrant, in *Mediterranea*), Pino (a Roma boy, in *A Ciambra*) and Chiara (daughter of an affiliate of the criminal organisation 'ndrangheta, in *A Chiara*) respectively embody the failure of EU migration policies, the minoritization of ethnic groups, and the persistence of a culture of criminal violence and old values in certain remote areas of Southern Italy. Here, the scarce presence of institutions and public agencies in citizens' lives gives way to wide areas of stubborn social exclusion. Their vicissitudes take place in Calabria, an economically and culturally backward region of the peninsula; an area that is already marginal per se, at the periphery of Europe, both from a geographical and political point of view, where old and new forms of slavery and human rights violations are daily committed against refugee seekers, ethnic minorities and lower middle classes. Southern Italy, namely Italian shores, are not only a mere scenery or a narrative pretext, but a significant framework, a vantage point from which to explore and return the Other's point of view.

In showing and promoting this kind of films, national institutes for culture hinge on a two-speed Europe. The first represents the cultural identity and diplomacy fostered by institutes, their community and niche-audiences, who are in the position and have the faculty to imagine Europe as a long-term cooperative project. The second, however, represents a position that cannot be anything but local, circumscribed and unable of wide-ranging political imagination or, simply, of thinking of a social ecosystem beyond its narrow regional boundaries. In particular, the *A Chiara's* final scenes, which portray the long-standing and apparently irremediable distance between the North and South of Italy, mirrors, in a sort of scale model, the distance between the North and South of Europe; they both strive for *unity*, but still struggle to engage with their different shades of *diversity*.

## EUNIC – EUROPEAN UNION NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CULTURE

Bi- or three-lateral collaborations are important occasions to foster diplomatic relations through European film culture from a transnational perspective. In

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**5** Cfr. the video essay *A Chiara - Breath of the Real* (2022) by Chiara Grizzaffi: <https://vimeo.com/686624679>.

2022, for instance, the Instituto Cervantes, the Institut Français Italia and the Goethe-Institut signed a partnership to launch *Sala Europa*, consisting of three months of European cinema in original language with Italian subtitles at Casa del Cinema in Rome. A few institutes have also been involved in the promotion of a more experimental cinema that tends the hand to other arts thanks to occasions such as the already mentioned *Les Rencontres Internationales Paris-Berlin. New Cinema and Contemporary Art*.

This kind of collaboration has become more and more intense over the years, and is progressively moving towards developing a coordinated, namely bilateral and multilateral, strategy of value-co-creation by "exchanging cultural practice and diffusing cultural productions" (Martel and Simic 2017, 48), rather than merely *projecting* national values. In particular, this shared vision became established thanks to the creation in 2006 of EUNIC, the European national institutes for culture network from all EU Member States. Founded with the explicit intention to cooperate with the Council of Europe as a strategic partner of the EU "actively involved in the further definition of European cultural policy",<sup>6</sup> its existence confirms the diplomatic weight of institutes for culture, yet within a renewed transnational framework. Since 2014 EUNIC has been supported by the Creative Europe programme, and the Joint Communication *Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations* (2016) recognises it "as one of the implementing partners of the EU's cultural relations approach". The partnership with the EU consists of joint activities between EU Delegations and EUNIC clusters, as well as on partnership agreements with the European Commission (2017) and with the EEAS-European External Action Service (2021). Its vision is based on the idea of culture as a tool to enhance international relations. That is the reason why it also works as a "platform for knowledge sharing and for capacity building amongst its members and partners", with the aim to promote cultural diversity, understanding and cooperation, to conduct research and share best practices.<sup>7</sup> According to the aim of this study, it is important to shed light on the section of the EUNIC mission that focus on the criteria through which the 38 members act: "for or on behalf of a national entity, based in EU Member States" but "engage[d] in cultural and related activities beyond their national borders".

Over the years EUNIC has promoted different events and supported shared programming on some common themes. The film season *The Fall of the Iron Curtain* (2009) is a case in point: the occasion was offered by the Wall's fall twentieth anniversary, through which the European cultural institutes members of the EUNIC in Berlin presented films on the Cold War, its end and its consequences on contemporary Europe. While initiatives such as *Europa che Ride (Europe laughing)*, held in 2013 at Casa del Cinema in Rome hosted films chosen by the various institutes to reflect on prejudices and stereotypes. As for

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/about>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://eunic.eu/media/site/fbf4c8e726-1591718794/eunic-strategic-framework-2020-2024-final.pdf>.

*Metamorphoses - Focus sur le Cinéma Européen Contemporain* (*Metamorphoses - Focus on Contemporary European Cinema*) in 2017 at the IIC-Lyon, the occasion was the celebration of the Rome Treaty's sixtieth anniversary,<sup>8</sup> with twelve contemporary European films (from Germany, Romania, Portugal, Italy, Poland, Spain). Another common initiative that does not question the concept of national cinema but supports the idea of a transnational and pan-European cinema is *Days of Contemporary European Cinema*: held for the first time in 2018, it is a selection of the last two years' European film production.

The *European Film Festival* (held since 1988) is probably the most important initiative co-organized by EUNIC. Founded by the European Union and based on the partnership between institutes for culture, academies and embassies, it is a travelling film festival that offers a kaleidoscope of European film production in its original language,<sup>9</sup> and film programming is accompanied by debates and meetings with directors, actors and screenwriters.

## MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The above survey outlines a multi-faceted panorama of practices. Nonetheless, even though institutes have different juridical statuses—a difference that could be an obstacle to developing joint projects according to a supra-national model, as institutes continue to adhere to their national models with the risk of big countries imposing their visions (Martel and Simic 2018)—at the same time, as film promotion and circulation are concerned, they share a number of complementary strategies. On one hand, thanks to a capillary presence on territories, they stand as partners or supporters of many festivals, benefitting from collateral events and occasions to present films with their directors, interpreters, and professionals. Indeed, according to Noto, not only the circuit of the IICs takes part in the *value-adding* process, but organically participates in the *value-creation* of films, potentially functioning “as a sort of temporal and spatial extension of the festival circuit” (Noto and Peretti 2016, 430; my translation).

Moreover, they keep alive a kind of (traditional) cinematic experience, by implementing practices similar to those of the art-house sector, which “include inviting directors, actors and film critics, screening retrospectives dedicated to a particular filmmaker, or organising special seasons of films originating from a particular country or continent” (Jäckel 2004, 26). A strategy confirmed by interviews with Carmen Hof (Goethe-Institut in Rome), Linda Marchetti (Institut Français in Milan), and Maria Teresa De Palma (Italian Institute for Culture in London).

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<sup>8</sup> Signed in 1949, the Treaty of Rome not only established the European Economic Community (CEE), but also fostered the circulation of co-produced films between the six founding members. See also Rivi 2007, 42.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.accadromania.it/2015/MNCE.pdf>.

Another aspect worth to be mentioned is that the national institutes for culture foster a transnational cinematic community, grounded on niches formed by small audiences of regular visitors. Besides, if this could be considered as an obstacle for the widespread circulation—or a consequence of the *fragmentation* of cultural policies (Noto and Peretti 2016)—, nonetheless it should be noticed that such niches are increasingly intersecting, also due to initiatives like that taken by EUNIC. In doing so, they “challenge a monolithic configuration of Europe and attempt to reconfigure it into a heterogeneous, hybrid, and polycentric space so as to take into account multiple subjectivities, nations, and realities” (Rivi 2007, 7).

The investigation has also revealed a general shift of interest towards a more (trans-)European cinema occurred between the 1990s and 2010s. Indeed, on the side of non-theatrical release this study has dealt with, audiences seem to prefer neither American productions (Comand and Menarini 2014) nor their own domestic ones (Jäckel 2004), at least not exclusively as it could be assumed when speaking of theatrical distribution. Similarly, Higson also points out that European national film cultures are “surprisingly resilient in this era of globalised, digital storytelling [while] a surprising amount of national filmmaking is still enjoyed by national audiences”. (Higson 2018, 306).

This scenario highlights an inversion of the general trend of the influence institutional policies have had on film reception—here clearly intended as affected by the film promotion and circulation strategies. According to Pierre Sorlin, indeed, until the 1990s they played “a rather marginal part” and “no simple, direct connection existed between political evolution and the tastes of the public” (Sorlin 1991, 200). Otherwise, the conclusion that could be drawn from the present enquiry is that the role of national institutes for culture in the promotion and circulation of a European transnational cinema clearly emerges as an outcome of European shifting policies and practices addressed to overcome the nation-state framework (Elsaesser 2005, 2014). Therefore, according to the EU policies which supports “national, transnational (co-production) and cross-European policies” (Bilteheyst and Cuelenaere 2021, 18), they form a useful network to ensure film circulation among a particular audience.

Therefore, one could state that cinema-related initiatives of the national institutes for culture take advantage, paraphrasing Elsaesser, of a sort of “tactical weakness”, which consists in “[p]erforming the nation rather than representing it” (Elsaesser 2014, 28). Undoubtedly, they return the image of an “imperfect Europe” or of a European cinema’s newly found freedom to be marginal” (Harrod, Liz, and Timoshkina 2014, 35). Nonetheless, how long can this *weakness*, albeit *tactical*, be incisive within a scenario characterised by increasingly scarce resources? Will the *art-house model* further ensure non-theatrical circulation among a transnational niches-based audience? Can the fragmentation be overcome in favour of a more structured network-oriented strategy?

A possible answer is offered by the British Council *circulation model*. As reported above, even if the BC doesn’t offer proper film programming in the cities where

it is present, it aims at fostering business connections between professionals and cinema industries in the UK and the hosting countries, ensuring proper distribution for films otherwise difficult to position within the European cinema market. Hence, the *value-creation* and *value-adding* processes here are focused not only on the distribution but even on the production, in particular of films that address sensitive topics and by supporting disabled artists' careers.

Such a *verticalization* could be assumed as a best practice to emulate also by other national institutes for culture, by intensifying, for instance, their relationships via EUNIC to improve the transnational features of films and their circulation beyond the mainstream circuits. Indeed, the fragmentation could be a weakness for the circulation and the promotion of European films beyond their theatrical release, primarily due to a lack of funding the individual institutes have to deal with. Conversely, pooling economic and human resources for a more efficient network, could ensure broader circulation for European films and their authors in different countries despite their nationality.

In conclusion, if national institutes for culture already play a significant role in film circulation, they also have the potentialities to increase their role in the construction of films' cultural value and identity, by fostering the European cinema sphere: "a vibrant space in which to understand and work through notions of and beyond national borders" (Gott and Herzog 2015, 1).

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# Popular European Cinema in the Platform Era: Circulation Cultures on YouTube

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Over the last two decades, the platformization of viewing practices has transformed patterns of circulation, multiplying the possibilities for engagement with cinema: not only new viewing spaces themselves but also vast amounts of readily accessible related content (trailers, publicity, clips, etc.). The aim of this essay is to consider how these changes have impacted the potential for popular European cinema—which has historically strayed little from each national domestic market—to travel abroad and outside of “traditional” contexts of consumption. We shed some light on this question by examining how content related to a handful of highly successful European films is used on YouTube, the most widespread and accessible repository of online videos. Following a discussion of the changes in the digital distribution sphere, we identify the most lucrative European films from the five largest film markets of the continent—France, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain—since the launch of YouTube. Isolating seven examples, we then trace out their presence on the platform, questioning what kind of content relating to the films is available; engagement rates with these videos; indicators of local and global consumption; and what these results can tell us about the spectatorship habits of European cinema today.

**Keywords**  
European Cinema  
Circulation  
Platformization  
Reception  
YouTube  
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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Over the last two decades, the platformization of European cinema and the digitization of viewing practices have brought about a number of changes: long-standing hierarchies and processes of intermediation shaping the divide between “popular” and “elite” tastes and patterns of circulation have been called into question. Not only has the multiplication of windows provided a plethora

<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of a continuous collaboration between all three authors and the research was conducted and analysed collectively. Concretely, Valerio Coladonato wrote the Introduction and the section “Popular European Cinema: A Contested Notion”, Arianna Vietina wrote “The Circulation of European Cinema in Digital Platforms” and “Methodology”, and Dom Holdaway wrote “Popular European Cinema on YouTube”, “Industrial and Cultural Influences” and “Interactions and Comments”. The Conclusion was penned together. The authors thank the reviewers for their insight on the first draft of this essay.

of access points to film and other audiovisual media, it has also splintered our means of interaction with them, thanks to the many available paratexts (promotional, but also fan-made/uploaded fare). The aim of this essay is to question the impact these innovations have had on the circulation of European cinema. We do so by examining the mediations of a handful of popular films on YouTube. Specifically, we identify and categorize the most viewed videos related to seven European films that had previously succeeded at the box office, taking into account the types of content available, levels of interaction (views, likes, comments) and indications of how the films have traveled. In this way, we aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary circulation patterns, as part of a broader, fluid culture shaped by a multitude of fragments of the films (and/or of related content) rather than the traditional, start-to-finish theatrical consumption.

Within this preliminary exploration, we limit our analysis to the five major Western-European industries in particular. As Higson writes, "In terms of the size of the local production sector and the size of the local market for films (and indeed the size of the population), there are five Western European countries that stand out: the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Italy" (2021a, 204). These industries, as he continues—also citing Jones (forthcoming 2024)—are among the most able to produce national production consistently, with theatrical success. Nevertheless, this often fails to translate to success beyond domestic markets across the continent, where it is Hollywood cinema that continues to prevail: "more than 1,000 US films achieved admissions of more than 1m in Europe in 2005–2015, compared to the 219 non-national European films": this translates to around 20 films per year (Higson 2021a, 202–04).

Our limited focus therefore shares an interest in the high-visibility of this national output, in addition to the intent to dialogue with previous works describing the effects of market concentration on European films' presence and circulation within Europe (see, for instance, Pardo and Sánchez-Tabernero 2012).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, our focus on the "big five" is obviously partial, and does not intend to reinforce a limited and outdated notion of "European cinema" that privileges the Western European canon (Iordanova 2003).<sup>3</sup>

Further, as mentioned, we limit to a focus on YouTube in this discussion, as this offers a number of strategic advantages. First, in view of its industrial geography, it is a US-based business that, thanks to its transnational presence, inserts itself

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**2** This article both summarizes previous research and develops a convincing interpretation of how US distribution companies maintain dominance of the EU market, even in the contexts in which film production has been historically strong.

**3** Two helpful examples of this less reductive perspective include Anne Jäckel's 1997 study of coproductions, showing how film practitioners can promote cinematic "integration" between Eastern, Central, and Western Europe, and Andrea Virginás's 2020 essay on the regional affinities in box-office hits of Hungarian and Romanian cinemas. The latter demonstrates how markets smaller than the "big five" have recently developed transnational strategies that allow them to transcend the dichotomy of Hollywood and European arthouse codes.

into the pluralistic regional dynamics of a global screen ecology (Cunningham 2015). Second, it predominantly uses the AVOD model therefore making content consumable essentially for free—though films are also available via TVOD. Further relevance lies in the fact that YouTube functions as a social network, too, unlike most video streaming websites, since users can like, comment on and interact via videos: it is indeed often among the most used social networks in European countries (see, for example, McLachlan 2022). Finally, the site also hosts a wide variety of content that enables a cartography of reception: not only films but also official promotional materials, clips, remixes, personal videos, news reports, etc. As such, by studying YouTube we hope to broaden the scope of distribution scholarship that has focused predominantly on the feature film (e.g., Higson 2021a, 2021b, Holdaway and Scaglioni 2018, Smits 2022), dwelling (also) on the other kinds of “content” (Eichorn 2022) that shape our interactions. In this sense, the article also seeks to challenge another historical tendency, that is, overlapping film consumption with the notion of the single, uninterrupted consumption of a film, start to finish. While this was evidently never the case—channel surfing, rewinding or fast-forwarding, leaving cinemas or remaining for double bills, re-watching clips or trailers: these “remixing” activities that are certainly not new—the digital context and the tools of digital humanities enable us to provide a more detailed picture of consumption habits.

What follows, then, is only a first attempt to trace how the “popularity” and the circulation of the European films on YouTube are interconnected—with the hope that further research on other areas and more detailed inquiry into other platforms will follow.

## POPULAR EUROPEAN CINEMA: A CONTESTED NOTION, FROM THE 1990S TO THE VOD ERA

A great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to defining popular European cinema, especially since the 1990s, thanks to a series of conferences initiated in 1989 at the University of Warwick (Dyer and Vincendeau 1992). In the initial phase, some recurring questions characterized the debate: whether “European cinema” is most strongly (or exclusively) identified with arthouse and auteur films, and how such association can be deconstructed—or whether it should be; what are the conditions for a “popular” European cinema to exist (emphasizing for instance the historical role of genres and the importance of “local” star systems); whether the opposition to Hollywood is constitutive to European cinema; and whether “European” is a mostly empty label, only designating a geographic origin but not a common identity—let alone a popular one.

For our purposes, two articles are particularly helpful, both published at the end of the 1990s as responses to the previous decade’s debate. These two contributions do not only act as reminders of what the category of “popular

European cinema" meant at the threshold of the new century: they also highlight a few critical junctures that still persist, even after the widespread impact of digital technologies. The first one is a short piece by Philippe Meers (2000) which, consistently with the approaches of the New Cinema History, pushed for a re-consideration of popular European cinema from the perspective of its audiences. Thus, the author argued, an ethnography of the viewers would help scholars dispel any notion of homogeneity in the lived experience of each national cinema's audience of Europe.<sup>4</sup> Transposing a similar approach to today's viewing practices would entail the added challenge of a fragmented digital mediascape—and this is one of the reasons, we argue, for paying closer attention to what happens on platforms such as YouTube.

The second response to the 1990s debate that can be helpful here is Tim Bergfelder's "Reframing European Cinema Concepts and Agendas for the Historiography of European Film" (1998).<sup>5</sup> Here the author noted that, at the time, few contributions "actually took account of the supranational implications" of a "popular" European cinema. Lamenting the shortcomings of this overlap between the "popular" and the "national", Bergfelder proposed an "alternative agenda according to which one might redraw the parameters of European film history" (1998, 5): he put at the center of this agenda the impact of diasporas, as well as co-productions and cross-cultural reception as *constitutive of* (and not marginal in) European cinema. Since then, many steps have been taken in these research directions: to single out only a handful of examples from a growing body of literature, see for instance the collection edited by Mary Harrod, Mariana Liz and Alissa Timoshkina (2015) centered on the transnational dimension of European cinema; as well as other works shedding light on how producers anticipated a European vision for cinema (Corsi 2017), on instances of cross-country artistic cooperation in early co-productions (Lefevre 2020), and on the circulation of technicians working in today's industry (Bonhomme 2020). But to return to the perspective of audiences: where does a contemporary European viewing experience take shape? Is it relegated to the cosmopolitan aspirations of arthouse theaters? (For example, the network of EU-backed *Europa Cinemas*, one of the most recognizable initiatives of the MEDIA programme). Or can the circulation of popular genre narratives, too, make audiences *feel* European, as indicated by another recent large-scale project focusing on crime fiction (DETECT; see Morsch and Re 2021)?

This is where an empirical look at VOD spaces provides insight into how

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**4** It is a line of inquiry that has since then flourished, resulting in large-scale historical projects, such as European Cinema Audiences, which has facilitated a new understanding of the entanglements of European film cultures and has provided empirical confirmation of Hollywood cinema's centrality and persistence in the viewers' memories and experience (see Ercole, Van de Vijver, and Treveri Gennari 2020, and the website <https://www.europeancinemaaudiences.org> for the full list of research outputs. The last access of all cited links in this essay was August 31, 2023).

**5** It also provides a useful overview of the key bibliographic references from that decade which, for reasons of space, we cannot fully account for here.

the “popular” can be articulated with European films in digital environments. Potentially, indeed, YouTube is an arena where the type of exchanges and connections theorized by scholars since the 1990s *could* take place: YouTube is a space of potential transnationalism, more so than the traditional theater (with the notable exception of film festivals). The platform is multilingual, and viewers from many countries can engage with an array of films (and related materials) that is potentially more diverse than in most other contexts.

In a recent, thought-provoking article Anne-Marie Scholz (2021) takes cue from two relatively obscure films directed by José Antonio Nieves Conde—*Marta* (1971) and *The Great Swindle* (*Historia de una Traición*, 1971)—to make a broader point about how they have survived oblivion. Scholz illustrates how YouTube, acting as an archive for popular films, might transform how we understand European cinema *tout court*—in other words, she asks: is YouTube “creating a new basis for a more appreciative and inclusive” cinematic history of the continent?”. Her argument is that the renewed appreciation for “Eurotrash” and growing fan engagement on YouTube (thanks to the upload of private, often low-quality copies) produces a “compelling nostalgic fantasy” (online), a different affective bond to lowbrow genre movies. Complicating a long-standing critical binary (entertainment-based Hollywood vs serious/high-brow European cinema), this fandom adds an alternative, bottom-up perspective to both academic definitions and institutional policies on European cinema (Scholz 2021). Though it would be a far stretch to extrapolate any general conclusion on *today’s* European cinema from this specific trend, we believe that it does beg the question: how is circulation on YouTube affecting our understanding of contemporary films? In other words, how does the US-based, Google-owned platform impact European cinema not only as an archive—a function that it performs “accidentally” (Burgess and Green 2009)—but also through its primary purpose? That is, a hybrid between a social network and video sharing platform, and more recently, a VOD service showcasing new releases. Despite its high potential for engaging users more directly, YouTube remains little studied as a distribution space for European cinema.

## THE CIRCULATION OF EUROPEAN CINEMA IN DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Understanding the changing circulation dynamics of European cinema in the contemporary context necessitates a recognition of the powerful impact of digital technology. Lower access barriers have facilitated the entry of many new players into the market, while digitization has allowed traditional gatekeepers to be challenged in the areas of audiovisual production, distribution and promotion. The resulting ever-increasing availability of products theoretically brings greater choice for the viewer (Waldfoegel 2017), while the growth of the streaming market has provided space for niches, such as horror cinema

(Shudder), anime (Crunchyroll) or arthouse film (MUBI), as well as more curated user experiences (Frey 2021).

The data regarding this growth is inconsistent, and while we can gain some insight into the libraries of certain platforms, viewer numbers and the popularity figures of specific content is often private. The LUMIERE Observatory's reports are particularly helpful in this regard, accumulating macro trends and indicating some relevant tendencies: for instance, platforms have increased by 71% the availability of European non-national films (with a previous theatrical release) in the countries considered, thus positively impacting also the film's exportability.

