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# Mise au Point

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Le cinéma européen et les langues

## ImpersoNations: National Cinema, Historical Imaginaries and New Cinema Europe

Thomas Elsaesser

Traduction(s) :

« ImpersoNations » : cinéma national, imaginaires historiques et nouveau cinéma européen

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### Résumés

Français English

The linguistic diversity of Europe is an important part of its cultural wealth. What are the advantages or disadvantages of this wide spectrum of languages? When films are shown in different countries they are often dubbed. Yet, good acting requires a symbiosis between the body and gestures, the voice and intonation. As a result, movie enthusiasts want films produced in their language. Like sound, which becomes more and more important when we watch a film, the language, the accent, the pitch and the tone of the voice make up the whole image and they prove to be indispensable to understanding the movie. This article will examine from a larger historical and conceptual context the complicated relationship between an “unbridgeable frontier” and an “essential element.” This text will also question how to develop a new analysis of the cultural wealth of the recent European films by putting forward the notion of a post-national cinema.

### Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés** : cinéma européen, cinéma post-national, médias, nation, constructivisme

**Keywords** : european cinema, post-national cinema, media, nation, constructivism

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## Introduction

- 1 As the European Union is going through one of its more serious moments of crisis and self-doubt, caused – we are made to believe – by the manipulations of the international financial markets and the gap between the provisions of the welfare state and national governments' ability to raise the revenue to pay for them, it is worth re-assessing the present state of one of its other currencies, besides the besieged Euro: the cultural capital inherent in Europe's linguistic diversity. While some politicians – mostly on the right – either demand their old currency back (the Dutch gilder, the Deutschmark, the Peseta or the Drachme), or rejoice in never having adopted the Euro (Britain, Denmark), a serious debate about a single common language has never been on the agenda. Perhaps this is so, because the 'gold standard', Esperanto and default value in Europe has been the English language all along. Its tacit presence may indeed be one of the main reasons why the national languages can still flourish the way they do, as a mixture of necessity and luxury, rather like the health insurance, education and unemployment benefits that make up the European welfare state.
- 2 In the field of cinema, the assets and pitfalls of having so many different languages are more difficult to calculate. On the one hand, it is true that language has acted as a barrier when it comes to creating a single market for films within Europe. Apart from the categories of 'art cinema' and 'festival films', popular films rarely travel across linguistic borders, and where they do – as in the case of imported Hollywood fare – they are usually dubbed (synchronized): a deeply entrenched habit in Germany, Italy and a few other countries that make going to the cinema attending a ventriloquized pantomime and submitting to aural torture. On the other hand, precisely because of the way that good acting in the cinema represents a special symbiosis of body, gesture, voice and intonation, those who love the cinema cannot do without films in their original language: as sound has become more and more crucial in our experience of cinema, so has language, accent, grain and timbre of the voice: the indispensable 'supplement' to the image that actually tells us what the 'image' is. In what follows I want to put this paradox of the un-crossable barrier and the un-missable supplement into a wider context, both historically and conceptually.

## Media, Nation, State: Another Look at the Discourses

- 3 The sometimes open, sometimes tacit and implicit bi- or tri-lingualism of most educated Europeans today is, generally speaking, a huge asset, compared to the either proudly flaunted or insincerely regretted mono-lingualism of many of the English-speaking countries. It shows double occupancy in one of its more empowering modes, and feeds in interesting ways into the impossible possibilities of European cinema, since it allows something that objectively does not exist to flourish and proliferate nonetheless. For, considered as a subject taught in academic film studies, European cinema is unproblematic: the impossibility of defining its "essence" has itself been institutionalized and become something of a fixed trope of discourse. As a consequence, despite or because of the difficulties of deciding what European cinema is, a growing number of books are being edited and published on the topic since the early 1990s, servicing the needs of the curriculum. Many opt for a pragmatic approach; they either treat Europe as an accumulation of national cinemas, with each getting its turn, or they highlight outstanding authors standing in for the nation and sometimes even for the entirety of a country's film production and filmmaking. What is notable is that the majority of these books originate from Britain, a country whose relation to "Europe" in matters of cinema at once reflects and contradicts its population's widely shared Euro-skeptic political stance. Often quick to draw a line between herself and the "isolated" continent, Britain has nonetheless been more successful than any other European country in penetrating this continent with its films. Titles like *FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*, *SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE*, *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*, *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*, the films of Ken Loach or Mike Leigh, not to mention the James Bond films, Mr Bean or Monty Python are all familiar to audiences in Germany,

<sup>1</sup> Melis Behlil, *Hollywood and its Foreign Directors* (Ph.D. thesis, Amsterdam University, 2007).