This growth has depended not only on the direct entrance of VOD platforms to the market and their investment in local production, but also on European institutions. On the one hand, the "streaming giants" have had a complex relationship with the EU (most commonly represented in the Cannes-Netflix conflict), with legal imposition that catalogue content must be at least 30% European (see Lobato 2019, Broughton Micova 2023). On the other, public production and distribution funding does succeed, to some extent, in creating a transnational European cinema: consider the cases of Eurimages, for co-production film funding, and the aforementioned MEDIA programme, for film distribution and exhibition (Cucco 2017, 2020; D'Urso 2023). The latter is increasingly conscious of the evolving contemporary landscape: according to the programme's website, one of its four areas of focus is "enhancing global circulation, promotion and distribution of European audiovisual works, taking into account the new digital environment".<sup>6</sup>

As Amanda Lotz has argued (2021), unpicking the complex strategies and power dynamics between the agents that enable the movement of media can be facilitated by prioritizing the notion of "circulation", with all its theory-building potential. When compared to the discipline of production studies, a hypothetical "distribution studies" carries additional complications, due to the plurality and fragmentation of operators with which scholars must interface, and often their reluctance to reveal the principles that regulate the sector (Garofalo, Holdaway, and Scaglioni 2018). The concept of "circulation", in place of "distribution", enables us to adopt a more inclusive perspective, that shifts away from a traditional, pre-digital and film-medium-specific model of production/distribution/exhibition (Lotz 2021, 49–50) to also include the other "windows" or "arenas" where audiovisual media can be accessed (Holdaway and Scaglioni 2018). Indeed, this can also include informal or illegal interactions. Ramon Lobato has effectively made the point in his *Shadow Economies of Cinema* (2012): collecting several cases of verified illicit distribution networks, he laid the groundwork for their subsequent study, also noting how these dynamics are revealing of the cultural policies of different countries. A further advantage of a focus on "circulation" is its capacity to integrate multiple actors within the film supply chain. In the

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<sup>6</sup> The other three are "encouraging cooperation", "nurturing talent" and "supporting the engagement and development of audiences". See the programme website: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/creative-europe-media>.

European context, the benefits of this approach are palpable in the evidence, for example, of how co-productions lead to wider circulation of films (Higson 2018, Lovascio 2020), or data from the European Audiovisual Observatory's 2021 report that confirms how wide theatrical success corresponds to a title's greater chance of circulation on over-the-top platforms (Grece 2021).

## METHODOLOGY

Therefore adopting an approach focusing on circulation, and responding to the above reflections that illustrate the potential of digital distribution spaces for European cinema, in the following sections we map out the "afterlives" of a handful of popular European films on YouTube. For this initial exploration, our sample was restricted to few films, defined through the same notion of popularity adopted in the MeCETES project (Higson 2021a): theatrical ticket sales. We began by identifying the European productions that had sold more than 1,000,000 tickets in Germany and Spain, and more than 3,000,000 in France, Italy and the UK, where "successful" films were of a greater number.<sup>7</sup> This included intra-European co-productions but excluded external ones. The timeframe adopted spans from the creation of the YouTube platform in 2005 to the time of writing (2023). We then compared the findings to the LUMIERE database of the European Audiovisual Observatory to gain an indicative idea of audience figures across the markets.<sup>8</sup>

In order to further restrict the content subsequently searched on YouTube, the sample identified above was narrowed down to seven films. We included the highest performing European title in each of the five countries of interest.<sup>9</sup> The sample of national successes—all medium budget, mainstream comedies—are:

- *Welcome to the Sticks* (*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, Dany Boon, 2008, France);
- *The Inbetweeners Movie* (Ben Palmer, 2011, UK);
- *Spanish Affair* (*Ocho apellidos vascos*, Emilio Martínez-Lázaro, 2014, Spain);
- *Suck Me Shakespeer 2* (*Fack ju Göhte 2*, Bora Dağtekin, 2015, Germany);
- *Quo vado?* (Gennaro Nunziante, 2016, Italy).

The success of these five films was predominantly limited to their own country of production. Hence, to add a comparative element, we added two European

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**7** The sources for this data collection were statistical reports on cinema produced by film institutes in the countries: the CNC - Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (France), the Filmförderungsanstalt (Germany), Cinetel and the Ministero della Cultura (Italy), The Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (Spain) and the BFI (the UK).

**8** We recognize that the LUMIERE data is not entirely comprehensive, though we take it as nonetheless indicative—especially with major box-office successes, thanks to their visibility and the lesser relevance of margins of error.

**9** In each case this was a domestic production with the exception of Germany, where *Intouchables* sold around 2 million more tickets than the highest performing German film, *Fack ju Göhte 2*.

films from the top performers that had greater box-office success also in the other four countries—the kinds of films that Higson refers to as “best travelled” (2021, 201). These are two medium-budget light-hearted dramas:

- *Intouchables* (Olivier Nakache, Éric Toledano, 2011, France);
- *The King’s Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2011, UK).

While the sample remains small, just seven films, the amount of “spin-off” content on YouTube is large yet manageable. The ticket sales of each film are reproduced in Table 1.

Film <sup>10</sup>	Tickets sold (domestic)	Tickets sold (total, 5 markets)
<i>Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis</i>	20,489,303	23,974,891
<i>The Inbetweeners Movie</i>	7,430,486	8,004,063
<i>Ocho apellidos vascos</i>	9,300,453	9,362,130
<i>Fack ju Göhte 2</i>	7,731,947	7,765,686
<i>Quo vado?</i>	9,367,995	9,752,614
<i>Intouchables</i>	19,440,920	34,480,583
<i>The King’s Speech</i>	7,538,428	16,094,953

Table 1: Sample of Seven Films with Theatrical Performances. Data source: [LUMIERE](#).

To gain an impression of the content relating to these films on the platform, we scraped the site, using the YouTube data tools (Rieder 2015), with a series of variations of search requests. The searches were all anonymous (i.e., with no account search history that could influence the algorithm; on the functioning of the YouTube search algorithm, see Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández, and Coromina 2018; Airolidi, Beraldo, and Gandini 2016). The searches were undertaken using the category of “relevance”, rather than popularity, date, rating or title; they were geolocalized to each of the five countries in order to recreate a realistic image of the “relevant” results nationally. Our searches also accounted for the translations of film titles. For each film, we recorded 100 results searching for the film’s original title and in its domestic market, as well as 50 results for the original title and 50 for the translated title in foreign markets.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Henceforth we refer to the sample with their original release titles.

<sup>11</sup> The limitation of 50 or 100 was implemented primarily to make the results manageable and relevant, though initial iterations clearly revealed that 100 results per film sufficed, since more results led to high fractions of irrelevant content. Relevance is certainly a subjective and therefore thorny category: for the sake of this data, our working definition was that the film content was explicitly mentioned in the video. At times, this was a difficult call: many videos were found to imitate or echo the title of a film, for instance, family road trips to Bergues that reference *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*, or speeches by Charles III of England or King Felipe VI of Spain labeled “The King’s Speech”. These were excluded unless the film was explicitly invoked.

Once compiled, this data was subjected to some cleaning: first, identifying, labeling and removing duplicate results from different national searches; second, eliminating any content that was deemed irrelevant, via a manual check of all non-duplicate videos. This resulted in a sample of 1,354 videos across all films. A summary of the data downloaded can be found in Table 2.

<b>Film</b>	<b>Search results (num. videos)</b>	<b>Duplicates (num. videos)</b>	<b>Relevant results (num. videos)</b>
<i>Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis</i>	482	199	200
<i>Intouchables</i>	500	230	194
<i>Quo vado?</i>	450	267	174
<i>Ocho apellidos vascos</i>	401	196	132
<i>Fack ju Göhte 2</i>	470	194	232
<i>The King's Speech</i>	497	190	219
<i>The Inbetweeners Movie</i>	483	205	203
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,283</b>	<b>1,481</b>	<b>1,354</b>

Table 2: YouTube Search Data Summary. Searches carried out 25-27/07/2023, with some further additions on 24/08/2023.

In the final stage of data preparation, each video was then categorized, using a simplistic coding system: a primary category (drawn from a predefined list) and further subcategories (to further categorize the videos, added more flexibly). The latter included, for instance, greater specificity in relation to the macro category ("music" could also be "soundtrack" or a "cover") and notes regarding the language or content.

## POPULAR EUROPEAN CINEMA ON YOUTUBE: ANALYSIS OF THE SAMPLE

The main categories and their distribution across the sample are listed in Table 3. By a significant margin, the most prevalent categories across the seven films were clips (c. 34% of the videos) and trailers (c. 23%). Clips are sequences from a film in its original form (i.e., not re-edited and excluding deleted scenes)—though this also includes other films that emerge in the search (e.g., clips from sequels of the searched film). Trailers refer to the promotional content produced in advance of film releases across any distribution window. They are inclusive of content uploaded officially, by distributors, but also by non-professional users.

Category	Occurrences	As %	Runtime (average)	Views (average)	Likes (average)	Comments (average)
<b>Clip</b>	457	33.75	2m 3s	281,046	4,405	78
<b>Trailer</b>	305	22.53	2m 7s	556,530	3,394	140
<b>Review</b>	99	7.31	11m 7s	223,492	5,779	263
<b>Reportage</b>	92	6.79	7m 47s	520,667	6,356	318
<b>Remix</b>	77	5.69	4m 33s	729,638	6,574	208
<b>Interview</b>	62	4.58	6m 57s	559,566	6,774	196
<b>Music</b>	56	4.14	3m 58s	9,069,783	74,266	1,561
<b>Full film</b>	56	4.14	36m 2s	105,365	1,161	24
<b>Influencer content</b>	28	2.07	7m 12s	798,591	27,054	1,797
<b>Original content</b>	23	1.70	2m 37s	460,769	8,154	174
<b>Making of</b>	20	1.48	3m 41s	675,702	7,532	120
<b>Summary</b>	19	1.40	6m 29s	463,614	5,226	1,001
<b>Other promotion</b>	16	1.18	1m 42s	1,410,096	20,928	336
<b>Deleted scene</b>	11	0.81	2m 37s	57,096	750	30
<b>Star content</b>	9	0.66	5m 40s	300,397	2,564	80
<b>Mistakes/outtakes</b>	8	0.59	8m 42s	738,028	9,057	103
<b>Personal video</b>	6	0.44	14m 40s	24,185	927	94
<b>Full episode</b>	5	0.37	22m 59s	214,483	1,484	104
<b>Language</b>	2	0.15	11m 17s	209,800	17,081	185
<b>Reaction</b>	2	0.15	4m 30s	12,576	46	40
<b>Merchandise</b>	1	0.07	1m 37s	655	6	8
<b>Average</b>			<b>8m 1s</b>	<b>785,793</b>	<b>8,169</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1354</b>	<b>100%</b>				

Table 3: YouTube Video Categories<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the results for the category of "full film" are inaccurate: the YouTube Movies account

It is worth noting that the 762 videos within these categories refer not only to the seven films in the sample but also to other connected audiovisual products that emerged in the results (that were deemed relevant), including sequels (in the “Ocho apellidos”, “Inbetweeners” and “Fack ju Göhte” series), remakes (*Benvenuti al Nord*, *Welcome to the North*, Luca Miniero 2012; *The Upside*, Neil Burger, 2017; *No manches Frida*, Nacho G. Velilla, 2016), or other products by actors/directors involved (in particular Dany Boon, Kad Merad, Omar Sy and Checco Zalone). Unsurprisingly, this impacts those films with greater quantities of related content: for instance, almost two thirds of the clips relating to *Fack ju Göhte 2* are actually clips from other films in the other series (strikingly, a high number of clips dubbed into Italian); around 20% of the clips for *The Inbetweeners Movie* and *Quo vado?* likewise relate to other content by the same creators or within the same series.

Attempting to understand how this content is distributed along national boundary lines is challenging. In general, as the data in Table 2 illustrates, there was a high level of overlap between the results among the different geolocalized searches: on average, 45% of the videos were duplicates. Already this is a potentially interesting result: on the one hand, it seems to indicate that even multinational and multilingual content is considered relevant by YouTube and therefore emerges in recommended results for different countries; on the other, however, one might argue that this is rather connected to a lack, within non-national European (NNE) markets,<sup>13</sup> of content relating to films that are only popular domestically—hence YouTube is forced to reach to foreign-language content to satisfy the search. Evidently a much larger sample would be required to reach more decisive conclusions.

A further element of difficulty when seeking to understand the national specificity of the videos is due to the great flexibility of YouTube: users can upload content from wherever, in any language, and often the video details—title, description, even user name—can be either geographically unclear or even in a language other than the audio of the clip itself (for example, a clip uploaded in a German dub with an original French title). At times, the videos have automated subtitles in different languages, at other times they have hard-coded subtitles—that are not necessarily mentioned in the title or description.

Taking into account the videos with dubbed audio or non-automated subtitles, on average, 44% of the trailers and 65% of the clips were available only in the original language. The data does not indicate any consistent variation between the domestic successes and the more global films: of the trailers, 27% and 67% of *Intouchables* and *The King’s Speech* respectively were in the production language, while the other films varied between 31% and 67%; as regards clips, 49% and 67% from the “best travelled” films were original language only, while the more domestic successes range from 21% to 94%.

Overall, the languages of the countries we searched were the most common foreign-language versions of the clips. German and Italian were most common, with, in total, 69 trailers and 31 clips dubbed into the former; 35 trailers and 81 clips dubbed in the latter language (this excludes the films produced in those countries). English subtitled videos (7 trailers, 14 clips) and French

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does not publicly record views and comments are switched off. The few views here are taken only from the handful of other (usually illegal) videos or links, so the data is skewed down. Moreover, the average length is under a feature-length film as the category also includes any content relating to full film streaming online, including e.g. linking sites.

**13** Here we use Huw D. Jones’s terminology, where “non-national” is shorthand for his NNE, “Non-National European” films, i.e. “films produced in one European country but released in another” (Jones 2018, 325).

subtitled or dubbed videos (15 trailers, 10 clips) were a lot less common. The Spanish figures lie in the middle (24 trailers, 16 clips). This potentially signals a greater openness among Italian and German-speaking audiences for popular European cinema, even comedies.<sup>14</sup> The results also produced clips and trailers with subtitles or a dubbed soundtrack in: Arabic (1 video), Czech (4), Dutch (1), Hebrew (1), Hindi (3), Hungarian (2), Galician (1), Greek (3), Mandarin (1), Polish (1), Portuguese (4), Russian (3), Turkish (3) Slovakian (1).<sup>15</sup>

## INDUSTRIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Beyond the clips and trailers, some less recurrent categories nonetheless conceal further insight with regard to the consumption of these films, at the intersection of three different impulses: the importance of the promotional machinery surrounding a film's release, the specifics of a popular film's position within a national (if not continental) culture, and the standards of the forms enabled by the platform.

Regarding the first point, indeed, a great deal of the content that emerged in these searches—including, of course, the trailers and many of the clips mentioned previously—contribute to the promotion and publicity of these releases. In addition to trailers, this also includes further official production materials, such as deleted scenes and behind-the-scenes, as well as interviews, predominantly with the cast (or actor-creators, such as Checco Zalone). The results also included some original content with indirect promotional functions, for instance the cast of *Fack ju Göhte* in "switch off your phone" warnings for cinemas, or the protagonists of *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* in an advertisement for the Fédération française de golf.<sup>16</sup>

Stardom is an important key for this content. For each film, one or two actor names feature prominently in many video titles, descriptions and tags: Dany Boon and Kad Merad; Checco Zalone; Elyas M'Barek, Karoline Herfurth and Jella Haase; Clara Lago and Dani Rovira; Omar Sy; Colin Firth. This is slightly less common in the case of *The Inbetweeners*, perhaps due to the choral nature of the films and the TV series, as well as the earlier career stage of the lead actors, though interviews and gossip reportages about the four protagonists do appear.

The search algorithm's attempt to provide relevant results (Rieder,

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**14** In the Italian case, this result is moreover consistent with Jones's findings (2018), albeit his work focuses predominantly on arthouse production.

**15** Beyond the categories of trailers and clips, videos also emerged in the sample in Indonesian, Kurdish, Thai and Vietnamese: all review or summary videos. The searches also revealed much content that was specifically localized (in title and/or video description) to Australia, Quebec, Mexico and Latin America generally, in English, French or Spanish.

**16** @RatPackFilm, "FACK JU GÖHTE (2013) - 'Handy aus!' Spot \*\* HD \*\*", 07/08/2013: [https://youtu.be/\\_e75PI5seUc](https://youtu.be/_e75PI5seUc); @ffgolf "Le golf, pourquoi pas vous ? - Dany Boon & Kad Merad", 29/06/2018: <https://youtu.be/3w-tbJeXcU4>.

Matamoros-Fernández, and Coromina 2018) also draws on stardom. Indeed, many of the other films emerging within the results (including many of those that were deemed irrelevant in our manual data cleaning) were commonly connected to the same stars. This included *Nothing to Declare* (*Rien à déclarer*, Dany Boon, 2010) and *A Perfect Plan* (*Un plan parfait*, Pascal Chaumeil, 2012), both starring Dany Boon, for example. One striking example of this is the case of Antonio Albanese, who emerges in a dozen results for the Italian localized search relating to *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*. Though the Italian comic is not in the French film—nor indeed in the Italian remake—he produced a 1997 theatrical monologue with the title “Giù al nord”, which is the Italian translation and release title for the French film. This was enough to produce results relating to other (unrelated) films featuring Albanese.

Though the sample remains too contained to reach concrete conclusions, these results bear striking gender skew, with the most visible stars being male protagonists and just two female romantic leads. One exception is Jella Haase, who recurrently plays Chantal, a teenage girl and student who tortures/is tortured by the protagonist teacher in the *Fack ju Göhte* series. Here, the comic role is as visible as the actress herself: the search results contain original content featuring Haase/Chantal such as the “Chantals Klassiker” series, in which the character riffs “idiotically” about classic novels, made to promote *Fack ju Göhte 2* and *3*.<sup>17</sup>

In general, content relating to stars is evidently made for the domestic market, as it has little translation, with the exception of a few interviews that have dubbing or subtitles. One standout exception is found in the promotion for *Quo vado?* in Germany. The comic actor Bastian Pastewka, who dubbed the protagonist for the German release, features 19 times across the titles, descriptions and tags of the videos. This also includes a couple of promotion videos uploaded by the German distributor of the film, Weltkino Filmverleih, in which Pastewka greets audiences, speaks a few words of Italian, or makes jokes about the film and its title.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the theme of stardom, some of the other video categories contain promotion of sorts that can have a much greater regional relevance. One instance relates to *Ocho apellidos vascos*, where twelve related videos were uploaded on the channel of EITB (Euskal Irrati Telebista), the public service broadcaster of the Basque autonomous region. This content, in Castilian or Basque, consists of regional promotional material such as maps of location shoots or reports of cinetourists visiting the region. This example can in fact

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**17** E.g., @ConstantinFilm, “FACK JU GÖHTE 2 Chantals Klassiker - Dschurässik Park”, 01/09/2015: <https://youtu.be/Al4eVf4HHZw>; @ConstantinFilm, “FACK JU GÖHTE 3 Chantals Klassiker - Romeo Julia”, 21/10/2017: <https://youtu.be/YjAEm75LZdc>.

**18** The German release title is *Der Vollposten*, referring to the “fixed post”/ permanent position that the protagonist is keen to maintain in the film, though it echoes the word “Vollpfosten”, meaning idiot or neanderthal. Hence, Pastewka humorously reminds audiences not to put the “f” in the title. @WeltkinoFilmverleih, “Der Vollposten | Bastian Pastewka Clip ‘Filmtitel ohne f’”, 26/07/2016: <https://youtu.be/7GQZudG0jCk>.

be situated within a broader tendency, whereby the kinds of videos indicate the terms in which the films' narrative motifs are tied to their role as cultural reference points in their own countries.

Specifically, one of the key themes that the seven films have in common is that of overcoming differences. In the more global successes, *Intouchables* and *The King's Speech*, this plays out through identity categories of race, disability and class; in the popular comedies with a more national reach, this is consistently elaborated at the level of regional or national difference. In *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* and *Ocho apellidos vascos*, humour is constructed through regional differences, while *The Inbetweeners Movie*, *Fack ju Göhte 2* and *Quo vado?* all feature travels abroad and renegotiations of national identity—or a comedic inability to adapt. Consider the nostalgia that Checco feels for Italy when he sees Sanremo on TV in Norway, or the ignorant stereotypes made by the “Inbetweeners” about foreign police officers. While, on the one hand, this seems to indicate a “pan-European” interest in these kinds of cultural tensions, on the other, they also have a declension in these films through a single-nation-specific humour that, as the box office data would seem to indicate, does not necessarily travel all that well (Higson 2021b, 223).

This tension, between transnational themes that play out on a national level, becomes apparent in the kinds of content that emerge in the YouTube videos. In this regard, one particularly significant category is what we labeled “reportages”: news reports, often broadcast on TV channels, if not online news, featuring issues related to the films. Hence, while these videos are a step removed from the content of the movies, their cultural or social impact is given some form. The reportages relating to *Intouchables* and *The King's Speech* are multi-lingual and relate, respectively, to the true story that inspired the former (for example, what are Philippe Pozzo di Borgo and Abdel Sellou doing now?) and to the royal family, especially true accounts of King George VI's stutter and recordings of real speeches that he delivered.<sup>19</sup>

While the reportages are almost universally made for other media, especially local or national news channels or, in the case of King George's speeches, newsreels that have been digitized, much other related content is more closely tied to YouTube itself and its own grammars. Here we refer in particular to the content created for social media, such as influencer or personal/family videos. A small amount of this is tied to the same regional dynamics mentioned here: family videos of trips to the Département du Nord, for instance, or humorous videos about what it means to be a Ch'ti.<sup>20</sup> Though they are not the most frequent form of content, these videos demonstrate how these popular films

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**19** For example, @Luca7423 “Quasi Amici, che fine hanno fatto i veri Driss e Philippe?”, 11/04/2020, <https://youtu.be/T44mNlamXsQ>; @Eloquent, “El verdadero discurso del Rey”, 11/05/2012, <https://youtu.be/wGRb7odxqvw>.

**20** @Journaldunemaman, “BIENVENUE CHEZ LES CH'TIS CHOUX - FAMILY VLOG”, 11/02/2018: <https://youtu.be/L1Kg1nUMW-w>; @NormanFaitDesVideos, “NORMAN - BE A CH'TI”, 02/09/2017: [https://youtu.be/ZO\\_M5bBQedI](https://youtu.be/ZO_M5bBQedI).

have entered into a common parlance as a cultural reference.

More explicit engagements with the films are found in the many reviews and remixes uploaded by YouTubers. Among these, the vast majority of reviews are simple recaps or summaries, though some are more complex analyses with a more academic tone; one such example is a video essay reading of Slavoj Žižek's thought via *The King's Speech*.<sup>21</sup> While made for video blogging, these clips tend to have a standard form with little editing and a duration of around 10 minutes. Short clips and remixes, differently, tend to demonstrate a quicker pace and editing by the user. The former are short clips from the films (on average, 42 seconds), reproduced in portrait mode and overlaid with words, emojis and/or hashtags; these are clearly designed for the YouTube "shorts" feature—but equally for TikTok or Instagram reels, i.e., a cross-social media format. These are consistently among the videos with the highest levels of likes, views and comments.<sup>22</sup> Remixes, on the other hand, recut and combine various clips that narrate the story of characters (and especially romantic relationships), and are typically overlaid with extra-diegetic music. Once again this can be understood as the films—and particularly short comic clips or romantic/friendship narratives—being integrated, as cultural references, within a different kind of grammar and for different kinds of audiences, potentially across social media. If the reportage clips mentioned above perhaps indicate how these films intersect with broader socio-cultural issues, these shorts and remixes potentially indicate a whole other reception dynamic: one that is more closely related to generic codes of comedy or romance.

## INTERACTIONS AND COMMENTS

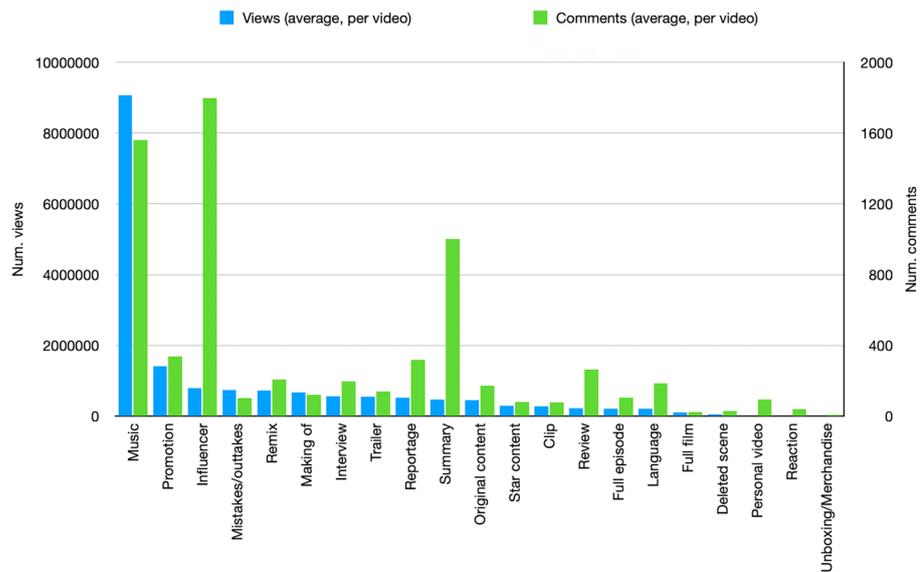
The average views and comments per video category are illustrated in [Figure 1](#), below, and detailed in [Table 3](#), above. Though space restricts us from providing an extended analysis of every category, one that merits a little attention is that of music, equating to 5% of the primary categories. This is commonly the official video of a soundtrack song, or a cover version. What is more, music videos have, by far, the highest interactions of all kinds. In terms of the average number of viewers per video in each category, music videos are by far the most viewed: over 9 million average views, six times more than the next category (promotional videos). While this is likely tied to a specific use of YouTube, as a music player, it is also noteworthy that music videos on average have the

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**21** @julianphilosophy, "Guide to Žižek: On 'The King's Speech'", 23/12/2022: [https://youtu.be/h\\_nptnlmpXc](https://youtu.be/h_nptnlmpXc).

**22** While "social media content" was not included as a principal category in our research, it was marked as a subcategory for clips, reviews and remixes in particular. Isolating and summarizing these in relation to the other categories (detailed in [Table 2](#)), it has respectively the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> highest rate of average views and comments per video, but the second highest rate of likes, after music videos. We return to these general interaction rates in the following section.

Fig. 1  
Average views (Y1  
axis) and comments  
(Y2 axis) per category



second highest comment rate (after influencer videos), with 1500 comments per video on average, hence, perhaps not merely a passive listening.

A further trend that is worthy of note is the importance of the comment rates for influencer and summary videos—two categories that evidently have porous boundaries. This is also not entirely surprising, given that creators who are versed in platform dynamics often seek the active engagement of users: suffice it to think of how, on YouTube, the request to “like and subscribe” has shifted into common vocabularies. Hence, a higher interaction rate here is to be expected. Moreover, the relative presence of a high comment rate in the categories of reportages and reviews is interesting, especially with respect to the average view count, insofar as they represent two lines of user interaction with the films themselves (film content and social impact), as we have suggested above.

The comments themselves are rich in insight. The scope of this article unfortunately does not enable us to study their content extensively. To provide preliminary insight from a manageable sample, we restrict ourselves to the top twenty videos with the highest number of comments from just two primary categories: trailers and film clips. We scraped all comments and ran them through an automatic language recognition system, before subjecting the results to a brief manual check. Though we recognize that the other kinds of videos will certainly have relevant comments, these two categories are most directly connected to the films and therefore, we hypothesize, potentially contain a more direct sense of audience responses.

Within this, a very clear tendency of linguistic segmentation appears. Indeed, among the twenty videos with the highest numbers of comments, in each case the majority—between fifteen and nineteen videos—are in the original language of the film. This signals that the most interaction in comments is skewed to original-language rather than foreign-language audiences in YouTube content, at least for these categories. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the comments

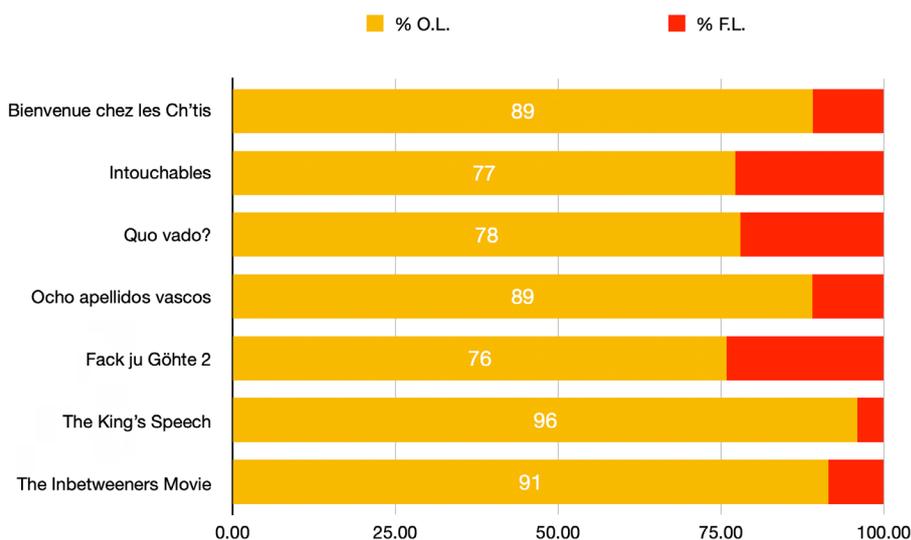


Fig. 2  
The percentage of comments in the original language of the video (OL) and in a foreign language (FL)

on these videos are in the same language as the audio (i.e., even if a French film is dubbed into Italian for the clip and trailer, the comments are also in Italian). Figure 2 indicates the percentages of comments that are in the same language as the video itself; as the figure indicates, this tendency is reproduced across the sample. As it demonstrates, then, the multi-lingual interactions with content are a minority.

One key exception to this trend comes in the case of *Intouchables*. For Nakache and Toledano's film, the videos and the comments are more variable. Eleven are French videos, the other nine consist of four English (including the two most commented videos), two Italian, two German and one Spanish. Overall, however, across all the comments, over half are in English (7500).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, across the 14,335 comments that were recorded among the videos relating to *Intouchables*, the automatic detection system that we used in fact registered more than 75 different languages. The top fifteen among these—all of which had more than twenty comments—are (in order of popularity): English, French, Italian, German and Spanish, then Telugu, Chinese, Portuguese, Malayam, Russian, Tamil, Arabic, Dutch, Polish and Romanian. Interestingly, the prevalence of Telegu and Tamil emerge in one video in particular—a short—which has very many comments from Indian spectators that highlight the connection to the Telegu remake of the film, *Oopiri* (Vamshi Paidipally 2016), also released as *Thozha* in the Tamil version.

Overall, while the regional inflections of engagement in the comments would seem to indicate that they generally do not shift beyond national geographic boundaries, the great success of *Intouchables* and the greater variety of

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that the level of engagement varies quite significantly from film to film: the comments from the top 20 trailers/clips of *Fack ju Göhte 2* and *Intouchables* are very many (both around 15,000), while the comments on *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* and *Ocho apellidos vascos* are much lower at around 2,000 (the other three films vary from 6-7,000).

languages within its comments perhaps indicates that a wider circulation is not necessarily impossible to achieve.

## CONCLUSION

Observing the trends of circulation and interaction of some highly successful European films on YouTube, many of the patterns that characterize their off-line popularity are obviously repeated: linguistic segmentation, the importance of stardom in the construction of audience engagement, the difficulty in “exporting” films belonging to genres relying on cultural specificity (such as comedies). Nevertheless, other elements point to the potential capacity of this platform to also facilitate *different* forms of engagement—a potential that, at the current stage, seems to be exploited only in part, and without a strong coordination of the European film industry and the institutional programs that support it. For instance, distribution companies seem, for the most part, to respond to offline and traditional media logics in the content uploaded to YouTube (e.g., trailers, clips, publicity made for theatres or TV), drawing heavily on stardom. There is little attempt, at least in our sample, to tailor this content to YouTube—something that is surprising considering that the videos generating the highest rate of interactions are the ones made by influencers who are not directly affiliated to the films themselves.

From our initial survey, YouTube emerges as an interesting arena for the dissemination of a “popular European cinema” for a variety of other reasons. First, it is a platform in which the interaction between the films and other traditional media content (such as news/reportages) already happens consistently. In a fragmented mediascape such as the European one, characterized by national boundaries and multilingualism, the possibility of flexibly combining to each film a variety of national/regional contents could be a strong advantage over other contexts of circulation. This ties in with the issue of the films’ exportability outside of their respective national contexts: the example of *Intouchables*, cited at the end of our analysis, points to the fact that a popular European cinema that transcends boundaries (more than the majority of the films do) is hypothetically possible.<sup>24</sup> Another indication of YouTube’s potential can be found in the report of the European Audiovisual Observatory (Grece 2021) highlighting a slightly higher availability of films in countries other than their own on VOD platforms, as compared to theatrical distribution. The inclusion of YouTube within this report reminds us of the singularity of this website: it is also a VOD service and a means of shaping a film’s circulation culture, as well as a social network. As a repository of European films, indeed, it acts in different ways: it showcases the

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**24** See, for instance, the AHRC-funded project “Producing the Post-National Popular: The Expanding Imagination of Mainstream French Films and Television Series”; the first research outputs are available on the website: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/modernlanguages/research/french/currentprojects/postnationalpopular/>

continent's audiovisual heritage in forms that de-centralize the emphasis on the arthouse/auteur canon, as well as on theaters as the legitimate venue for the cinematic experience. It increases fan-based content and engagement, allowing conversations across European audiences (and outside), and creating new and diverse engagements with the archive of European films. All these elements suggest that further inquiry into audience engagements with European films through YouTube is necessary in order to better grasp what can make European cinema popular today.

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# La collecte statistique sur le commerce cinématographique entre les États-Unis et l'Europe: une esquisse historique<sup>1</sup>

André Lange, independent researcher  
and Head of Department at the European  
Audiovisual Observatory from 1993 to 2015

This article provides a history of the implementation, in the United States and Europe, of collection processes on cinema attendance, on the results obtained by films in terms of admissions or box-office receipts, and on the international trade of films. The contribution shows how the US industry was already from the 1910s concerned with obtaining a statistical portrait of European markets while efforts to set up an integrated European statistical tool, imagined in the 1920s, did not come to fruition. This was only achieved in the 1990s with the creation of the European Audiovisual Observatory and its LUMIERE database.

## Keywords

Statistical Data Collection  
European Audiovisual  
Observatory  
LUMIERE Database  
Box-office  
Film Market  
DOI

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*The numbers, just the numbers. Why we have people  
who come every day and bring their friends the next  
day. Which are the most popular scenes now?*

Bullock 1907

En 1986, dans le cadre d'un projet de l'Institut européen des médias (Manchester) financé par la Commission européenne et l'Union Européenne de Radio-Télévision (UER), il m'avait été demandé d'établir une liste des films européens ayant eu le plus de succès en salles. A l'époque, le seul outil qui permettait de dresser une telle liste était le classement cumulatif du box-office mondial établi par le magazine *Variety*. Le seul critère d'européanité qu'il m'était possible d'utiliser était la nationalité du réalisateur. J'avais donc placé en tête du classement *Doctor Zhivago* (David Lean, 1965), film réalisé par un anglais, adapté d'un roman écrit par un russe, produit par un italien pour un studio hollywoodien avec un égyptien comme acteur principal. Comme dans le roman de Boris Pasternak, Lara, la maîtresse du héros, est d'origine belge, et que dans un film, l'important c'est la femme, il m'est souvent arrivé de plaisanter en affirmant que le film européen ayant le plus de succès était belge. L'impossibilité de répondre de manière satisfaisante à cette question illustre le travail qui restait à accomplir pour créer

<sup>1</sup> Le présent article n'implique que la seule responsabilité de l'auteur et n'engage pas l'Observatoire européen de l'audiovisuel ni le Conseil de l'Europe.



un appareil statistique européen sur le secteur cinématographique et audiovisuel, projet d'ampleur auquel j'ai eu la chance de contribuer pendant trente années.

Des statistiques pertinentes et fiables ne naissent pas d'un coup de baguette magique, mais d'un lent processus impliquant les milieux professionnels et les décideurs politiques. La statistique sur un type donné d'activité économique ne naît que lorsqu'existe la possibilité de compiler les données collectées ou produites par les entreprises individuelles en vue d'élaborer une connaissance partagée. La mise en commun des données peut se faire soit à l'initiative d'organisations professionnelles sectorielles, soit des pouvoirs publics, soit d'entreprises tierces (presse, entreprises spécialisées). Cette mise en commun peut répondre à des objectifs très différents: meilleure connaissance des marchés (compréhension des "goûts du public", des marchés extérieurs à conquérir), actions de *lobbying*, définition et évaluation des politiques, ... De là découle la difficulté d'écrire une histoire de la pratique statistique dans le secteur cinématographique, tant une historiographie de la pratique statistique suppose une connaissance détaillée de l'évolution des relations entre les différents protagonistes du secteur. Dans cet article, on s'attachera à retracer l'origine des collectes statistiques par l'industrie cinématographique américaine et l'histoire de l'intelligence économique des échanges internationaux en matière audiovisuelle, de la circulation des films et de la mesure des résultats (entrées et recettes). Nous montrerons comment la mesure statistique s'intègre dans les stratégies de conquête des marchés par l'industrie cinématographique américaine et de maintien de la position dominante acquise par celle-ci, avec l'appui des pouvoirs publics, en tentant d'imposer ses propres indicateurs comme norme de la mesure de l'état du marché international. La mise en place de l'Observatoire européen de l'audiovisuel est décrite comme un des éléments, malgré sa création tardive, de la riposte européenne à l'hégémonie américaine.<sup>2</sup>

## ORIGINES ET DISPARITÉS MÉTHODOLOGIQUES SUR LA COLLECTE DE DONNÉES SUR LES ENTRÉES DES FILMS DISTRIBUÉS EN SALLES

### 1 - Les collectes de données sur les résultats au box-office aux États-Unis

La mesure des recettes au guichet des films est apparue aux États-Unis comme un perfectionnement de la mesure de la *bankability* des acteurs, des

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<sup>2</sup> Sur la légitimité politique d'une intervention publique sur le marché de l'information pour corriger les défaillances de celui-ci et en réduire l'asymétrie, voir Lange 2002.

réalisateurs, des producteurs et des studios.<sup>3</sup> Celle-ci a d'abord été menée par des enquêtes (*polls*) de popularité, dont la première est menée en 1911 par le *New York Morning Telegraph*. La plus connue sera le *Top Ten Money Making Stars Poll*, publié entre 1915 et 2013 par la Quigley Publishing Company, editrice du *Motion Picture Herald*, réalisée par le biais d'un questionnaire adressé aux exploitants (Weaver 1940).

Ce type de sondage mettait en évidence une perception subjective de la popularité des films et des acteurs mais ne mesurait pas la réalité des pratiques. Des données plus solides sur la réalité du marché ont été souhaitées par les milieux professionnels. Le 3 mars 1922, le magazine professionnel *Variety* publie pour la première fois des données sur les recettes au guichet (*gross box-office*) des principaux films distribués sur le marché américain. Les données sont présentées comme des "fairly accurate estimates" des résultats dans les principales salles de Broadway la semaine précédente. Le magazine annonce que ce type de collecte, destiné à aider les exploitants dans leur choix de programmation, a vocation à s'élargir progressivement aux salles des principales villes du pays ("Business on Broadway Figures" 1922). Dans ce premier, mais unique, article, des données sont fournies sur les cinq films ayant réalisés les meilleures recettes à Broadway, ainsi que sur les principaux résultats à Chicago, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Syracuse, Atlanta, New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco et Portland. Cette annonce et cette première publication de données ne sont cependant pas prolongées dans les numéros suivants de l'hebdomadaire et il faut attendre l'après-guerre pour voir leur publication devenir régulière.

Dans les années 30, le principal indicateur des performances de films, de réalisateurs et d'acteurs aux États-Unis est le périodique *National Box Office Digest* (1936–1947, édité par Norman Webb).<sup>4</sup> Ce magazine, devenu hebdomadaire à partir de 1936, ne publie pas à proprement parler de données sur les recettes des films, mais établit un index de succès: un film dont les recettes sont dans la moyenne est noté 100%. Si son succès dépasse la moyenne, il sera coté 120, 150% etc. A partir de 1938 est publié un *National Box Office Digest Annual* qui propose les recettes estimées sur l'année précédente des dix premiers films et des classements (*batting averages*) des studios en fonction des *ratings* obtenus. La méthodologie de collecte n'est pas précisée et, même si les données ont servi d'indicateur pour la profession, leur caractère

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**3** Sur l'essor de la collecte des données de box-office aux États-Unis voir le récit de deux journalistes de *Variety*, Hayes and Bing 2004. Voir également l'article "Box-Office" de Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Box\\_office](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Box_office)), consulté le 10 janvier 2020, qui est une base de départ intéressante, mais incomplète, et Wasko 2003, 109–10.

**4** L'histoire de cette publication, qui contribua au phénomène du *stardom*, est mal connue. Peu d'exemplaires sont conservés dans les bibliothèques américaines. Quelques-uns sont disponibles sur Internet Archive. Elle avait pourtant pignon sur rue à Hollywood, comme en témoigne l'importance des publicités que les studios y publiaient et les citations du magazine dans les publicités des films et des studios publiées dans d'autres magazines professionnels.

incomplet a été souligné. Pour la première fois, la question de la couverture de ce type de collecte est posée.

En 1946, *Variety*, à l'initiative du chef de rubrique cinéma Herb Golden, commence à publier une enquête hebdomadaire indiquant la performance des *hits* et des *flops* de la semaine sur la base des résultats du box-office de 25 villes américaines clés (Golden 2003). Le 25 septembre 1946, le magazine publie une liste des 33 "Top Grossers", soit les films ayant atteint 4 000 000 \$ de recettes au guichet aux États-Unis et au Canada (Golden 1946). Le 8 janvier 1947, *Variety* publie pour la première fois la liste des "60 Top Grossers" ayant obtenu plus des recettes de plus de 2,25 millions \$ ainsi qu'un classement des studios en fonction des recettes obtenues par ces 60 films ("60 Top Grossers in 1946" 1947). La publication de ces données dans le premier numéro de janvier du magazine allait devenir rituelle et s'allonger au fil des ans. À partir de la fin des années 1960, *Variety* a utilisé un ordinateur IBM 360 pour rassembler les recettes brutes des hebdomadaires de 24 villes américaines. En 1969, le magazine commence à publier une liste des 50 films ayant réalisés les meilleures recettes la semaine précédente, mais ce service est interrompu en 1990.

Les données hebdomadaires collectées par *Variety*, devenues importantes pour les décisions des distributeurs, des exploitants, des agents de ventes et les acheteurs étrangers, vont être concurrencées par un autre service, considéré comme plus performant. En 1976, Marcy Polier, une employée de la chaîne de salles Mann, a mis en place "Centralized Grosses" pour rassembler les données quotidiennes du box-office américain, collectées par téléphone auprès des exploitants. La société est ensuite devenue "National Gross Service" puis "Entertainment Data, Inc. (EDI)". En décembre 1997, elle a été rachetée pour 26 millions \$ par AC Nielsen, société spécialisée dans la mesure d'audience TV (Hindes 1997). A ce moment, EDI collectait les données relatives à 25 000 écrans aux États-Unis et au Canada, représentant environ 85% des recettes totales dans les deux pays. Des services similaires avaient été ouverts par EDI au Royaume-Uni, en France, en Allemagne et en Espagne.

Dans les années 80, la collecte et la publication des données de résultats au box-office est devenue de plus en plus importante et de plus en plus sophistiquée. En y recourant, les départements de marketing ont accru leur influence au sein des studios, prenant progressivement plus d'importance que les départements de productions dans les prises de décision. Nielsen a lancé le service de *tracking* NRG, permettant de mesurer rapidement la satisfaction des différentes catégories de public, tandis que le journaliste de *Variety* A.D. Murphy lançait en 1984 le *Variety's Box Office Index*, une publication annuelle influente (Hayes and Bing 2004, 237-50). *Daily Variety* a également commencé à publier un classement hebdomadaire des recettes nationales du box-office. Progressivement les recettes brutes au guichet (*gross*) se sont substituées aux recettes déclarées par les distributeurs (*rentals*). En 1987, EDI a mis en place une base de données d'informations au box-office qui comprenait des données sur certains films depuis 1970. En 1991, tous les studios américains ont accepté de partager leurs rapports de données complets avec EDI (Hindes 1996, 4). À

partir de 1994, *Variety* a publié chaque année la liste des 100 films ayant obtenu les meilleurs recettes au niveau mondial.

## 2 - La diversité des procédures de collecte en Europe

En Europe, la collecte de données sur les marchés est, au départ, un projet des organisations professionnelles, mais dans un cadre strictement national. La mise en place de procédure de collecte systématique de données sur les entrées et les recettes dans les pays européens est née d'une logique différente. Alors que les collectes américaines visaient à déterminer la *bankability* (potentiel d'un film, d'un réalisateur ou d'acteurs à engendrer des financements basés sur la prévision des recettes) et le *stardom* (la célébrité des acteurs), les collectes européennes sont essentiellement nées de la volonté des pouvoirs publics de rendre les données d'entrées plus transparentes et plus fiables en vue d'assurer une correcte remontée des recettes vers les ayants-droits et d'évaluer a posteriori la pertinence des choix, de financement public. Une telle logique pouvait se satisfaire de données annuelles, non nécessairement publiées. Ces collectes ont été mises en place, suivant les pays, par des sociétés de gestion collective, des ministères de la Culture, des centres nationaux, des fédérations professionnelles de distributeurs ou d'exploitants ou encore par la presse professionnelle (Lange 2020).

L'Italie paraît avoir été un des premiers pays en Europe où le nombre de salles et leur revenu annuel est comptabilisé, ainsi que, dès 1912, la répartition des recettes entre films nationaux et films étrangers ("The Cinema in Italy" 1913, 7). En Allemagne et en France, la compilation par les magazines professionnels de listes de films distribués permet d'élaborer des statistiques sur le nombre et l'origine des films.<sup>5</sup> En France un projet de la Chambre syndicale française des distributeurs publié en juin 1939 propose un contrôle des recettes. Dans la foulée est publié un Décret relatif au contrôle des recettes 29 juillet 1939 qui mentionnait la perspective de la création d'un "organisme central professionnel de contrôle et de statistique de l'industrie cinématographique" (Léglise 1970, vol. 2, 193). Il faudra cependant, pour que cette proposition se réalise, attendre la Loi du 25 octobre 1946 portant création d'un Centre national de la cinématographie, dont l'article 13 créait un service du contrôle des recettes et un service des statistiques.

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**5** Pour l'Allemagne, on dispose de séries pour les années 1930-1944. Voir SPIO 1959: 42. Une première thèse de doctorat sur l'économie du cinéma est Kullmann 1935. La collecte statistique sur le nombre et l'origine des films distribués en France commence en 1924 à l'initiative de Marcel Colin-Reval, rédacteur en chef du magazine professionnel *La Cinématographie française*. Colin-Reval fut le premier avant-guerre à publier les recettes de salles de cinéma, ce qui lui valu un procès intenté par un exploitant, et qu'il gagna en appel (Léglise 1970, vol. 1, 214). Une première compilation de données sur les principaux marchés européens est proposée par Bächlin 1945.

# LA LENTE MISE EN PLACE DE COLLECTE STATISTIQUE SUR LE MARCHÉ MONDIAL DU CINÉMA ET LA CIRCULATION DES FILMS

En ce qui concerne la collecte de données sur la dimension internationale du marché du cinéma et sur circulation internationale des films, il est aisé de constater que, dès les années 1910, une importante asymétrie se met en place entre les États-Unis et l'Europe.

Aux États-Unis, les premières entreprises de collectes systématisées sur les marchés extérieurs sont entreprises, à l'origine, non par les organisations professionnelles, mais par les pouvoirs publics. Dès 1908, un rapport consulaire analyse les potentialités du marché italien pour les films américains ("The Italian Market" 1908, 213). A partir de 1912, le US Department of Commerce compile des statistiques douanières permettant de mesurer l'importance des exportations et des rapports sont régulièrement publiés sur le développement des marchés étrangers, en particulier les marchés européens (Rosenberg 1982; Thompson 1985; Jarvie 1992, 16; Bjork 2000). A l'origine, l'indicateur utilisé pour la mesure des parts de marché est le volume général (*footage*), mais progressivement le nombre de *feature films* distribués devient l'unité de comparaison. Dans les années 30, une des publications professionnelles, le *Film Daily Yearbook*, publie un "International Survey" proposant pour chaque pays le nombre et l'origine des films distribués. En compilant les données de cette publication, Kristin Thompson a pu recomposer les parts de marché des films américains dans une soixantaine de marchés extérieurs pour les années 1930-1934 (Thompson 1985, 219-22). Le département de l'Education de l'État de New York établit, à la fin des années 30, des statistiques sur le nombre et l'origine des films distribués (Pobers 1950, repris dans Dubosclard 2004).

La création d'un département statistique au sein de la Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), le puissant lobby des *majors* créé en 1922 sous la présidence de Will H. Hays, est envisagée en 1925 mais ne se met en place qu'après la Seconde Guerre mondiale (Platten 1927). Lorsqu'en 1928, un exportateur du système sonore RCA souhaite connaître la taille des marchés à l'exportation en vue de promouvoir le système sonore RCA, Paramount accepte de fournir, apparemment pour la première fois et uniquement en pourcentage, la ventilation de ses ventes internationales (Seidelman 1928). Des données sur l'importance relative des marchés extérieurs pour les différents membres de la MPPDA sont publiées pour la première fois en 1929 (Seabury 1929, 413) mais la systématisation de cette collecte n'est établie qu'après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, avec la mutation de la MPPDA en Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). Les enquêtes menées par la Federal Trade Commission sur l'intégration Paramount, même si elles ont conduit à la réalisation d'études et à la publication de données sur le marché national, n'ont probablement pas incité les studios à développer la transparence concernant leurs activités domestiques

et internationales.<sup>6</sup> Lorsque la collecte deviendra régulière, les données sur les *foreign rentals* collectées par le Marketing Department de la MPAA ne seront jamais publiés officiellement, mais de manière officieuse par les magazines professionnels (*Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, ...), et de manière plus ou moins complète suivant les années, jusqu'à la fin du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle.

En décembre 2009, le service EDI Nielsen a été racheté par 15 millions \$ par Rentrak, une société qui avait émergé dans la mesure des ventes et locations de vidéogrammes et avait mis en place en 2001 un système informatisé de collecte des données de box-office, avec mise à jour en temps réel et qui, à partir de 2003, était préféré par les studios (Hayes and Bing 2004, 288-89; DiOrio 2009; Fritz 2009). A ce moment, le service collectait les données de 50 000 écrans dans 26 pays des cinq continents. Le 1<sup>er</sup> février 2016, Rentrak était à son tour acquise par comScore, société qui avait émergé comme la référence en matière de mesure d'audience sur Internet. A ce moment, le service de Rentrak couvrait 125 000 écrans (25 000 cinémas) dans 64 pays, soit environ 85% du box-office mondial (Faudeux 2016). En janvier 2020, comScore, qui s'est développé en Europe, en Asie, en Afrique et au Moyen-Orient, annonce des partenariats dans 69 pays ("Comscore Expands Box Office Measurement..." 2020).

Au niveau international, le seul concurrent de comScore est dorénavant le service en ligne Box Office Mojo, lancé en 1999 par Brandon Gray. D'accès gratuit, le service a rapidement acquis en popularité, malgré le fait que sa méthodologie de collecte ne soit pas explicitée. Le service a été racheté en 2008 par IMDb, filiale d'Amazon Inc. A partir d'octobre 2019, certaines modalités d'accès sont devenues payantes, à travers le service IMDb Pro. Début 2020, le service fournit des données pour 86 territoires, avec des périodicités et des indicateurs variables suivant les pays (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/>).

Une première tentative de synthèse des données européennes est présentée par un professionnel français lors du Congrès international de la cinématographie qui se tient à Gand en août 1913 ("Miles of films each day" 1913, 33; sur le Congrès, voir Convents 1993), mais l'élaboration de statistiques européennes ne fait pas l'objet des recommandations finales de ce Congrès et cette initiative paraît être restée sans suite immédiate. En 1921, alors que le système de collecte américain est déjà bien en place, un des premiers analystes anglais constate que les données sur les marchés étrangers sont difficiles à obtenir (Bougey 1921, xvii).

La mise en place par l'Europe d'un outil d'observation des marchés internationaux a été beaucoup plus lente. Dans les années 20, les tentatives de définition d'une collaboration industrielle européenne, connue sous le label Film Europe, mettent à l'ordre du jour l'idée d'une structure professionnelle européenne qui pourrait faire pendant à la MPPDA (Higson and Maltby 1999). Cette hypothèse est évoquée à l'occasion de différents congrès (Paris, 1923; Paris, 1926; Berlin, 1928; voir Higson

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<sup>6</sup> Kia Afra fait remarquer que, dans ses investigations, la FTC a pris comme indicateur de la position de Paramount sur le marché le nombre de films distribués (dont le pourcentage tombe de 17% en 1919 à 12% en 1923) et non les *rentals* et les *bookings* (Afra 2016).

1999). Une des activités d'une telle structure devrait être la collecte de données à l'échelle internationale. Dans les recommandations du Congrès International du Cinématographe (Paris, 27 septembre - 3 octobre 1926) qui se tient sous l'égide du Comité international de coopération intellectuelle de Société des Nations, figure la proposition de création d'un Bureau international de la cinématographie, qui serait attaché à la Société des Nations. Une des missions de ce Bureau serait la "réalisation d'études statistiques sur l'industrie du cinéma du point de vue de la production, des marchés et des goûts du public (volume de production, nombre de films exportés et importés, prix, capacité et fréquentation des salles, réglementations, etc.)." (Seabury 1929, 379; cette proposition est formulée par la Commission n°8 du Congrès, essentiellement composée de représentants de l'industrie). Par ailleurs, chaque état devrait créer un comité national du cinéma, dont une des missions serait la collecte de données sur son marché national. La MPPDA, qui craignait que ce Congrès ne soit une occasion de convergence des récriminations contre leur domination sur le marché international conduisant à la promotion des mesures de contingentement et de quotas, organisa une campagne de presse et formula une contre-proposition, incitant le gouvernement des États-Unis (qui ne faisaient pas partie de la Société des Nations) à ne pas participer au Congrès de Paris. Les producteurs américains suggèrent comme alternative, évidemment inacceptable par les Européens, la création d'un Comité d'experts auprès de la Société des Nations, en charge de la collecte de données, et qui serait financé au prorata de l'importance de chaque marché, ce qui revenait à assurer aux États-Unis la mainmise sur les travaux de ce Comité (Seabury 1929, 152). Même sans la participation américaine, le projet d'un Bureau international du cinéma restera lettre morte: les divergences de stratégie entre industriels européens, l'arrivée du parlant qui posait autrement les formes de collaboration et la montée des nationalismes durant les années 30 allaient avoir raison du projet.

## LES PREMIÈRES COLLECTES INTERNATIONALES: LE RÔLE DE L'UNESCO

Il faudra attendre la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale pour qu'une partie des missions définies à Paris en 1926 pour le Bureau international de la cinématographie soit intégrées dans les activités de l'UNESCO. Dans son programme initial, l'agence des Nations Unies n'est pas immédiatement chargée de collecter des statistiques sur l'ensemble des activités culturelles, et notamment le cinéma, alors que c'est le cas pour l'éducation. Le cinéma n'est d'ailleurs pas considéré, au départ, en tant qu'activité culturelle, mais en tant que moyen de communication de masse, au même titre que la presse et la radio. Néanmoins, en 1947 est mise en place une Commission sur les besoins techniques immédiats en matière de presse, radio et cinéma dans les pays dévastés par la guerre. Des questionnaires sectoriels sont élaborés et celui sur le cinéma, trop complet pour

être vraiment opérationnel, inclut notamment des questions sur la distribution des films étrangers (UNESCO 1947).<sup>7</sup> Des rapports sont publiés sur 17 pays. Dans la synthèse, la circulation des films est mesurée par le nombre de films étrangers en distribution (UNESCO 1948a). Alors que la première enquête a mis en évidence la domination de la distribution américaine sur les marchés européens et sud-américains et le souhait de parvenir à des échanges plus diversifiés, les recommandations de la sous-commission consacrée au cinéma n'incluent pas la mise en place d'un véritable outil statistique concernant le cinéma commercial et se contente de proposer la création, sous l'égide de l'UNESCO, d'un centre d'information consacré au seul cinéma éducatif (UNESCO 1948b).

Ce n'est qu'au milieu des années 1950 que se met en place un véritable projet de collecte internationale. Un premier rapport est publié en 1955, qui peut être considéré comme le premier document identifiant la liste des indicateurs souhaitables et les difficultés méthodologiques, notamment en ce qui concerne la pertinence des données sur la circulation internationale (problèmes de l'identification de l'origine des films, problèmes liés à la comptabilisation des coproductions, ...) (UNESCO 1955). Le rapport identifie de manière très pertinente que les données sur le nombre de films importés sont d'un intérêt limité et qu'il serait préférable de disposer de données relatives à l'origine des films, de données sur le nombre de projections, leur durée et les recettes. Le rapport fournit également pour la première fois des séries statistiques sur les années 1945–1953. L'année suivante, en 1956, puis en 1958, la Division Statistique transmet aux États membres un *Questionnaire concernant les statistiques de la production et de l'exploitation cinématographiques*. En dépit des recommandations du rapport de 1955, l'indicateur retenu pour mesurer l'importation des films est le nombre de films étrangers mis en distribution, sans qu'il nous soit possible de déterminer si ce choix résulte d'un réalisme méthodologique (dans peu d'états, à ce moment, sont disponibles les données plus détaillées souhaitables) ou d'une influence diplomatique visant à minimiser la domination des marchés par les films américains.

A partir de 1960, l'UNESCO publie un *Annuaire statistique* contenant un chapitre sur le cinéma, avec les données de base (nombre de films de long métrage produits, nombre d'établissements d'exploitation, capacité des salles, origine des films distribués, fréquentation).<sup>8</sup> Pour importante qu'elle soit, la collecte statistique mondiale réalisée par l'UNESCO est loin de satisfaire les besoins des professionnels européens du cinéma: la collecte est nécessairement bureaucratique, les données collectées sont loin d'apporter des réponses à des

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**7** On notera que le représentant français au sein de cette commission était le romancier et réalisateur Marcel Pagnol et l'enquêteur français n'était autre que le poète, journaliste, critique de cinéma et ancien surréaliste Philippe Soupault. La plupart des publications statistiques de l'UNESCO relatives au cinéma sont disponibles sur le site Unesdoc Bibliothèque numérique: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/>.

**8** De 1960 à 1963, *Basic Facts and Figures: International Statistics Relating to Education, Culture and Mass Communication*; à partir de 1964: *Annuaire statistique / Anuario statistic / Statistical Yearbook*.

questions importantes, en particulier les parts de marché par origine mesurée en entrées ou en recettes, et elles sont publiées avec plusieurs années de retard, dans une présentation austère et peu lisible. La création, en 1999, de l'Institut statistique de l'UNESCO (ISU, UIS en anglais) permettra une meilleure organisation de la collecte statistique, dans un cadre général de définitions d'indicateurs permettant de mesurer la diversité culturelle et les échanges Nord-Sud.<sup>9</sup>

## PREMIÈRES INITIATIVES DE COLLECTES DE DONNÉES SUR LE CINÉMA À L'ÉCHELLE EUROPÉENNE

Les collectes nationales se développent au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais il faut attendre les années 50 et la perspective de la création d'un marché commun européen pour que renaisse la proposition d'une coopération européenne. Le Congrès de l'Union internationale de l'exploitation cinématographique (Paris, mars 1953) émet le vœu que "les gouvernements des pays représentés à Strasbourg au sein de la Communauté européenne prennent d'urgence en considération l'opportunité de créer un pool du cinéma qui, en consacrant l'abolition des entraves nationales, concourra puissamment à la propagande de l'idée européenne par une meilleure compréhension des peuples entre eux" (Degand 1955). Dès 1955, Claude Degand, chargé de la formation au Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC), réalise des tentatives de comparaisons européennes et plaide pour une "normalisation" des statistiques européennes du cinéma (Degand 1955).

Alors que la collaboration entre professionnels européens se renforce par le biais des coproductions bilatérales et que la création de la Communauté économique européenne met à l'ordre du jour la création d'un marché commun et la libre circulation des films européens sur ce marché, des experts (en particulier Claude Degand et Jean-Claude Batz, producteur belge) commencent à réaliser des études sur l'économie du cinéma européen, comparent les méthodologies statistiques et les données disponibles, proposent des solutions institutionnelles. Dans le cadre de ces réflexions, Claude Degand, dans un rapport à l'Assemblée parlementaire du Conseil de l'Europe, précise en 1978 une idée formulée dès 1957: la création d'un Bureau européen du cinéma ayant une "fonction d'études, de centralisation et de rediffusion des informations" (Degand 1979). Une telle proposition sera lente à mettre en œuvre, faute de soutien institutionnel. A Strasbourg, le Conseil de l'Europe, organisation multilatérale, ne dispose pas des moyens nécessaires pour mettre en place une telle structure tandis qu'à Bruxelles, la Commission

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<sup>9</sup> Parmi les publications de l'ISU relatives aux statistiques culturelles, et plus particulièrement au cinéma, citons ISU 2009; ISU 2013a; ISU 2013b; ISU-Institut de la statistique du Québec 2016.

européenne ne dispose pas de compétence culturelle et ses compétences dans le domaine du cinéma ne portent guère que sur la libre circulation des films, le statut des employés du secteur, et les aides d'État, une compétence qui, pendant des années, lui vaudra la méfiance des professionnels du secteur. Dans cette période, un seul rapport concernant le cinéma est commandé par la Commission européenne et il concerne non le marché européen mais les États-Unis (Garnham 1982). Théoriquement, une activité statistique à l'échelle communautaire aurait pu être prise en charge par Eurostat, mais celle-ci ne prendra forme qu'en 1993 avec la mise en place, pour une durée de cinq ans, d'une Task Force sur les services audiovisuels (Eurostat 2002).

Faute d'un cadre institutionnel adapté vont apparaître diverses initiatives privées visant à proposer des synthèses statistiques européennes sur le cinéma. En 1971, le réalisateur britannique John Chittock, correspondant en matière de cinéma du *Financial Times*, lance *Screen Digest*, une lettre d'information spécialisée, qui, bénéficiant de la proximité des filiales britanniques des studios à Londres, va rapidement s'imposer comme une des principales sources d'information statistiques sur le cinéma et les autres activités audiovisuelles. En 1984, un ancien fonctionnaire britannique de la Commission européenne, le Professeur George Wedell, crée à Manchester l'Institut européen de la communication, qui, pendant quelques années, va bénéficier d'un statut privilégié auprès des institutions européennes. Le cinéma ne fait pas partie de ses priorités, mais sera néanmoins abordé dans le projet "L'avenir de l'industrie audiovisuelle", financé par la Commission européenne, l'Union européenne de radiodiffusion (EBU-UER) et la Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (Lange and Renaud 1989). En France, deux organismes de consultance, BIPE Conseil et l'IDATE publient diverses études sur le marché international du cinéma (Lange 1989), tandis que le CNC publie une lettre d'information sur l'actualité internationale (Györy 1992). A Bruxelles, un avocat spécialisé, Michel Györy, conseil de la Fédération européenne des réalisateurs (FERA), compile une importante somme statistique européenne rassemblant les données nationales disponibles depuis les années 50. Enfin, à l'initiative des associations d'exploitants néerlandaise et italienne se met en place l'association MEDIA Salles, qui, à partir de 1991, publie un annuaire européen spécialisé sur les infrastructures de salles et la fréquentation.

# LA CRÉATION D'UNE STRUCTURE PUBLIQUE EUROPÉENNE DE COLLECTE D'INFORMATION SUR LE SECTEUR AUDIOVISUEL: L'OBSERVATOIRE EUROPÉEN DE L'AUDIOVISUEL

Paradoxalement, c'est l'évolution du marché européen de la télévision qui va permettre, avec beaucoup de retard, l'émergence d'une structure publique spécialisée dans la collecte d'information sur le secteur audiovisuel, y compris le cinéma: l'Observatoire européen de l'audiovisuel. La mise en concurrence des activités de télévision, le développement de la diffusion par câble et par satellite, la création de chaînes transfrontalières ou à vocation européenne nécessitent la définition d'un cadre juridique européen. La présence de plus en plus massive de programmes américains sur les petits écrans et le relatif épuisement des formules de coproduction bilatérale suscitent des tentations protectionnistes (système de quotas de programmation) et la recherche de modalités nouvelles (fonds de coproduction européen, clubs de producteurs, mise en réseau d'exploitants arts et essais).

Ce contexte nouveau de définition d'une politique audiovisuelle européenne nécessite la création d'un organisme public européen, suffisamment solide et autonome pour élaborer des collectes et des publications d'information *supra-partes*. Dès décembre 1986 la France propose la création d'un Observatoire européen des médias lors de la Première Conférence des ministres de la communication du Conseil de l'Europe qui se réunit à Vienne. La proposition n'aboutit pas mais est relancée par le Président François Mitterrand lors des Assises européennes de l'audiovisuel (Paris, 30 septembre - 2 octobre 1989), et à laquelle participeront vingt-trois pays membres du Conseil de l'Europe, ainsi que l'Union soviétique, la Pologne, la Hongrie et la Yougoslavie. Dans un contexte politique où la France est contrainte de lâcher du lest sur sa proposition de quota de programmation d'œuvres européennes, qui n'est pas retenue dans la Directive Télévisions sans frontières, adoptée au lendemain des Assises, le 3 octobre 1989, la création d'une telle structure permettrait de fournir les données impartiales de l'évolution du marché de la télévision et de son impact sur le secteur cinématographique. Après une étude de faisabilité menée par Eurêka Audiovisuel, une association inter-étatique née des Assises, l'Observatoire européen de l'audiovisuel est finalement institué en décembre 1992 en tant accord partiel élargi du Conseil de l'Europe, avec au départ 36 États membres—ils sont aujourd'hui 40—et l'Union européenne représentée par la Commission européenne. D'après ses statuts, l'Observatoire a pour but d'améliorer les transferts d'information au sein de l'industrie de l'audiovisuel ainsi que de promouvoir une meilleure perception du marché et sa plus grande transparence. A cet effet, l'Observatoire s'attache notamment à assurer la fiabilité, les possibilités de comparaison et

la compatibilité des informations. Le processus de mise en place se fait avec le soutien des organisations professionnelles du secteur, réunies au sein d'un Comité consultatif, au sein duquel les différentes branches et professions du cinéma sont représentées par la Fédération européenne des réalisateurs (FERA), la Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films FIAPF, la Fédération internationale des associations de distributeurs (FIAD), l'Union internationale des cinémas (UNIC), l'International Video Federation (IVF), l'Euro-Mei (syndicats des travailleurs des médias).

Comme la mission de préfiguration et les statuts l'avaient conçu, l'Observatoire n'ambitionne pas de collecter seul les informations juridiques, économiques et pratiques, mais travaille en passant des accords avec des partenaires spécialisés (instituts, bureaux de consultants, organisations professionnelles) réalisant déjà des opérations de collecte à l'échelle européenne considérées comme fiables. Paradoxalement, le domaine des statistiques sur le cinéma est le seul où, malgré l'existence citée de divers organismes actifs dans ce domaine, il est décidé que l'Observatoire réalisera lui-même la synthèse européenne, en s'appuyant sur les sources nationales de référence. La raison en est simple: dans la plupart des États membres, la collecte statistique en matière de cinéma est le fait d'organismes publics (Ministères de la Culture, agences du cinéma, instituts de statistiques) ou d'organisations professionnelles. Ces données n'ont pas de statut commercial et peuvent être obtenues gratuitement alors que l'obtention d'autres données (telles que par exemple les données d'audience TV ou la mesure des investissements publicitaires) implique une rémunération des services d'entreprises ayant réalisé des investissements significatifs dans la mise en réseau des sources nationales et le traitement des données.

Ce choix stratégique s'avérera efficace: à peine un an après le début de ses travaux, l'Observatoire arrive à publier un *Annuaire* couvrant les différentes branches de l'industrie et qui est reçu très favorablement et devient le principal outil de référence statistique du secteur.<sup>10</sup>

En ce qui concerne la circulation des films et leurs résultats en salles, les organismes correspondant de l'Observatoire, au début des années 90 étaient pour la plupart en mesure de fournir des sur le nombre de films distribués en fonction du pays d'origine et sur les parts de marché, calculées, suivant les pays,

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**10** Le premier Annuaire statistique a été publié en 1995. 20 éditions papiers ont été édités. Depuis 1996, l'Observatoire réalise également pour le Marché international du film (Festival de Cannes) le *Focus. Tendances mondiales du marché du cinéma*. A partir de 2001 l'Annuaire est également commercialisé sous forme électronique. La dernière édition papier est publiée en 2014. A partir de 2015 l'ensemble des données collectées est publiée uniquement en ligne, tandis qu'est publiée une brochure *Current trends*. Les publications de l'Observatoire européen de l'audiovisuel des années 2017 et suivantes sont disponibles sur le site de l'organisation (Rubrique Presse): <https://www.obs.coe.int>. La plupart des autres publications citées sont accessibles via la bibliographie connectée "Politique et économie du cinéma" du site *Histoire de la télévision* édité par l'auteur: <https://www.histv.net/politique-et-economie-du-cinema>. Une partie importante des publications réalisées par l'auteur à l'Observatoire sont également accessible sur son site: <https://andrelangemedart.academia.edu/research>.

sur base des entrées ou des déclarations de recette des distributeurs. Cependant, l'Europe est plus que la somme des parties: il ne suffit pas de réunir des tableaux statistiques nationaux pour obtenir une vision cohérente et harmonisée d'un espace économique en voie d'intégration.

La réunion de ces données nationales dans l'*Annuaire*, pour utile qu'elle soit, ne permettait pas de répondre à la question devenue de plus en plus importante pour les professionnels et pour les responsables des mécanismes de soutien mis en place à l'échelle européenne (le Programme MEDIA de l'Union européenne, initié à titre expérimental dès 1987 et le fonds de soutien aux coproductions, Eurimages, initié en 1989 par le Conseil de l'Europe): quels sont les films européens qui circulent à travers le continent et avec quel volume d'entrées en salles?

La réponse à cette question impliquait la création d'une base de données nouvelle, qui fournirait les données sur les entrées en salles des films distribués en Europe considéré individuellement. En 1997, le Comité consultatif de l'Observatoire, alors présidé par Gilbert Grégoire, Président de la Fédération internationale des distributeurs de films (FIAD), demanda formellement à l'Observatoire d'étudier la possibilité de mettre en place une telle base de données. J'ai décrit ailleurs les difficultés qu'impliquait la mise en place de ce qui allait devenir à la fin du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle la base LUMIERE, auxquels se sont ajoutés par la suite les services LUMIERE Pro, LUMIERE Pro World et la base LUMIERE VoD (Lange 2020). La collecte statistique de l'Observatoire a pu se perfectionner grâce à la collaboration avec le réseau des services statistiques des agences nationales du cinéma (EFARN), ainsi que de EDI/Comscore. Malgré une demande institutionnelle importante, l'Observatoire et ses partenaires de l'EFARN n'ont pu obtenir un accès aux données commerciales sur l'audience des films en télévision (centralisées au niveau international par le service international de Médiamétrie, Eurodata-TV, aujourd'hui Glance) ni aux données sur les ventes de DVD (collectées par GfK).

A peine installé, l'Observatoire fut également sollicité par la Commission européenne et les organisations professionnelles, qui souhaitaient disposer de données économiques sur le secteur audiovisuels et de chiffres clés sur l'évolution des relations commerciales entre l'Union européenne et les États-Unis.

La mise en place effective de l'Observatoire intervenait, en 1993, au moment de la finalisation des négociations de l'Uruguay Round du GATT, qui impliquaient un volet audiovisuel. Pour répondre à cette urgence un indicateur que j'avais mis au point à l'IDATE au début des années 90, indicateur bricolé mais adopté par le Directeur général du GATT,<sup>11</sup> fut repris par l'Observatoire. Cet indicateur, utilisant les seules données en valeur disponibles sur les échanges internationaux, combinait les données sur les *rentals* des distributeurs américains (MPAA et

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**11** "Peter Sutherland Responds to Debate on Audiovisual Sector". GATT. 14 October 1993. [https://www.wto.org/gatt\\_docs/English/SULPDF/91730128.pdf](https://www.wto.org/gatt_docs/English/SULPDF/91730128.pdf).

AFMA) avec les données publiées sur les recettes internationales des entreprises britanniques et celles des recettes salles aux États-Unis publiées par Unifrance et les distributeurs allemands. Tout imparfait qu'il était, cet indicateur a souvent été considéré comme plus pertinent que les statistiques d'échanges internationaux relatives au secteur audiovisuel publiées par EUROSTAT à partir des données de balance de paiement, collectées par les banques centrales, et posant d'importants problèmes conceptuels liés à la définition des services (voir par exemple Lange 1999: 23-24, et les annuaires suivantes). La publication de cet indicateur, qui montrait que le déficit des échanges entre États-Unis et Union européenne était passé de 2 milliards de \$ en 1988 à 9 milliards de \$ en 2000 a dû être interrompue lorsque les membres de la MPAA ont cessé de communiquer les chiffres à leur association.

Une décennie plus tard, j'ai repris une tentative de mesure du poids économiques des services audiovisuels en suivant la méthodologie proposée dans le MSITS par l'Organisation mondiale du commerce (WTO 2010). Pour les services audiovisuels, le MSITS recommande de recourir aux statistiques de filiale étrangères (FATS), considérées comme plus représentatives que celles issues de la balance de paiements. En principe, il revient à EUROSTAT d'établir ce type de statistiques d'entreprises, mais, pour des raisons structurelles, la collecte des données d'entreprises audiovisuelles par l'organisme statistique officiel de la Commission européenne ne m'a jamais parue satisfaisante. J'ai donc réalisé une synthèse statistique alternative en utilisant les données disponibles dans la base de données AMADEUS sur les comptes des entreprises. Pour la NACE 59 (production, post-production, distribution, exploitation, musique enregistrée) 647 filiales d'entreprises étrangères actives ont été identifiées, représentant un produit d'exploitation de 18,6 milliards d'EUR. Pour la NACE 60, 177 filiales d'entreprises étrangères ont été identifiées en 2010, générant un chiffre d'affaires de 5,6 milliards d'EUR. A cela, il convient d'ajouter, toujours pour 2010, 22 entreprises éditrices de services audiovisuels à la demande et 17 entreprises opérant des plates-formes de télévision à péage, représentant respectivement 1,5 et 11 milliards d'EUR de produit d'exploitation ("Commerce international des services audiovisuels" 2014). Bien que saluée par l'UNESCO (Kulesz 2018), cette tentative n'a pas été poursuivie, l'Observatoire s'attelant à un nouveau chantier stratégique, celui des statistiques relatives à la composition du catalogue et à l'économie de la vidéo à la demande.<sup>12</sup>

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**12** Voir Lange 2016 et les différents rapports de Gilles Fontaine et Christian Grèce publiés par l'Observatoire: <https://www.obs.coe.int/fr/web/observatoire/industry/home-video-and-vod>.

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# Une goutte d'eau, une goutte d'étoiles. Microcinématographie et avant-garde dans les années 1920

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A long-standing link exists between avant-garde and scientific cinema. In the 1920s, in fact, the former contributed to the construction of the latter: on the one hand, by its systematic inclusion in film clubs' and film societies' screening programs; on the other hand, by catalyzing the theoretical debate on the medium specificity because of the specific techniques it develops. Through the texts by philosophers, film makers and theorists of the time (Walter Benjamin, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, Émile Vuillermoz, László Moholy-Nagy among others), this essay examines the role of microscope films in the construction of 1920s film theory, discussing several tropes and key concepts such as pure cinema, *cinégraphie integrale*, rhythm theory and optical "unconscious".

**Keywords**  
Scientific Film  
Microscope  
Avant-garde  
Twenties  
Film Theory  
DOI

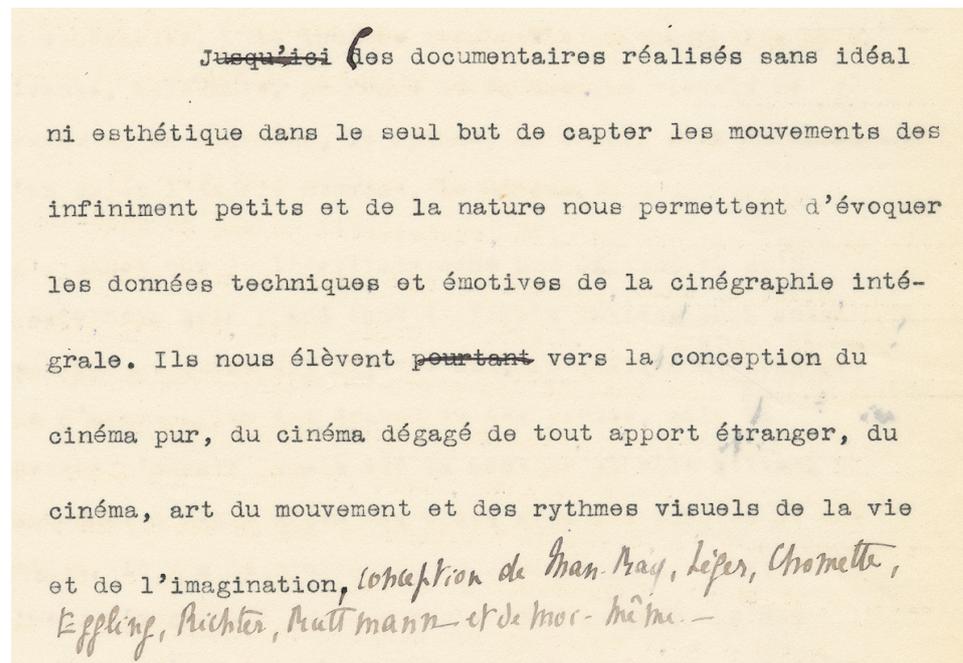
<https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/17723>

## INTRODUCTION

En 1926, Germaine Dulac tenait une conférence au Salon d'Automne, dont la Cinémathèque française conserve un dactylogramme montrant une comparaison aussi improbable qu'explicite: celle entre films scientifiques et films d'avant-garde, précisément ceux que "Man Ray, Léger, Chomette, Eggeling, Richter, Ruttmann" et elle-même réalisaient à l'époque<sup>1</sup> [Fig. 1]. En effet, une liaison ancienne et intime entre le cinéma scientifique et l'avant-garde existe et est désormais connue: dans les années 1920, le premier a contribué à la construction de la deuxième par son inclusion systématique au sein de la programmation de salles spécialisées et de ciné-clubs, tout en catalysant la réflexion théorique sur la spécificité du médium en raison des techniques spécifiques qu'il a développées. Les films au ralenti de Lucien Bull sont par exemple projetés dès la première saison cinématographique au Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier à Paris à partir de 1925, la London Film Society inclut souvent des documentaires scientifiques de la série *Secrets of Nature* dans sa programmation, tandis que des films sur la croissance de végétaux et cristaux sont montrés lors des séances de la Filmliga, le réseau de l'avant-garde

<sup>1</sup> Fonds Germaine Dulac à la Cinémathèque française (DULAC 317 - B21- 5/9).

Fig. 1  
Germaine Dulac,  
dactylogramme de la  
conférence au Salon  
D'Automne, 6 décembre  
1929 (DULAC 317 – B21-  
5/9, Fonds Germaine  
Dulac) – Collection la  
Cinémathèque française.



cinématographique néerlandaise<sup>2</sup>. Dans ces contextes où la théorie du cinéma était construite de manière effective, la réflexion sur le cinéma scientifique se développe surtout autour de son automatisme, à partir de l'idée selon laquelle le médium-cinéma est avant tout un œil mécanique capable d'apporter à l'homme une *nouvelle vision*, comme le dira László Moholy-Nagy, dépassant sa faible "sensibilité rétinienne" (Tedesco 1926, 9) et étendant la puissance de ses yeux dans deux directions : en agissant sur la manipulation temporelle via le ralenti et l'accélération, et sur le rapprochement progressif des corps, via les gros plans scientifiques, la microcinématographie et la radiocinématographie.

## POUR LE FILM ABSTRAIT

Les films en microcinématographie<sup>3</sup>, avec leur capacité à révéler la forme et la vie dynamique de l'infiniment petit caché dans la vie quotidienne, sont

<sup>2</sup> Sur la diffusion des films scientifiques dans les salles spécialisées, voir Bernabei 2016 et 2021. Sur l'articulation et la géographie de l'avant-garde cinématographique européenne et de ses clubs dans l'entre-deux-guerres cf. Hagener 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Dans le domaine scientifique, la microcinématographie – déjà expérimentée par Étienne-Jules Marey depuis 1891 – est perfectionnée par Lucien Bull et Antoine Pizon, François-Frank et Lucienne Chevroton, Julius von Ries et Fred Vles. Depuis 1908, le pionnier Jean Comandon affine une technique déjà mise au point à partir de 1903 par les Allemands Karl Reicher et Oskar Messter, à savoir l'emploi du microscope à éclairage latéral (ultramicroscope à fond noir) qui permet le tournage des microorganismes vivants. Dans le cadre de son doctorat en médecine sur la reconnaissance de l'ultramicroscope des mouvements spécifiques du *Treponema pallidum*, le spirochète de la syphilis, Comandon réalise en 1908 les premières expériences *ultra*-microcinématographiques au laboratoire de l'Hôpital Saint-Louis à Paris, avant de commencer sa fructueuse coopération avec Charles Pathé. Cf. Marey 1892; François-Frank 1907; Chevroton 1909 et Comandon 1909. Voir aussi Lefebvre 1993.

très appréciés par l'avant-garde car leurs résultats sont lus en tant que films abstraits portant les deux composantes de l'abstraction, c'est-à-dire le mouvement et la forme<sup>4</sup>. Effectivement, c'est bien la même machine employée pour réaliser les microcinématographies qui présentent en germe ces deux possibilités esthétiques : l'appareil de prise de vues élaboré par Jean Comandon, par exemple, est une machine qui agrandit et accélère à la fois, en s'ouvrant à une double direction du plaisir visuel, avec d'un côté le mouvement par-delà la forme, la visualisation des rythmes de la nature, qui interceptent l'élaboration théorique du cinéma pur et, de l'autre, les "structures constitutives, les tissus cellulaires" (Benjamin 2000 [1931], 300) dont la théorisation en tant qu'éléments primaires et que formes universelles fait partie du débat sur l'abstraction<sup>5</sup>.

À cet égard, la cristallisation est un sujet très fascinant puisqu'elle nous fait distinguer clairement ces deux composantes de l'esthétique de l'abstraction et sa réception avant-gardiste intercepte plusieurs courants théoriques : tout d'abord le côté français, plus lié au débat sur le cinéma pur et intégral et à la théorie du rythme, pivot des années 1920 — le rythme étant considéré comme "l'élément primordial et esthétique de toute la vie, comme de tous les arts, comme de toutes les émotions" (Romain 1929, 10) — et animé par des personnalités telles que Germaine Dulac, Jean Tedesco et Paul Romain, qui visaient à élaborer un cinéma dégagé de la suprématie des acteurs et des scénarios. En 1926, Germaine Dulac — qui avait l'habitude de montrer de nombreux films scientifiques pendant ses conférences pour expliquer ses théories — voyait par exemple dans les images de cristaux prises en accéléré "des rythmes et des mouvements sans thème, une musique visuelle de lignes"<sup>6</sup>. Dans *Photographie-Cinégraphie*, elle explique :

*Les films de science nous donnent un grand enseignement : les phénomènes de cristallisation transcrits par exemple dans la collection Pathé suscitent l'émotion non par la photographie, mais par le mouvement ascendant et transformiste, qu'à travers l'objectif, la pellicule sensible enregistre<sup>7</sup>.*

C'est surtout grâce à leur mouvement que ces formes peuvent être identifiées avec la "cinégraphie intégrale" [Fig. 2] : pour la concevoir, il suffit d'imaginer "plusieurs formes géométriques en mouvement qu'un souci artistique réunirait en rythmes divers dans une même image, et juxtaposerait en une suite d'images" (Dulac 1927, 47). En ce sens, pensons aussi à *Uit het rijk der kristallen* (Dans le royaume des cristaux), le film de Jan Cornelis Mol montré en triptyque au Studio 28 de Paris avec une installation expérimentale à tous les effets, immersive dans

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**4** Dominique Château (1992, 82-83) remarque que cette double tension caractérise déjà la pensée de Kandinsky : elle "repose sur un paradoxe autour duquel son œuvre travaillera sans cesse, oscillant entre deux conceptions de l'art abstrait: le géométrique et le lyrique, le statique et le dynamisme".

**5** Sur l'équipement de Jean Comandon, voir O'Gomes 1967.

**6** Germaine Dulac, conférence sans titre 1926-27, Fonds Germaine DULAC, la Cinémathèque française (DULAC 317 - B21-2/9).

**7** Dulac 1994 [1926], 80 (nous soulignons).

Fig. 2.  
 Germaine Dulac,  
 «Les esthétiques. Les  
 entraves. La cinégraphie  
 intégrale », dans *L'Art  
 cinématographique*, II,  
 Paris, Alcan, 1927, p. 48.



le mouvement et dans l'invasion organique<sup>8</sup> [Fig. 3].

D'un autre côté, le deuxième élément qui caractérise le cristal est sans doute la géométrie, la forme. En tant que forme primaire, il est au centre d'une véritable

<sup>8</sup> Projeté en "triptyque", selon le procédé inventé par Abel Gance et introduit par cinq minutes de "projections murales" par un "orchestre mécanique" de conception nouvelle et surtout par cinq minutes de "lanterne magique avec bonimenteur" qui confirment l'amour de l'avant-garde pour les "attractions" — surtout celles qui récupèrent et resémantisent des dispositifs appartenant à l'histoire passée de la vision — ce film de J. C. Mol est un succès restant à l'affiche pendant quatre mois et remplacé pendant l'été par "*Lumière et ombre*, un film absolu de A. Sandy" (1928); *Cristallisation* (20 avril – 3 juin 1928); *Lumière et Ombre* (8 juin – septembre 1928); *Cristallisation* (1er mars – 2 mai, 1929).

“esthétique de la cristallisation” des années 1920, qui le fait apparaître aussi dans les films, par exemple dans le “film d’objet” *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (H. Chomette, 1925) ou dans les pages de l’enquête sur les formes élémentaires conduite par la revue *Merz*.

*Ce sont les formes techniques fondamentales de l’univers. Elles suffisent à toutes les opérations de la formation du monde pour les conduire à leur développement extrême. Tout ce qui est, est combinaison de ces sept formes primitives. C’est sur elles que reposent toute l’architecture, les éléments de la mécanique, la cristallographie, la chimie, la géographie, l’astronomie, l’art, toute technique et le monde entier (Anonyme 1923, 75).*

Dans le contexte de la Filmliga où le débat sur le film absolu dominait — notamment porté par des figures comme Henrik Scholte et Menno Ter Braak, auteur de *Cinema militans* (1929) et *Absolute film* (1931), qui théorisaient un cinéma “tout à fait dégagé des influences extérieures et des faux sens” et “fondé sur des concepts purement cinématographiques” (Ter Braak 1931) — la réception des cristallisations est davantage liée à la recherche esthétique sur les formes primaires. Ici, ce même film de J.C. Mol est à nouveau proposé, juxtaposé à deux *Filmstudie* de Hans Richter et à *Symphonie diagonale* (V. Eggeling, 1924) et il est explicitement assimilé à un film “presqu’absolu” :

*La partie essentielle de ce court sont les formes des cristaux, et c’est donc avec joie que nous l’identifions comme un film “presqu’absolu”, qui peut à juste titre être accueilli à côté d’Eggeling et Richter. On a*

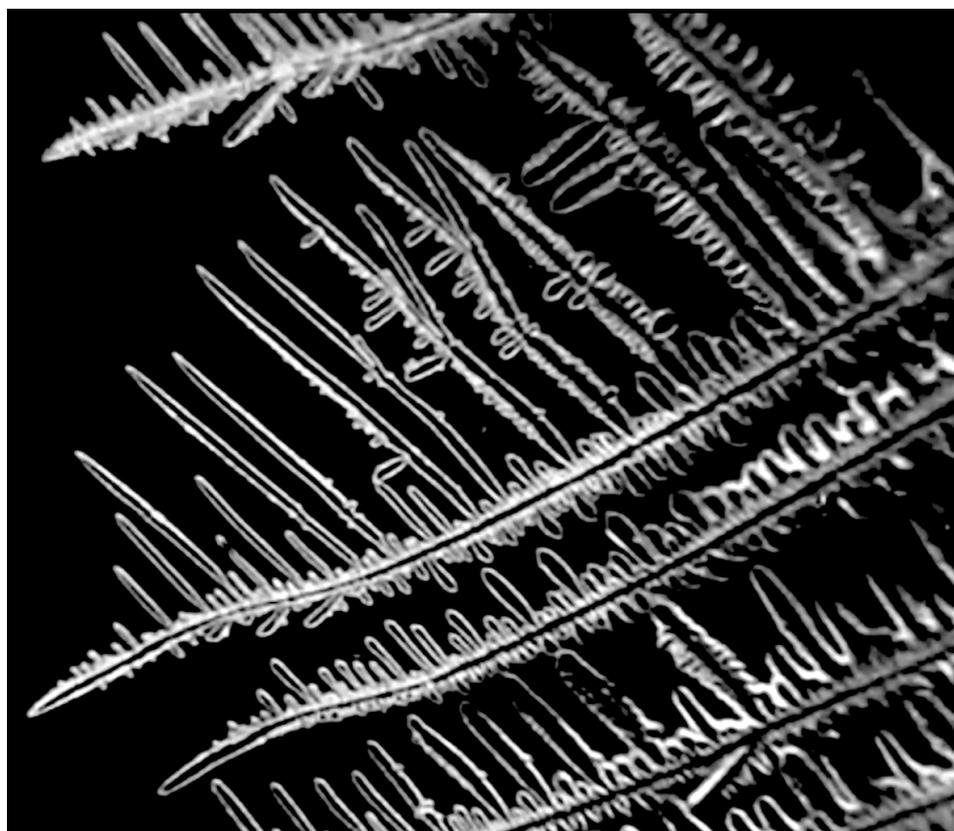
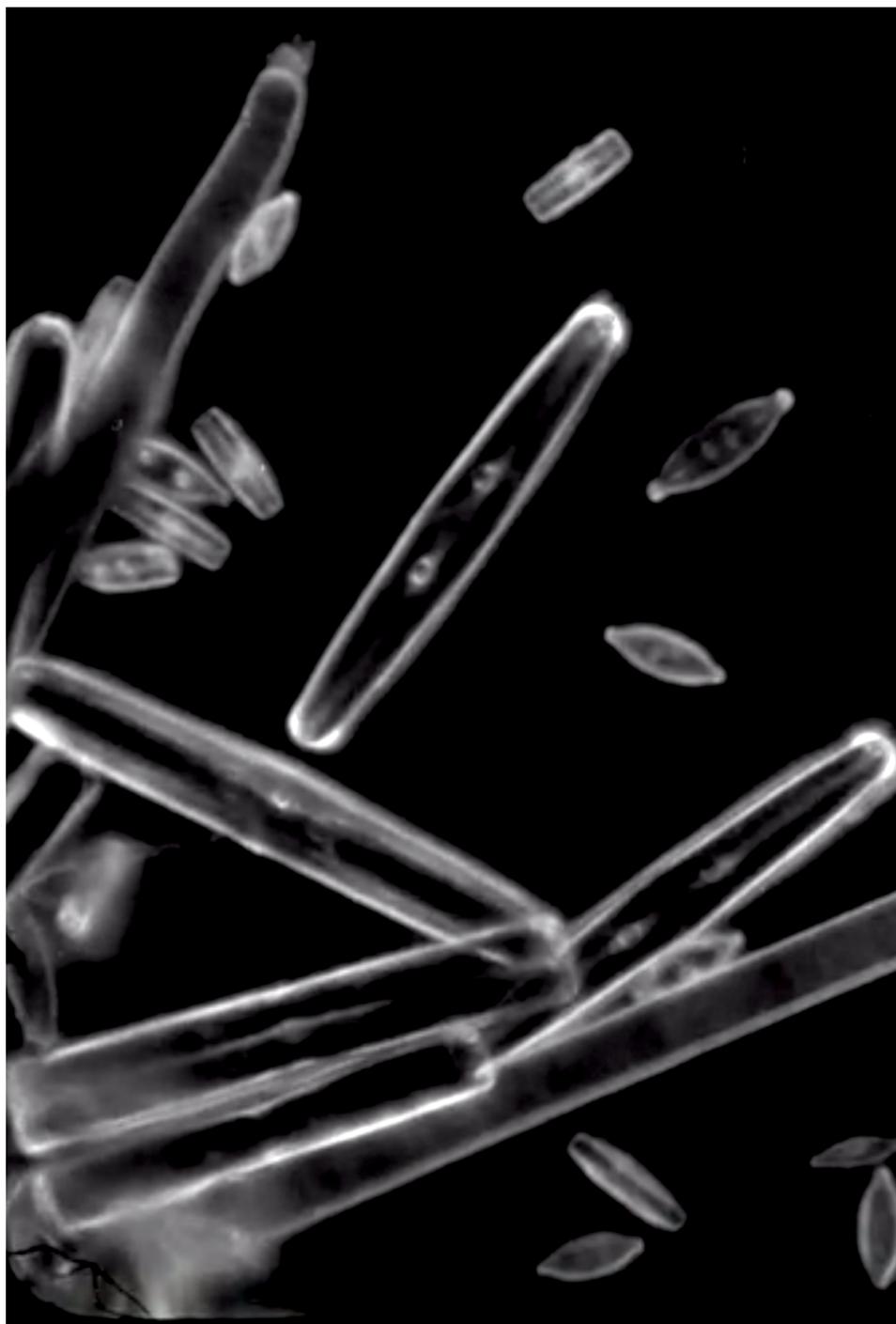


Fig. 3  
Jan Cornelis Mol, *Uit het rijk der kristallen*, Bureau voor Wetenschappelijke Cinematografie, 1927 — Collection Eye Filmmuseum, the Netherlands.

Fig. 4  
Jean Comandon,  
*Diatomées*, Pathé,  
1910 — © GP Archives  
— Restauration CNC.



*quand-même gardé cartons et légendes de ce film qui a été réalisé à des fins purement didactiques par notre associé à Haarlem (Ter Braak 1982b [1928]).*

Jan Brzekowski (1971 [1930], 142) partage la même opinion lorsqu'il inclut dans sa proposition de scénario pour un film abstrait les " cristallisation", c'est-à-dire les films sur le mouvement des cristaux", comparées aux œuvres d'Henri Chomette, Alfred Sandy et Hans Richter.

L'identification des cristaux en tant que forme primaire nous amène finalement à la projection organisée par László Moholy-Nagy au Bauhaus en 1926,

l'année où Vassily Kandinsky, qui y enseignait, fait de ses leçons le neuvième *Bauhausbuch*, *Point et ligne sur plan*, où il inclut aussi des cristaux, dont la structure schématique est comprise comme une "pure formation linéaire". Tout comme les structures de la *Micrographie décorative* de Laure Albin-Guillot (1931), ces images kandiskiennes sont à considérer aussi bien comme de véritables traités scientifiques que comme de stimulants catalogues capables d'enrichir cette révision de "l'inventaire de nos perceptions" qui "va changer notre image du monde dans une mesure encore" (Benjamin 1997 [1928], 70). Une autre recension sur le développement de cristaux parue dans la revue d'avant-garde *Close Up* semble parler exactement de ceci :

*Cristallisation, document scientifique, d'abord, puis aussi réservoir de visions originales fournies par les différents aspects de la solidification fantaisiste des minéraux [...]. Un traité de cristallographie, sans doute, mais qui se laisse examiner avec le plus vif intérêt (Chevalley 1930, 407).*

Quel "réservoir de visions originales", quelles formes plus primaires peuvent exister que les *Microbes contenus dans l'intestin d'une souris* (J. Comandon, Pathé, 1909), "de toute forme, longs, ovales, allongés comme des bâtons" (Rollini 1922, 340), ou les formes protoplasmiques des *Amoeba*, ou celles géométriques que revêtent les diverses *Diatomées* ([Fig. 4; les deux J. Comandon, Pathé, 1910) – toutes aussi différentes que les flocons de neige d'un univers parallèle, capables de dépouiller l'œil du profane du principe ordonnateur du monde? Pensons encore aux *Volvox* (J. Comandon, Pathé, 1911), matrioskas de sphères qui tournent silencieusement sur elles-mêmes comme des planètes, aux *Vorticellides* (J. Comandon, Pathé, 1914), campanules transparentes, ou aux segmentations géométriques de la série des *Tourbillons cellulaires de l'éther* [Fig. 5] ou encore à la *Solidification cellulaire*

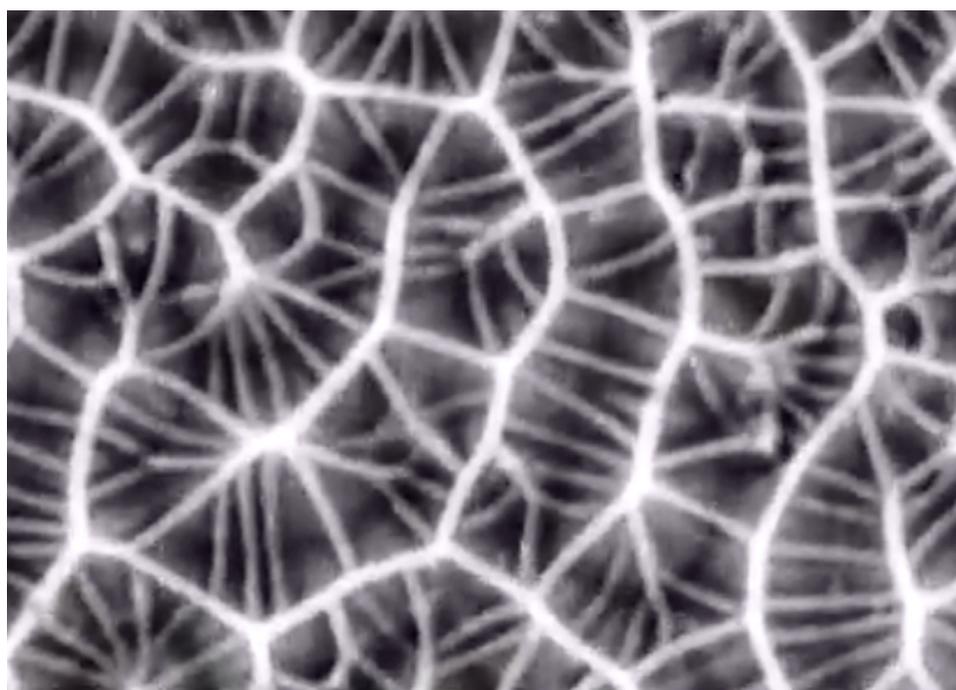


Fig. 5  
Anon., *Tourbillons cellulaires de l'éther*,  
*Encyclopédie Gaumont*,  
vers 1920 — ©  
GP Archives.

(Gaumont n. 05359 et suiv., vers 1920), jusqu'à l'incroyable *Transformation de phosphore blanc en phosphore rouge par l'action de la lumière* (J. Comandon et P. de Fonbrune, Laboratoire de biologie du Centre de Documentation Albert-Kahn, 1929), où le phosphore suit la plus stricte et la plus improbable des lois universelles, celle qui, au cours de la réaction chimique, le fait agglutiner sous la forme d'une étoile à cinq branches.

## LA VIE DANS UNE GOUTTE D'EAU

En augmentant progressivement le niveau de grossissement de quelques dizaines à quelques centaines de fois, la microcinématographie permet de montrer, entre autres, les organismes vivant dans une goutte d'eau. *Het leven in een druppel water* (La vie dans une goutte d'eau, J. C. Mol, Multifilm, 1927) fut montré plusieurs fois dans les salles de la Filmliga néerlandaise, en parallèle des *Opus II, III, IV* de Walter Ruttmann (1921-25), et fut le seul film proprement scientifique inclus par Hans Richter dans la section cinématographique de la célèbre exposition *Film und Foto*, à côté de *Regen* (J. Ivens, 1929), *L'Étoile de mer* (Man Ray, 1928), *Symphonie diagonale* (V. Eggeling, 1924) et *Johanna von Orléans* (P. Renner, 1929)<sup>9</sup>. Soulignant l'étrangeté de ces visions, Menno ter Braak (1982a [1928]) compare explicitement les microbes de ce film aux "acteurs d'un film de Man Ray". Compte tenu du profil hybride de Mol, à la fois cinéaste scientifique et cofondateur de la Filmliga, on peut supposer qu'il a élaboré les intertitres de ce film de manière très réfléchie. Examinons-les:

1. Imaginez que nous devenions *dix mille fois plus petits*. Notre taille n'est plus que d'un cinquième de millimètre, l'épaisseur d'une feuille de papier.
2. *Les choses autour de nous semblent très différentes maintenant*. La texture fine d'un mouchoir.
3. La pointe d'une *aiguille* fine.
4. Le trou fait avec cette aiguille dans une feuille de *papier*.
5. Le dos d'une *feuille*.
6. Un acarien, un animal *difficile à voir à l'œil nu*.
7. Nous commençons nos pérégrinations et notre descente des boules de lentilles d'eau, jusqu'aux *monstres* que sont les insectes, et dans le monde microscopique de l'eau.
8. Notre première impression : le *très grand nombre* d'habitants.
9. Nous arrivons au milieu d'une *colonie* de Paracea, des animaux unicellulaires à la constitution très *primitive*.
10. Au cours de notre voyage, nous rencontrons parfois d'énormes essaims de bactéries, généralement à proximité de matières en décomposition.

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<sup>9</sup> Les projections ont eu lieu du 13 au 24 juin 1929. Pour le programme voir Anonyme 1929. Voir aussi Richter 1929.

11. Nous continuons notre chemin et nous nous trouvons soudain en présence d'une foule de *petites balles* qui tournent à notre approche.
12. Dès qu'elles s'arrêtent, elles déploient une couronne de cils. Elles *ressemblent à d'élégantes campanules* sur une belle tige.
13. Ce sont des Vorticellides. Ils se déplacent rapidement avec leurs cils et créent un grand *mouvement* dans l'eau.
14. Soudain, nous avons l'impression d'être dans *l'espace, parmi les milliers de planètes en rotation du système solaire*.
15. Ce sont des *Volvox*. Chaque boulette d'un dixième de millimètre est une *colonie* de centaines de flagellés. La *naissance* de jeunes colonies.
16. Nous pouvons « capturer » ces Volvox avec de la lumière. Ils sont *irrésistiblement* attirés par elle.
17. Du coup, on se retrouve soudain devant un *monstre étonnant*.
18. C'est une larve d'insecte qui est *énorme selon nos standards*: trois millimètres.
19. On peut voir l'intérieur de l'animal comme à travers une coquille de verre. L'intestin se tord et pousse les aliments vers l'avant.
20. Dans le monde de la goutte d'eau, nous rencontrons de nombreux types de *serpents*, qui rampent dans des forêts d'algues microscopiques.
21. Des serpents, d'un demi-millimètre de long seulement et complètement transparents. Nous voyons le jeune vivant dans le corps de la mère.
22. Certains ressemblent à des animaux *disparus* depuis longtemps.
23. Un troupeau d'êtres *fantastiques* entre dans notre champ visuel, avançant très rapidement avec des antennes très ramifiées.
24. C'est la *Daphnie*, la puce d'eau. Magnifiquement transparent, elle nous ouvre tout son organisme.
25. «*Les animaux nous regardent*» maintenant, et avec vingt yeux disposés sur une boule rotative.
26. Des œufs dans l'espace de culture...
27. Dans lesquelles les jeunes daphnies se développent également.
28. On assiste à la naissance de jeunes daphnies.
29. Ainsi se termine notre «*merveilleux voyage*» et nous reprenons nos dimensions<sup>10</sup>.

Le premier acte accompli par le film de Mol est l'imposition d'une défamiliarisation violente, due au changement d'échelle : en bouleversant les proportions naturelles, nous sommes maintenant les Lilliputiens tout comme, dans l'élaboration de la théorie de l'*inconscient optique* de Walter Benjamin, l'observateur devient petit en présence des agrandissements de plantes de Karl Blossfeldt. Ensuite, les objets du quotidien apparaissent, comme dans la

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<sup>10</sup> Les intertitres (version 1932) sont tirés de Crommelin 2006 (Appendix III, 89-93) (nous soulignons).

*Micrographia* de Robert Hooke (1665) : une aiguille [Fig. 6], une feuille de papier ou une goutte d'eau, le sujet de ce film. Ces objets sont révélés à travers un grossissement irréal, comme s'ils étaient vus pour la toute première fois, et la première impression que nous avons est la monstruosité écrasante de la myriade de "choses" qui passent inaperçues à nos yeux myopes. Par ailleurs, le voile de l'habitude soulevé par les techniques de la photographie et du cinéma est un élément qu'on retrouve plusieurs fois à cette époque chez Ernst Bloch et Walter Benjamin. De plus, très agrandis, ces êtres s'organisent en colonies réactives à tout ce qui se passe autour d'elles, tout en révélant les lois qui régissent leur univers, et présentent les formes les plus variées et les plus insolites (boules, cils), capables de montrer des ressemblances esthétiquement surprenantes:

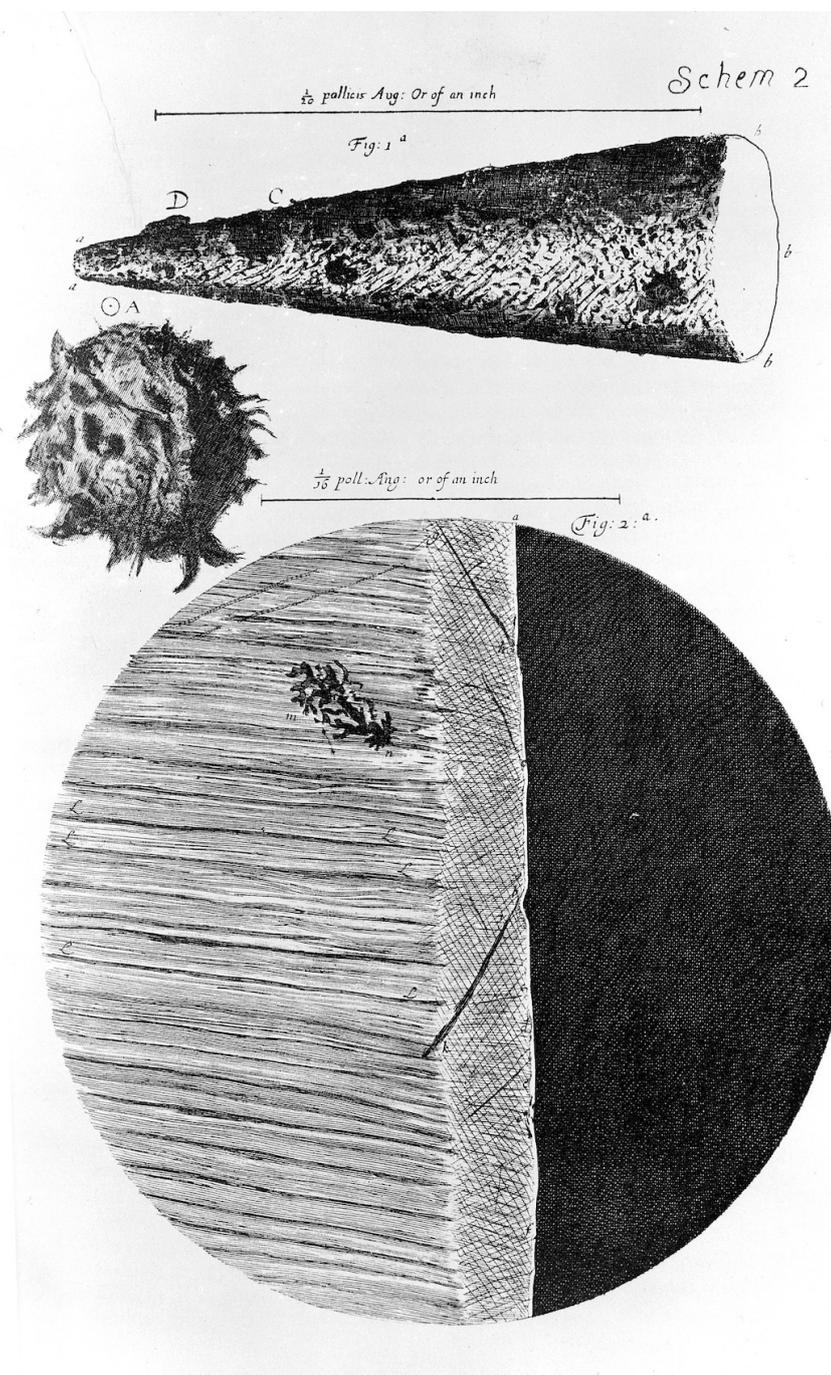


Fig. 6  
Needle-point, dans  
Robert Hooke,  
*Micrographia*, 1665.

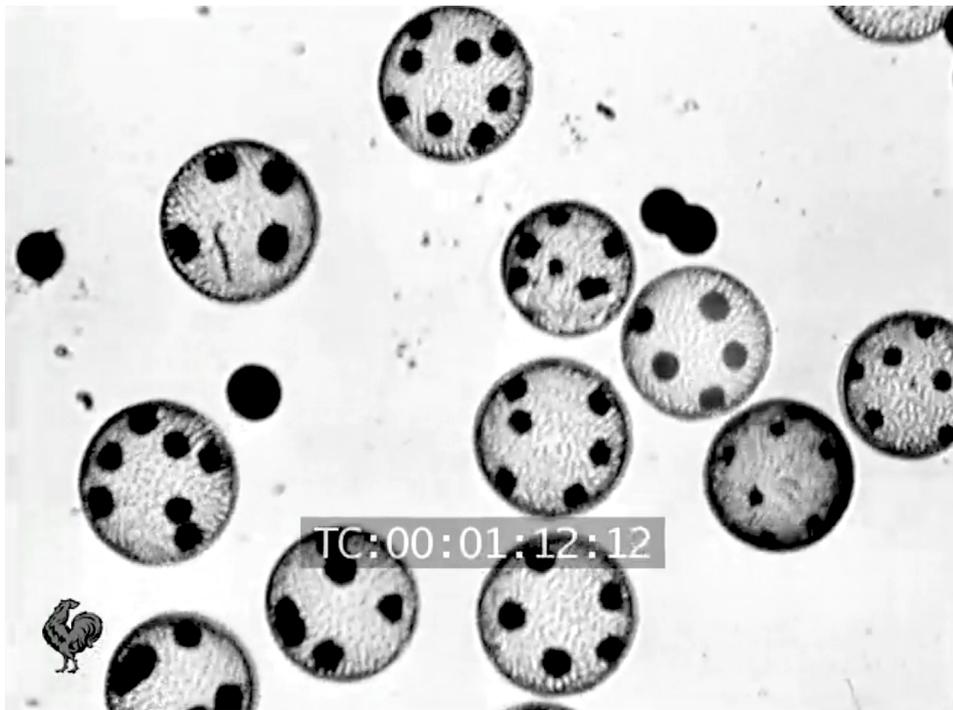


Fig. 7  
Jean Comandon,  
*Volvox*, Pathé, 1911  
— © GP Archives —  
Restauration CNC.

des vorticellides comme d'élégantes campanules. Le fourmillement qui se produit là-bas, dans l'infiniment inconnu, est tout-à-fait inattendu, et l'infiniment petit est analogue à l'infiniment grand : les *Volvox* que nous voyons, ces algues unicellulaires sphériques qui se coordonnent pour vivre dans une sphère plus grande, sont-elles les planètes d'un énorme système solaire [Fig. 7]?

Nous nous sommes désormais installés dans cet environnement microscopique, dans ces proportions élégantes — l'homme s'habitue à tout, il semble né pour être anesthésié — et une simple larve d'insecte devient le plus énorme des monstres dans ses trois millimètres titanesques. Grâce à la puissance des lentilles réglables du microscope, nous pouvons examiner ses organes internes comme sur une table de dissection.

Si, hors de la goutte d'eau, les techniques du cinéma scientifique nous ont déjà montré les cristaux pousser comme des plantes et les chevaux danser au ralenti comme Nijinski, ici, dans ce pays des merveilles aquatiques, parmi sphères, clochettes, planètes et étoiles, nous avons le plaisir de croiser de véritables serpents qui s'agitent dans les traités scientifiques depuis le XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle (Johannes Zhan parlait "d'aqua cum vermicolis" dans ses démonstrations avec la lanterne magique; Zhan 1686). Dans la goutte d'eau, nous rencontrons des "êtres fantastiques" : les daphnies, vedettes "belles et transparentes" d'un film de Jean Painlevé présenté en avant-première au Studio des Ursulines (*La Daphnie*, 1928), ou encore des animaux désormais disparus : c'est en effet dans cet univers inconnu qu'ils se réfugient, une fois échappés du nôtre.

*Regardant-regardé*, nous nous sentons soudain menacés, plus en sécurité dans cet environnement, entourés dans la jungle par des indigènes potentiellement cannibales qui se reproduisent sans cesse. Heureusement, nous pouvons nous échapper, en reprenant nos dimensions et en sortant revoir les étoiles...

## C'EST UNE FÉERIE ET C'EST UN DRAME

Des thèmes esthétiques similaires apparaissent également à un niveau supplémentaire de grossissement, des dizaines de milliers de fois, grâce auquel nous pouvons pénétrer dans nos corps mêmes et assister aux batailles qui se déroulent en eux. C'est ainsi qu'en 1926, au club Vision Fortis de Bruxelles, Jean Comandon est invité à parler de *La Lutte entre les infiniment petits*, parmi d'autres causeries d'avant-garde<sup>11</sup>. Émile Vuillermoz, qui a souvent écrit sur *Le Temps* à propos de films scientifiques, souligne les fines associations entre forme et mouvement dans les microcinématographies de Comandon. D'un côté, les formes abstraites offrent de précieuses révélations aux artistes décorateurs:

*Des plaques d'argent, niellé ou martelé, aux ombres fines, aux reliefs, adoucis, voici des étoffes somptueuses, lamées, jaspées, moirées, mais dont les filigranes sont vivants et dont le mouvement déplace savamment les lignes [...]. Quelles somptueuses révélations pour nos artistes décorateurs! Quelles indications fécondes pour des dessinateurs de soieries ou des orfèvres! (Vuillermoz 1922).*

De l'autre, de telles formes sont ensuite confrontées à celles en éternel mouvement d'un kaléidoscope et, bien entendu, étant donné le contexte dans lequel Vuillermoz écrit, il ne s'agit pas de mouvement pur et simple: "ces atomes en mouvement ne sont pas des poussières", mais ils s'animent plutôt comme les symphonies visuelles que Germaine Dulac théorise à la même époque, et qui sont composées ici par les rythmes vitaux à l'intérieur d'un corps répondant à des lois universelles (et musicales, ajoute l'auteur, allant jusqu'à faire allusion à la proposition d'enrichir ces images avec un commentaire symphonique):

*C'est un drame et aussi un ballet. Il n'a pas de rythme plus émouvant que celui dont nous avons ici la révélation. C'est le rythme même de la vie, cette chorégraphie grave et lente, cette danse sacrée, cette marche religieuse de nos cellules qui obéissent en nous aux injonctions d'une mystérieuse discipline musicale. La musique on l'entend, on la devine sous ces magnifiques balancements, sous ces voltes et contredanses du protoplasme, aussi harmonieuses et aussi régulières que la ronde des astres (Vuillermoz 1922).*

Le thème d'une vie fourmillante revient, ce thème que Comandon lui-même avait déjà observé dans une communication à la Société de Biologie, en parlant de cellules qui "se déplacent dans tous les sens [...], rampent à l'aide de leurs

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**11** Les autres causeries: G. Dulac, *le Sens du 7e Art*. Projection du *Ballet mécanique* de F. Léger, du *Film Intégral* de Ruttmann, et de la *Folie des Vaillants*; H. Chomette, *le Cinéma, Art multiple*. Projection de *Jeux des Reflets* et de *la Vitesse*; D. Kirsanoff, Une formule Cinématographique. Projection de *Ménilmontant*; M. L'Herbier, *la Cinématographie et l'Espace*. Projection de *l'Ex-Voto*; Jean Epstein, *Prises de Vues cinématographiques*. Projection de *Mauprat*, Abel Gance, *Napoléon à l'Écran*, Projection de *Napoléon*; R. Clair, *le Film de demain*. Projection d'*Entr'acte*.

pseudopodes, s'en vont assez loin dans le plasma et parfois elles retournent par un autre chemin [...] et on a l'impression d'une ruche d'abeilles où tout est en mouvement" (Comandon, Levaditi et Mutermilch 1913, 465). C'est dans un article de *Close Up* que ces visions microscopiques en mouvement démontrent avoir des qualités modernistes marquées:

*Cells with movement in them striking contrast being drawn between the circulation of traffic in a great city. Amoebae, glittering gold of reflected light. Pleasant to think that glittering gold is the seed of life. Groups of cells are formed, multiply, split up, reform (Blakestone 1929, 69-70).*

Dans les pages d'une revue qui a construit l'avant-garde cinématographique, la vie qui palpite secrètement dans le cœur d'une plante dialogue avec les fers de lance du dynamisme moderniste. Dans les *Mouvements du protoplasme dans les poils staminaux de tradescantia*, on observe en effet un trafic digne des nouvelles routes à longue distance tandis que dans *Mouvements du protoplasme dans les cellules d'Elodea canadensis* (les deux J. Comandon, Pathé, 1910) se cache la structure d'une métropole presque simmelienne, avec de vraies perspectives à vol d'oiseau sur le trafic ou de vertigineuses "aéropeintures" des gratte-ciels.

Par ailleurs, dans la conjoncture animiste qui marque cette époque, ces petites vies en microcinématographie se révèlent aussi humaines: pour Blaise Cendrars (1987 [1926], 211), "les microbes ressemblent à nos plus illustres contemporains" et pour Vuillermoz (1922) on trouve dans les films de Comandon "des êtres vivants à qui le monstrueux grossissement de l'écran prête un véritable personnalité" qui se manifeste dans la vaste gamme d'activités auxquelles ils s'emploient. Des déplacements, des danses et des combats qui configurent des histoires trépidantes d'amour et de guerre. Pour Béla Balázs (1952, 173) elles jouent plutôt sur le ton de la fable — "il n'y a rien de plus fabuleux qu'un film scientifique qui montre un processus de cristallisation ou la lutte de microbes infusoires à l'intérieur d'une goutte d'eau" — tandis que pour Jean Epstein, c'est une trame romantique qui se déroule au microscope, "une histophysiologie passionnelle, une classification des sentiments amoureux en qui prennent et qui ne prennent pas le gram qu'au lieu de cartomancienne les jeunes filles iront consulter" (Epstein 1975a [1921], 95)<sup>12</sup>.

Nous nous trouvons ici face à un passage important qui va du constat émerveillé de la présence de la vie là où nous n'aurions pas pu l'imaginer, de la vie qui lutte à l'échelle 1:1000 pour sa survie avec "des évolutions, des luttes, des pièges, des unions, des séparations et des migrations", à une véritable mise en forme spectaculaire, qui suit des dramaturgies et des modèles spécifiques. Nous

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**12** Sur le regard d'Epstein au cinéma documentaire et ses implications esthétiques voir Tognolotti, Vichi 2020, surtout la première partie, "De l'attraction documentaire à la théorie d'un cinéma au-delà du réel".

sommes alors à chaque fois confrontés à un "ballet", à un "drame imprévisible" (Escoube 1931, 57), à "un spectacle à la qualité théâtrale insoupçonnée", à la "tragédie éternelle, en milles épisodes que jouent, dans une cellule vivante, les infiniment-petits" (Vuillermoz 1922). Ou enfin à des films dramatiques, d'action, de guerre, aux scénarios les plus variés, "ces films sont des films de guerre" (Vuillermoz 1922), "aussi captivants qu'une intrigue très complexe dans un film policier" (Anonyme 1925, 38). Il faut à présent observer que ces films scientifiques — dont l'entrée dans le débat théorique agira comme le catalyseur d'un processus de libération du cinéma du joug du scénario et des acteurs, mais aussi de leur jeu et de leurs anecdotes — se trouvent dans un premier temps être reçus eux-mêmes comme des films certes nouveaux, mais qui suivent néanmoins des règles d'interprétation et de scénario. Le public qui voit ainsi à *Sang d'oiseau infecté par un hématozoaire et phagocytose de ce parasite* (J. Comandon, Pathé, 1917) ne regarde rien d'autre que le "ciné-roman en douze épisodes de la phagocytose" (Vuillermoz 1927a, 64); la "saisissante fantasmagorie qui se déroule dans le monde des microbes" (60). Pour Vuillermoz en effet, il est extrêmement difficile de réussir à se détacher de l'habitude, du préjugé de "l'Anthropocentrisme": "Vous aurez beau aller chercher dans l'infiniment petit des visions d'une nouveauté insoupçonnée pour rééduquer notre œil, vous n'arriverez pas toujours à le débarrasser de ses préjugés en matière de spectacle". En somme, il semble qu'à l'aube d'une époque qui condamnera tout scénario, le film scientifique intervient pour révolutionner le débat théorique, en particulier à cause des "scénarios magnifiques" qu'il présente, des "scénarios d'une puissance et d'une variété inimaginable", que le "profane" ne peut isoler de ses propres coordonnées spectaculaires (Vuillermoz (1927b): "Est-ce que les images du film [*Mouvement des leucocytes*, J. Comandon, Pathé, 1919], par la suite, ne développent-elles pas un drame, une action logique?" (Fescourt et J.-L. Bouquet 1988 [1925-6], 380). C'est un sujet sensible, à l'ère de l'interdiction des scénarios et des anecdotes — *Tuons l'anecdote!* tonnent entre-temps les pages de l'avant-garde<sup>13</sup>.

## RÊVES ÉVEILLÉS

On a vu dans ces pages plusieurs effets de la défamiliarisation en microcinématographie: toutes les références changent, l'échelle de grandeur en premier. Nous qui devenons des milliers de fois plus petits, dans le film de Mol, un grain de sable qui "ressemble à un gratte-ciel" dans la métaphore moderniste par excellence (Vuillermoz 1922), *Nains de l'Océan* comme titre d'un documentaire consacré au plancton (Haré 1930), jusqu'au leitmotiv de l'assonance astronomique. Nous le trouvons chez Kandinsky, chez Moholy-Nagy, chez Élie Faure qui se dit touché par l'homologie entre "le profond univers de l'infini microscopique, et peut-être demain de l'infini télescopique, la danse inouïe

13 Cf. Hugues 1929, 22-23 et 9-11.

des atomes et des étoiles”, chez Cendrars qui ne sait pas s’il regarde “un ciel étoilé à l’œil nu ou une goutte d’eau”, et enfin chez Abel Gance qui découvre des univers d’avenir: grâce à la puissance du nouveau médium “tout est, ou devient possible: une goutte d’eau, une goutte d’étoiles”<sup>14</sup>. Encore une fois, Vuillemoz (1922) voit un “paysage étrange et hallucinant, un horizon sublunaire” dans la microcinématographie d’une cellule et Karl Nierendorf (1929) dans sa préface à *Urformen der Kunst* de Karl Blossfeldt, découvre que “le microscope révèle des systèmes de monde dans une goutte d’eau, tandis que les instruments de l’observatoire astronomique révèlent l’infini de l’univers”. C’est exactement dans ce sens qu’Epstein peut parler de “saisissantes homologues entre macrocosme et microcosme” (1975b [1947], 391), en se rattachant à un *topos* ancien qui a déjà traversé la merveille délivrée des lentilles du microscope. Un *topos* ancien, comme la seconde occurrence de l’éloignement en microcinématographie, c’est-à-dire l’observation d’objets et d’activités quotidiennes qui se révèlent être des créatures extraterrestres ou de très risquées missions militaires, tels sont les dangers qu’elles cachent. Comme nous le savons désormais, ce dispositif d’éloignement est élaboré de manière militante par les formalistes russes (ici *ostranenie*): Chklovski dans *L’art comme procédé* en soutient la nécessité “pour soustraire une chose à l’automatisme de la perception” et Osip Brik déclare que les photos de Rodtchenko transforment “des objets familiers” en “structures jamais vues”, en allant fort “au-delà de la portée habituelle de l’œil humain” pour montrer “la réalité comme elle n’avait jamais été vue”<sup>15</sup>. Si, dans une accolade animiste, les bactéries pensent avec leur cerveau et les microbes avec celui des cristaux, si nous nous retrouvons en lilliputiens dans une goutte d’eau comme sous les feuilles d’une plante et que nos activités se révèlent être des “activités de couverture” parmi les plus improbables d’un univers parallèle foisonnant à l’envi, soumis au nôtre et prêt à jaillir dans un “geyser [...] de nouveaux mondes d’images” (Benjamin 1997 [1928], 70), cela veut dire que nous sommes encore une fois immergés dans une surréalité, en présence de nouvelles occurrences de *l’inconscient optique*. Balázs et Benjamin le savent, et en regardant au microscope ils sont foudroyés par une même impression onirique: le premier parle d’*álmodozás*, “de rêves éveillés”, ceux où, pour Benjamin, “les mondes d’images qui habitent les plus petites choses” trouvent “abri”. Ils peuvent ici se laisser aller à des souffles physiologiques: pour l’un, c’est justement grâce à l’instrument technique, tandis que pour l’autre, les atomes se connectent entre eux “comme dans la découverte inattendue d’un visage”<sup>16</sup>. Chez Balázs, le tissu cellulaire, doté d’une vie autonome, renverse la relation sujet-objet : je regarde la cellule, qui ne me perçoit pas, car – bien qu’elle soit à l’intérieur de moi – elle a son propre système de référence, ses propres habitudes, son propre

**14** Cf. Faure 1920, 27 ; Cendrars 1917; Gance 1927, 83.

**15** Chklovski 1973 [1917], 17; Brik, 2003 [1926], 90–91.

**16** Balázs 2012 [1924]. Les citations de Benjamin sont prises de Benjamin 2000 [1931], 300.

environnement et voit "le monde d'une manière complètement différente"<sup>17</sup>.

Hannah Landecker explique clairement quel a été le rôle de l'observation microscopique dans la définition de théories comme celles de l'*inconscient optique*: à l'époque, les cellules étaient perçues en tant que "particules élémentaires de phénomènes physiques, dont l'étude aurait pu élucider les caractéristiques fondamentales de la psychologie humaine"; dans leur optique, on avait donc tendance à projeter la "vision des bases des phénomènes psychologiques" (Landecker 2005, 932), comme le fait Freud avec les protozoaires dans *Au-delà du principe de plaisir* (1920), en cherchant une racine commune à tous les instincts, et il les envisagera comme des forces conçues à l'intérieur du corps, en transmission constante avec l'apparat mental. En ce sens, la visualisation du comportement cellulaire microcinématographié est comparable à celle des instincts humains, ce qui en fait une sorte de "correspondant morphologique" de la structure théorique de la psychanalyse<sup>18</sup>. C'est pourquoi dans *Close Up*, en 1927, la levure est dotée d'un "esprit microscopique" (H.D. 1927). Pensons à Freud (2000 [1899], 508) qui dans l'*Interprétation des rêves* propose de "représenter l'instrument qui sert aux opérations de l'âme comme, par exemple, un microscope composé de diverses pièces, un appareil photographique, etc."; à Max Ernst qui, dans ses références scientifiques, exploite abondamment tout ceci à la microscopie<sup>19</sup>; ou à Marc Bernard (1931, 62) qui dans la *Revue du cinéma*, soutient à son tour que pour l'imagination le microscope et le cinéma ont fait plus que tous les "élucubrations poétiques"; ou enfin à André Breton qui dans le photomontage *L'Écriture surréaliste* se représente en train d'observer au microscope, à la découverte de la réalité fantastique cachée dans les cellules. C'est encore une fois Moholy-Nagy qui explique comment tout ceci peut tenir ensemble, en mettant sur le même plan le désir (surréaliste) d'enquêter l'inconscient et celui (scientifique) d'enquêter sur l'invisible avec les instruments de la vision améliorée. Pour lui, au XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle, ces tendances se succédaient en prenant chacune la place de l'autre, presque sans solution de continuité:

*Le désir d'inconscient passait au second plan, après les miracles du microscope, du télescope et des rayons X et infrarouges. Vitesse, électricité, électromagnétisme, tous ces phénomènes occupaient suffisamment l'imagination sans qu'il soit besoin de recourir à l'automatisme inconscient [...]. La photographie était, dans la plupart des cas, le passe-partout ouvrant la porte au miracle de l'univers extérieur et on la considérait comme le moyen le plus parfait et le plus accessible de rendre et d'enregistrer celui-ci. Même les enregistrements les plus étonnants étaient des représentations objectives bien que celles-ci allassent parfois au-delà de pouvoir*

**17** Balázs 2012.

**18** Landecker 2005, 931; voir aussi Schloegel et Schmidgen 2002.

**19** Cf., par exemple, *La bicyclette gaminée garnie de grelots* (1920), *Plantation boophile d'outremer hyperboréenne* (1921) o *Plantation farcineuse hydrogique parasite* (1921). Cf. aussi Stokes 1980 et Gamwell 2002, 245 et suiv.

*d'observation de nos yeux, avec la micro et macrophotographie, les très grandes vitesses d'obturation, les Rayons X, infrarouges, etc (Moholy-Nagy 1993 [1943], 225).*

Voilà un élément supplémentaire pour comprendre, comme le dirait Benjamin, "la différence entre technique et magie comme une variation historique" (2000 [1931]).

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Michael Gott

# Screen Borders. From Calais to *cinéma-monde*

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Where does contemporary Europe begin and end? The provocative question posed by political scientist Jean-François Bayart is the starting point of Michael Gott's book *Screen Borders. From Calais to cinéma-monde* (Bayart 2009). The question has no single answer, but depends on the mobility and background of the traveller. In order to boost unlimited tourism within the EU, internal borders tend to disappear for Europeans. On the contrary, for migrants seeking to reach and cross the barriers of *Fortress Europe*, containment and expulsion facilities multiply. Calais and its *jungle*, the checks for crossing the Channel Tunnel, refugee camps on the islands of Lesbos and Lampedusa, the Ceuta and Melilla border fences, the liquid borders of the Mediterranean and the checkpoints along the forested borderlands between Poland and Ukraine are some of the external borders and peripheral locations that deny access to migrants in Europe. From the so-called *migrant crisis* of 2015 to Brexit and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, during the 21<sup>st</sup> century boundaries have become ubiquitous across the territories of European states. These often unsuccessful attempts to contain the proliferation and acceleration of migratory flows increase border anxieties in the social composition and produce waves of media overexposure that subject migrants to various

forms of degradation, including the annihilation of singularities, their transformation into a frightening mass of invaders or even terrorists, victimisation, confinement to urban peripheries, and criminalisation. Shifting boundaries are also characterised by the constant presence of monitoring systems: the stages of the migration experience and the attempts at integration are both overseen by a complex media environment.

On the other hand, there are many artistic productions that challenge borderland restrictions and controls to promote otherness, forms of creolisation and transcultural narratives. As well as condemning the inability to manage migration flows, borderland narratives provide a privileged context for understanding Europe's current issues and future challenges.

Based on the assumption that the mental maps and geographic concepts that define Europe can vary, Michael Gott's *Screen Borders* contributes to the visual and cultural history of contemporary borders, both inside and outside Europe. If the "screen apparatus intersects and interacts with the narrative representation of borders that this apparatus helps to produce" (1), then the concept of screen borders "hinges on and acts upon how narratives and images about inside and outside are framed, who is framing them, and what audience views the images projected

onto screens" (10). Gott, Professor of French and Niehoff Professor of Film & Media Studies at the University of Cincinnati, draws from common research lines in cultural geography and interdisciplinary research fields such as border and mobility studies to analyse a corpus of popular films, auteur fiction, documentaries and TV series that fall under the category of *cinéma-monde*. This expression, which Gott already used in previous essays, refers to transnational audiovisual products that are linked to the broader Francosphere (Gott and Schielt 2018). The Francophone dimension of *cinéma-monde* can be found at various levels, including production, distribution, and narrative. Therefore, Gott analyses the ways in which the representative dimension, production systems, funding schemes, and distribution networks of the *cinéma-monde* interact with the borders and borderlands of the EU.

Stations and tunnels, ports and airports, watery and forested borderlands: the chapters of *Screen Borders* develop, drawing from films and TV series set in these and other crossing spaces, a dynamic cartography in which images mediate and influence our cultural, political and ethical understanding of borders. Let us follow some of the routes mapped in the five chapters.

The first chapter describes how *Géographie humaine* (Claire Simon, 2013), transforms the interzone of the Gare du Nord into the largest square in Paris, a microcosm marked by departures and arrivals. In her documentary Simon explores the station in the company of the camera and her collaborator Simon Méribet, two interfaces that capture the flow of exiles, migrants and travellers, and return their life stories to the spectators. Unlike a crossroads space like Gare du Nord, in the Channel Tunnel the function of filtering and separating those who are entitled to mobility from those who are not is more evident: *The Tunnel* (Sky, Canal+, 2013-2017), drawing on the atmospheres of Nordic noirs—the series is an adaptation of the Swedish/Danish production *The Bridge* (SVT1, DR1, 2011-2018)—depicts the

climate of intolerance and border anxieties of the pre- and post-Brexit eras.

The second chapter focuses on the borderland potential of Atlantic and Mediterranean ports. The five films analysed, including *A Season in France* (Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, 2017), *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2011), and *Journey from Greece* (Tony Gatlif, 2017), consider the perspective of residents in port cities and depict their encounters with migrants and refugees, the attempts at solidarity, and the social and legal barriers to hospitality.

The third and fourth chapters explore the intersections of tourism with migration to investigate the overlapping zones between free mobility within the EU (one of the founding principles of the European project), the excluding barriers of the Schengen area, and the rigorously controlled external borders of *Fortress Europe*. Chapter 3 introduces a specific typology of cinematic travel labelled "touring cinema", that is, "a variant of tourism that frequently overlaps with other types of mobility" (99). Through the lens of touring cinema and of films partially set in airports, including *Orly* (Angela Schanelec, 2010), *One Day in Europe* (Hannes Stöhr, 2005) and *L'Italien* (Olivier Baroux, 2010), Gott brings to light the relationships between the representation of mobility and the flexibility of transnational networks related to financing, production and distribution. In Chapter 4, Italian-French co-productions such as *Eden Is West* (Costa-Gavras, 2009), *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialesi, 2011) and *Mediterranea* (Jonas Carpignano, 2015) reconstruct the emotional and social dynamics—from fear to first-aid and labour exploitation—that connect tourists on Italian and Greek shores, the migrants landing on those same shores and the everyday life of the locals.

TV series, thanks to their growing popularity and to the emergence of a contemporary focus, have become a useful tool for mapping the geographical and cognitive coordinates of the European space and for enabling the audience to position themselves within it. With this in mind,

the last chapter is devoted to European border series, organised into three macro-categories: networked borders such as the Norwegian *Occupied* (Arte, TV2, 2015-2020) and the already mentioned *The Tunnel*; forested borderlands such as the Polish *Wataha* (HBO Europe, 2014) and *Capitani* (RTL Télé Lëtzebuerg, Netflix, 2019); and migration-focused narratives such as the miniseries *Eden* (Arte, 2019).

Despite the European *obsession* with creating borders, the wealth of examples contained in *Screen Borders* testify to how “the very act of making a film or series about a borderline transforms it into a potential borderland, a site of dialogue [...]” (197). Gott’s book provides critical and theoretical tools to scrutinise what we see on the screens and what lies behind them, unmask the stereotypes that promote the proliferation of borders, and identify possible alternative strategies.

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# Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses

Edited by Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten, and Hanna Prenzel

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The 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the European *Barometric Study on Poverty and Economic Precariousness* tells us that, in 2023, more than one in four Europeans grapples with precarious financial situations. To be specific, 29 percent of the 10,000 respondents included in the survey characterized their financial status as precarious. Conversely, according to the 2023 Oxfam report, *Survival of the Richest*, the wealthiest one percent globally holds nearly two-thirds of all wealth generated since 2020. In fact, in the past decade, the fortune of billionaires has almost doubled, while the combined wealth of the poorest 50 percent of the world's population has only grown by a quarter. On top of that, figures like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg constantly imprint their omnipresence on our daily existence. We know what they wear, we know their convictions, their political stances, we read about what they think, what they work for, what they care for, and who they love. Their influence is as inescapable as it is ever-present, shaping our world, both figuratively and literally.

Even though we might encounter the laborers of the precariat on a daily basis, they remain mostly *invisible* to us. Research shows "there is a real danger" (Zaniello 2020, x) to this invisibility, as "[n]onrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning

someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (Taylor 1994, 25). One way of fighting this oppressing invisibility is simply by telling the stories of people that live precariously. However, while we may find ourselves in an era characterized by a multiplicity of images and audiovisual narratives, this does not necessarily equate to diversity in the stories told and the representation of various voices within them.

Should there be any lingering skepticism regarding the role that cinema can assume in an era marked by the deepening socioeconomic disparity and the burgeoning experience of precarity, the open access volume *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses* (2022) stands as a compelling answer to this question. Already in the volume's introduction, Guido Kirsten advocates for a broader understanding of the concept of "cinema of precarity", expanding it to encompass "the whole of the corpus of filmic works that centrally engage with aspects of precarity in society" (15). By doing so, Kirsten emphasizes the significance of examining the cinema of precarity across its diverse formal and thematic dimensions while disassociating it from the notion of "auteur cinema", thereby opening the concept to include mainstream or popular European cinema as well. A welcome and possibly more inclusive perspective, not

in the least because much research on cinema audiences shows that auteur cinema tends to be predominantly consumed by audiences from middle and upper-class backgrounds.

The editors consciously chose to not focus on a sociological micro analysis of the precarious working conditions in European film sectors, instead prioritizing a cultural studies approach. Comprising 19 chapters contributed by various authors, each addressing a specific country or region, the volume unravels the concept of precarity in cinema, encompassing analyses of both fiction and documentary films, with some delving into more experimental forms and television series. Following Kirsten's call, the book examines the audiovisual portrayal of precarity in Europe from diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. Moreover, the editors clearly emphasized the importance of accentuating diversity within European cinema, as they endeavored to have authors scrutinize a wide array of countries and regions across the European mainland. Indeed, the volume delves into films spanning from Belgium to Turkey, and from Slovakia to the UK. Together, they offer novel insights into the multifaceted portrayal of these socioeconomic issues, underpinned by their unique socio-cultural, historical, and political backgrounds. Separately, each contribution, in one way or another, illuminates how films are able to depict various facets of precarity – think of issues related to social exclusion, precarious labor conditions, economic uncertainty, housing, migration, gender, and ethnicity. Several authors also explore the diverse political implications conveyed by these films, ranging from moralism and individualism to solidarity and resistance. *Grosso modo*, the volume looks into two overarching queries that are respectively related to the concepts of representation and discourse.

First, the editors put forward that in the realm of contemporary European cinema, the portrayal of precarity is intrinsically linked to the creation of particular visual systems. Doing so, they prompt an investigation into the identities represented

as precarious in the films under analysis and the visual attributes and characteristics ascribed to them. As such, they equally raise the question of whether we are witnessing the emergence of novel iconographies distinct from the traditional imagery associated with “classical” poverty. Looking at this in the context of contemporary Greek cinema since 2007-2008, Ursula-Helen Kassaveti contends that there is a discernible transition towards the portrayal of precarity. The author shows how Greek films have increasingly focused on the diversity and intensity of manifestations of precariousness within Greek society, departing from traditional modes of cinematic storytelling. Films like *45m2* (Stratos Tzitzis, 2010) or *Standing Aside, Watching* (Yorgos Servetas, 2013) challenge conventional resolutions, opting for open endings while transcending the link between precarity and specific social or cultural backgrounds. They employ a realistic visual style, often with handheld camera work, highlighting the authentic portrayal of characters and their environments. Importantly, these films equally engage with the underlying influence of the neoliberal framework that exacerbates precarity, suggesting the potential for transformative agency within the precariat.

The latter brings us to the second objective of this volume, as the editors also wanted the contributors to look into the persuasive intentions and target audiences of these films, as well as into the perspective from which their implicit or explicit arguments are made. Which deliberate or inadvertent omissions contribute to the nuanced portrayal of the subject matter, and, beyond that, how do these films actively engage with other audiovisual texts, contributing to the ongoing discourse within the broader public sphere. This second focus can be clearly found in Ewa Mazierska's chapter on the representation of precarity in post-communist Polish cinema. Central to her analysis is the premise that cinema serves as a conduit for engaging with social and political realities, albeit not by mirroring these

realities directly. Instead, filmmakers always strategically accentuate or conceal specific facets of the narrative. Mazierska argues that the cinematic portrayal of poverty frequently leans towards strategies involving either masking, amplification, or dramatic representation. This inclination arises from the perception that an unadorned, straightforward depiction of poverty is considered unremarkable and could cast an unfavorable light on the government or the societal elites. Mazierska's research reveals that distinct approaches have been adopted in various historical epochs to convey the ordeals associated with poverty and precarity.

After reading this book, one is convinced that the power of cinema is not merely confined to

the screen but extends to the broader realm of socio-political discourse. The interplay between recognition and misrecognition, as well as between representation and misrepresentation (or even non-representation), serves as a reminder of cinema's role as a powerful force in reshaping our understanding of the human experience and the imperative of addressing the complex challenges that accompany life in precarious situations. In the cinematic realm, stories untold become the catalysts for change, forging new paths to understanding, empathy, and, ultimately, action.

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Jussi Parikka

# Operational Images: From the Visual to the Invisual

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023, pp. 296

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Once upon a time, there was the operational image. We all remember Harun Farocki's epochal essay and video essay (2003) on the filming of the bombing of Baghdad from the warheads of Cruise missiles during the first Gulf War. According to Farocki, that was the moment when the history of technical images swerved sharply, taking a path that seemed completely new at the time: from being tools for representing the world, digital images enhanced by algorithms became agents that modified it by intervening on reality, in that case with destructive results. In the years that followed, much emphasis was placed on this new condition of the image, starting with two landmarks of Farockian studies: the intervention of the artist Trevor Paglen, who announced a future in which images would increasingly be created by machines for other machines, without passing through the eyes of humans (2014), and the contribution of the leading Farocki scholar Volker Pantenburg (2017), who, while considering the iconic appearance of operational images to be misleading (simply "a gesture of courtesy extended by the machine" to humans), relaunched what Farocki originally conceived of as an archaeology: operational images do not originate with the digital turn, Pantenburg wrote, they have a much longer genealogy that needs to be reconstructed.

This need is met by Jussi Parikka's new volume, which stems from the project "Operational Images and Visual Culture", hosted by the Department of Photography at FAMU at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. *Operational Images: From the Visual to the Invisual* is an extraordinary map of the present that revolves around the status of algorithmic images, their philosophical potential, and their economic and political role. This book brings together many of the key objects of contemporary research, uniting them under a single heading, but above all it has the merit of elaborating the necessary conceptual tools with which to analyse them. From astronomical images to driverless cars, from gesture recognition to predictive algorithms, from smart urbanism to Lidar as the basis of a new filmic and photographic imaginary, from contemporary satellite Earth observation techniques to geolocation: all are part of the current data economy that finds its keystone in the operational invisibility.

Operationality, operativity: Parikka puts this important concept to the test in the present, making it work and fully demonstrating its heuristic value. To operationalise is not to produce or create, one reads, but to mediate, to connect, to take from one level to another, to move, to dislocate, to mobilise, to model: for

example, to connect the symbolic and the real, the present and the future, the visible and the invisible, the abstract and the concrete. It is through these connective acts that images can now be recognised as a fundamental link in our political economy, provided they cease to be thought of as static, defined objects with a specific existence and a precise spatio-temporal location. Images do not have to be seen through the “embodied perceptual system of the human being”, the author writes, and yet it would also be wrong to reduce them to mere data, to see them as a stream of numbers that stops for a moment on some support and then starts flowing again. The notion of support is no longer valid, and it seems that Parikka contrasts it with that of platform, the place where data is processed and *formatted* (another crucial word in the book). The “platform as a central feature of capitalism, political geography, and digital culture”, a place where we create access to the world, establish ways of knowing it by creating diagrams of meaning (i.e. abstract skeletons of the visible/knowable), maps by which we orient ourselves, separate things, create orders of importance.

What one learns from the book, then, is that the iconic (in a generic sense) aspect (if any) of today’s technical images is certainly less important than the scaffolding that supports them, the infrastructures that bring them up to date, those platforms on which old photographic or video recordings crumble apart and reassemble, rewrite and reorganise themselves, eventually returning to resemble what they were but after an irreversible leap in degree and quality.

Parikka succeeds in looking at the phenomena he describes from above, and from this angle he unifies a subject that appears very heterogeneous and fragmented at close range. But despite this meta-reflexive character, the book draws you in with its lucid traversals, animated more by great political and philosophical questions than by the need for specific in-depth study. The reader reflects on the idea of algorithmic image making as an act of the second degree, as an

intervention on very different signals gathered by instruments that do not necessarily involve an optic and a lens that simulates human vision. And it turns out that this is nothing new, just think of certain 19th-century machines for processing light, such as the Fraunhofer spectrometer, invented in 1810 and already capable of making non-representational “observations”. Within this archaeological media path, Parikka introduces a major theme of contemporary visual culture studies, namely the current exploitation of the entire electromagnetic spectrum for the purpose of image-making. What is the point of this broadening of the field of operation, this extensive capitalisation of invisible light, once of interest only to astrophysicists? The fact is that the metric, or photogrammetric, function of photography—if it is still to be retained as a reference image—has finally prevailed. The mathematisation of the image goes back to perspective, writes Parikka, “a system for compressing data on a flat surface”, but when Meydenbauer’s photogrammetry is grafted onto this Renaissance technique, the relationship between data and the senses is clearly revealed, as already explained in 1988 by Farocki in his masterpiece (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*).

The resumption of this very important point of Farocki’s reflection—which we fully understand more than thirty years after Farocki’s first insight—also becomes for the reader an exercise in looking. One finally accepts that also a classical photograph, full of evidence, can be seen simply in its lines of force, which we can perceive as the machine does, as a “tableau of information”, a surface of measures, a drawing of recognisable relations. With this exercise of the gaze, the metric question, central to studies of science and photography (such as those by Kelley Wilder), becomes much more than a theory. In fact, this exercise has a political potential, since it is an operation carried out on the symbolic, but all outstretched towards the real. By translating the world into numerical ratios, the image becomes a force that bends the field of perception and

ultimately of power in a certain direction. By transforming seeing into counting, into grasping the statistical distribution of the properties of objects in order to fix it and circulate them, one influences the real world, and also *formats* the environment, as Parikka writes. Humans today are immersed in environments created by this endless series of “centres of calculation” that disseminate patterns and instructions, and it is their deeper logic that we urgently need to confront.

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PROJECTS  
ABSTRACTS





# Horizon 2020

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

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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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# ABSTRACT PRIN 2017

## Italian Na(rra)tives: The International Circulation of “Brand Italy” in the Media

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*Italian Na(rra)tives* examines a series of contemporary Italian audio-visual and literary products that have gained success through international circulation, and the cultural impact of the images and models of “Italianness” that they promote. Its chronological framework is from 2000 to 2017 and it contextualizes the object of study in relation to contemporary changes in the cultural industries, following advances in digital technology and the corroboration of convergent culture. It focuses on a sample of cultural products that have been selected according to the parameters of their international circulation within this time span.

The project has been realized through the following stages of analysis:

- 1) the sampling and classification of cultural products;
- 2) content analysis of the narrative components and forms of representation. This textual analysis employs various methodological tools, the most important of which are: a) narratology, both in its classical use, i.e. the morphological study of narrative texts, and in its more recent developments in cognitive psychology and

neuroscience; b) rhetorical analysis intended in the broadest sense, taking into account argumentation theory, the study of enunciation, and its appropriation in Critical Discourse Analysis; and c) the prevalently thematic critical approach of Cultural Studies;

- 3) analysis of the translation/adaptation strategies of cultural products in various national contexts, and of curation, production and distribution processes at national and international levels;

- 4) analysis of the branding and celebrification strategies of products and characters related to the TV series, films and literary texts in the sample;

- 5) analysis of the cultural impact of the case studies at national and international levels. This phase employs various methodological tools. Principally this includes: a) reception studies, to investigate critical responses to these products and the tendencies through which they are inscribed in the public sphere, generating debates and other reactions in the media; b) audience studies and the ethnography of consumption, to study the responses of specific audiences to the cultural products.

Overall, this project is made innovative by its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates the analysis of texts and their fruition with the study of the cultural industries and their structures. This approach is increasingly urgent in view of today's globalized media system, yet it has been only partially employed in previous scholarship.

In terms of the academic impact of this project, the study of both the cultural influence of Italian media products in various nations and the ways in which images of Italianness circulate abroad: 1) provide a systematic perspective on transmedia and at times global processes, revealing their formation at various levels (in terms of production, text, politics and consumption); 2) provide national cultural institutions with "nation branding" models in the context of the media, therefore helping to develop protocols to reinforce Italian cultural production in that area; 3) improve awareness in the public organizations and national agencies that promote the Italian cultural industry abroad, and of European policies relating to cultural diplomacy.

The project's outputs include a series of collective publications, the organization of thematic conferences and seminars, and public meetings with authors and industry professionals.



# ABSTRACT PRIN 2017

## DaMA – Drawing a Map of Italian Actresses in Writing

Led by the University of Sassari (Principal Investigator Lucia Cardone), it involves the University of Catania (Research Unit Leader: Maria Rizzarelli) and the University of Napoli Federico II (Research Unit Leader: Maria Rizzarelli).

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As Stardom studies have shown (Amossy 1986, Dyer 1979), from their origins and up to the present day, film stars have engaged in self-narratives, through autobiographies, public diaries, columns in magazines and newspapers to define their *star persona*. Yet, they also engaged in proper literary practice by publishing novels, poems, memoir stories. What they have produced is a wide archipelago of writings almost completely overlooked or misrecognized by both Film Studies and Literary Studies. *DaMA – Drawing a Map of Italian Actresses in Writing*—aims at exploring the writing production of Italian actresses, by drawing on transdisciplinary methodologies and key research areas as Stardom and Performance Studies, Film Studies, Comparative Literature, Celebrities Studies, Women's and Gender Studies. DaMA has accomplished, in its three years research, an initial analysis and mapping of the varied forms of writing produced by Italian actresses which define the corpus—so far composed of about 100 texts, and still in the process of becoming—of what Maria Rizzarelli has called “divagrafie” [divagraphs] (2021).

The research work has been developed in three phases: the recognition and retrieval of texts produced by Italian actresses; their

analysis through interdisciplinary approaches; their classification and mapping through a digital platform which will be available in 2024. The open access web platform, which also explores Digital Humanities tools, will allow to have an overall view of the corpus and to access content selected according to a taxonomic classification that reflects the main themes emerged: from meta-reflections on acting to the phenomenology of women emancipation, from the practices of self-performance to the intersections with historical events, places, and persons (like writers, film directors, artists, producers).

By involving three Research Units, this study has been articulated into different approaches and analysis. The unit of Sassari explored the Italian “divagrafie” corpus in relation to the studies on stardom and performance, and the studies on women's self-narration. The autobiographies of the actresses have been the main objects of investigation, namely in the form of publications published in volume which blend stories of life and cinema with a first-person narration (Cardone 2023; Piana 2023; Simi 2021).

The Research Unit of the University of Catania focused specifically on the literary dimension of “divagrafie”, by building a theoretical approach on textual typologies and critical categories on

the side of fiction writing. The unit has mainly aimed at developing a theoretical reflection on the "double talent" concept (Cometa 2014) trying to extend this category, formulated in the field of visual culture studies, to the relationship between literature and performance so to verify its hermeneutical fertility (Pontillo 2021, 2020,2021; Rizzarelli 2021).

The Research Unit of the University of Naples Federico II investigated the most contemporary scenario, with particular attention to the last decades, by analysing the different types of actresses' production, from publications in volume up to the fluid writings of social networks (Masecchia 2020; Prospero 2023; Tralli 2023).

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# ABSTRACT PRIN 2017

## Modes, Memories and Cultures of Italian Film Production 1949-1976

The PRIN-funded "[Modes, Memories and Cultures of Italian Film Production 1949-1976](https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/22508)" (MMC4976) project is a collaborative research led by the Udine University (Principal Investigator: prof. Mariapia Comand) and carried out by scholars from six universities (IULM in Milan, Parma, Roma Tre, Cagliari and eCampus). It partners with institutions in the field of film industry (AGIS Triveneto, ANICA) and preservation (Archivio Storico Istituto Luce, Archivio Centrale di Stato, Biblioteca "Luigi Chiarini" CSC Rome, Cineteca "Renzo Renzi", Bologna).

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The project's aim is to detect the distinctive socio-economic and cultural features that shaped the Italian production system from the post-WWII period to the mid-1970s. Such a wide time span is sub-divided in three, shorter periods: 1949-54 (for the increase in film production after "Andreotti's law" to the first of Italian cinema's cyclical crises); 1958-63 (a still flourishing phase during national government's political shift); 1971-76 (the last growing stage before the liberalization of television frequencies). The methodological framework intertwines a long-standing tradition in political-economic studies on the modes of film production with the more recent interest in professional communities' cultural stances. The first line of inquiry is aimed at reconstructing how the system worked on a macro-level, paying attention to the institutional features and to the corporate and political strategies; the second one takes a close look at the professional figures employed in the organizational and craft dimensions of filmmaking, enlightening the

discursive (self)representations of specific trade communities.

In line with this multi-sided approach, the research has considered different orders of historical source-materials: institutional papers on ANICA's activities preserved in the Oppido Lucano Film Archive were re-organized and inventoried; datasets were extracted from the cataloguing of paperworks on the co-production of feature films preserved at the Archivio Centrale di Stato in Rome; an extensive survey on audiovisual sources preserved by public television (RAI) and non-fiction film archives (Luce, Aamood) was completed; the memoirs of several film industry laborers or their heirs' were captured on camera; finally, entire collections of Italian trade press journals (*Araldo dello spettacolo*, *Cinemundus*, *Cinespettacolo*, *Giornale dello spettacolo*, *Cineproduzione*, *Cinema d'oggi* and *Fiera del cinema among others*) were digitized and made available for consultation as OCR-readable files from a digital

Catalogue.

To date, the MMC4976 project has promoted several dissemination activities, including an on-line [round table \(Udine, March 2021\)](#) and two conferences on the topics of ["out-of-standard" \("fuori norma"\) production practices \(Rome, November 2022\)](#) and on the [representation of the film producer \(Milan, April 2023\)](#). The research group also curated two film retrospectives on the "alternative and independent modes of production", hosted by the [Palladium \(November-December 2022, Rome\)](#) and the [Sergio Amidei](#) film festivals (July 2023).

Reflections on sources, methods and infrastructures were also shared in two special issues of *L'Avventura* journal, devoted to production archives (Comand and Venturini, eds. 2021) and to the trade press (Di Chiara and Dotto, eds., 2023). Marsilio's book series "Retrosцена" was inaugurated precisely to host the project's outcomes: it already counts three monographic volumes, on Franco Cristaldi as a creative producer (Corsi 2021), on the exchanges between the film and publishing industry (Zanco 2022) and to trade organizations for sponsored film producers (Dotto 2022). Edited collections

on the cultures of Italian film production in the 1960s (Giordana and Ugenti), on out-of standard production practices (Zagarrio and Uva), on the public representation of the film producer (Farinotti, Gipponi and Grizzaffi) are expected by 2024. An international collection on European film policies (Di Chiara ed.) is also in its working phase.

Two major outcomes are to be released the end of the project: the first one is a documentary short film (provisionally entitled *Made in Italy*) directed by Vito Zagarrio, featuring the witnesses gathered while interviewing (former) professionals in film production and their heirs. The second one is an online Atlas of Film Production: the data gathered from ANICA and ACS archives on the personalities (production managers and inspectors, general managers) and on the geographies (studios, locations) of film production will be elaborated through data visualization and visual storytelling tools, to make historical knowledge of the Italian Film Industry available to wider audiences of scholars and enthusiasts. For more details: <https://cineproduzione.uniud.it>.

## REFERENCE LIST

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# ABSTRACT PRIN 2017

## Free-range chicken. Cinema and the New Culture of Consumption in Italy (1950-1973)

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The research project PRIN 2017 *Free-range chicken. Cinema and the New Culture of Consumption in Italy* (1950-1973) questioned the role that cinema played in the processes of Italy's modernization, with a particular reference to the diffusion of the new culture of consumption during the so-called "golden age of capitalism", (1950-1973). We intend "cinema" as an institution, that is, as the sum of industrial processes of film production, distribution and exhibition, rooted in a specific historical context. With the notion of "consumer culture" we address the ways in which individuals and families have experienced and processed the daily exposure to the distinctive consumer goods typical of Western societies during the second half of the 20th century. This object of study has been traditionally neglected by film scholars, undoubtedly due to the problematic identification of suitable sources, methodologies and tools for the extensive investigation of such a culturally significant theme. In terms of periodization, the

project has taken into account the period of time defined by Eric Hobsbawm as "the golden age of capitalism"; this choice is motivated by two main reasons. First of all, the nature and structure of consumption gradually changed in Italy during that time, due to the massive imports of American goods and cultural products, the significant increase of the national and per capita incomes, and the rapid increase of the youth population. In the context of a considerable expansion of consumption during the 1950s and 1960s, food expenses decreased for the first time to under half of the available resources, while other kinds of expenses (transport, communication and culture, hygiene and health, and durable goods) started to increase. Secondly, in the same period, the media system has undergone a progressive process of "commercialization", that is, the quantity, quality, and social visibility of consumer goods offered by advertising increased significantly. Long before reaching its full potential in the context of private broadcasting—as a consequence of

the so-called “air deregulation” of the second half of the 1970s—a varied and impressive materialist imagination spread transversally in Italian society in proportion to the increase of advertising investments in the press, national TV and radio broadcasting, billboards, and cinematic spaces.

The project followed three different perspectives. In the first place, we have examined the ways in which cinema has made consumer goods a central element of film narrative, staging their narrativisation through different (often biased) articulations. Secondly, we have investigated the extent to which cinema was explicitly thematized within the national public debate that arose at that time around the incipient phenomenon of mass consumption. Thirdly, we have explored how cinema was strategically used in the context of advertising campaigns envisioned by the popular illustrated press. In this respect, each team involved examined a large amount of comparable materials, according to their respective outlooks, starting from the exploration of a wide range of Italian periodicals published in the same period, including film magazines (such as *Cinema Nuovo*), popular illustrated magazines (such as *Oggi*), political and cultural magazines (such as *L'Espresso*), women's magazines (such as *Annabella*), and teen and children's magazines (such as *Big* and *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*).

The team selected materials thematizing the relationship between cinema and consumption: documents of different editorial typology—ranging from magazine covers to photo-text, from letters to advertising, from articles to film reviews—have been selected, photographed and had their metadata recorded in order to aggregate both bibliographical references and relevant information for the researchers to locate the resource. This series of reflections has been developed within the framework of a database of digitized sources populated by the research project group and specifically developed in accordance with the most advanced

digital humanities standards. It is accessible, by registration, through the official website of PRIN (<https://ilpolloruspante.unime.it>). In addition to this research product, the project output includes the publication of a monographic journal issue (“Il cinema e la nuova cultura dei consumi in Italia: discorsi, pubblicità, rappresentazioni”, *L'avventura. International Journal of Italian Film and Media Landscape*, ns 2022), along with a series of conference, seminar and workshop presentations, and a forthcoming collection of volumes in the series “Cinema, media and consumption” to be published by Marsilio.



## Contributors / Collaborateurs

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