France, Italy and elsewhere. Peter Greenaway's work is more welcome in Germany or the Netherlands than it is appreciated in his own country, while Derek Jarman, Isaak Julien and Sally Potter have solid followings in European avant-garde and art worlds. Neither France nor Italy are Britain's competitors, but only Hollywood, where many of Britain's most gifted directors have indeed sought access and found success (Ridley and Tony Scott, Adrian Lyne, Alan Parker and Mike Figgis, Christopher Nolan, Stephen Daldry, to name but the most obvious). The linguistic proximity helps, and British actors – often theatre-trained – have been among the export assets the country has invested in Hollywood (and therefore made internationally known) ever since the coming of sound. But producers, directors of photography, sound technicians and other film specialists have also made their way to Hollywood, increasingly so since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

- 4 British cinema thus has always been facing the United States, while its back, so to speak, was turned to Europe. So, why this interest in European cinema? First of all, it responds to a dilemma, internal to universities, whose departments of modern languages have been under threat. From the mid-1980s onwards, their mainly literature-based language studies of French, Italian, Spanish or German failed to enroll student in sufficient numbers. In many universities the choice was a stark one: either close down departments altogether, or amalgamate them into European studies, and try to attract new students by drawing on cultural studies, media studies and film studies, rather than relying solely on literary authors and texts of similarly canonical authority. Yet the debate about national cinema, and therefore also the thinking behind the books on European cinema, continues a long tradition in Britain. Rather than originating only in the hard-pressed areas of the humanities, the European dimension has accompanied the establishment of film studies in British universities since the 1970s. As a question about what is typical or specific about a nation's cinema, and its obverse: "what is the function of cinema in articulating nationhood and fostering the sense of belonging?" The debate owes its productive vitality in Britain to a conjuncture that could be called the "interference history" between film studies, television studies and cultural studies. Several phases and stages can be identified in this history, and they need to be recapitulated, if one is to understand what is at stake also in any substantive move from national cinema to what I am calling "New Cinema Europe," and to appreciate what new knowledge this move can be expected to produce. Paradoxically, it may have been the very fact that by the mid-1990s the discussion around national cinema had – depending on one's view – hardened into dogma or reached a generally accepted consensus around a particular set of arguments that encouraged the desire to conceptualize the field differently, or at the very least to signal such a need.

## National Cinema: Essentialism vs. Constructivism

- 5 The first signs of a renewed debate around national cinema in Britain took place in the early 1980s, on the fringes of emerging film studies, as part of a polemic about the relation between two kinds of internationalism: that of Hollywood and its universalizing appeal, and that of a counter-cinema avant-garde, opposed to Hollywood, but also thinking of itself as not bound by the nation or national cinema, especially not by "British cinema." At that point the problem of nationality played a minor role within academic film studies, compared to the question of authorship and genre, semiology, the psychoanalytic-linguistic turn in film theory, and the rise of cine-feminism. With the shift from classical film studies to cultural studies, however, the idea of the "nation" once more became a focus of critical framing, almost on a par with class and gender. Broadly speaking, the term "national cinema" thus fed on oppositional energies derived from the avant-garde and the new waves, in parallel to the more sociological attempts to critically identify what was typical about domestic mainstream cinema and the ideology of its narratives. Yet it also responded to the changing function of cinema and television, each "addressing" their audience as belonging to the "nation." These were potentially contradictory agendas, and for a time it was the contradictions that marked the vitality of the debate.
- 6 Cultural studies, for instance, took a resolutely constructivist approach to analyzing the nation as "produced" by television, just as it did with respect to gender or race. But from a historical perspective, the classic analyses of national cinemas were on the whole "essentialist," meaning that they looked

<sup>2</sup> See Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies a Psychological Study* (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press (...)

to the cinema, its narratives, iconography or recurring motifs with the expectation that they could reveal something unique or specific about a country's values and beliefs, at once more authentic and more symptomatically than in other art forms or aspects of (popular) culture. It makes Siegfried Kracauer's study of the cinema of the Weimar Republic, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) the founding text for such a study of national cinema. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, his blend of sociology, group psychology, and metropolitan-modernist fieldwork ethnography influenced many studies that purported to investigate the "national" character of a country's cinema, and it yielded some remarkable books on the sociology of cinema, but it also influenced – more indirectly – Donald Richie's volumes on Japanese Cinema or Raymond Durgant's *A Mirror for England*. One could call this the period when *national cinema* connoted a nation's *unconscious deep-structure*, the reading of which gave insights about secret fantasies, political pressure points, collective wishes and anxieties. The danger of this approach was not only essentialism regarding the concept of national identity: it also risked being tautological, insofar as only those films tended to be selected as typical of a national cinema which confirm the pre-established profile. Grounded in sociology, such studies used the cinema for the distillation of national stereotypes or significant symbolic configurations, such as the father-son relations in German cinema, contrasted with the father-daughter relationships of French cinema.<sup>2</sup> Narratives of national cinema in this sense pre-date the European *nouvelles vagues*, and besides Kracauer and Durgant, one could name Edgar Morin and Pierre Sorlin in France, or the social anthropologists Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites in the US. From within film studies, these writings stand apart from the aesthetics of "auteur cinema," indeed they are almost diametrically opposed to them, which may be one of the reasons "national cinema" returned on the agenda, when the author as auteur-artist began to be deconstructed in the 1990s, and cinema was seen as a differently generated social text, not cohering around the director.

- 7 Three essays in the early 1980s re-launched the debate around national cinema in Britain and the US, broadly in the context of so-called "revisionist film history." The first was by Ed Buscombe, "Film History and the Idea of a National Cinema" (1981), the second was my "Film History: Weimar Cinema and Visual Pleasure" (1982), and the third was Philip Rosen's "History, Textuality, Narration," from 1984.<sup>3</sup> Ed Buscombe's short essay from 1981 is still a landmark in the debate. It addressed the problems of British cinema vis-à-vis Hollywood and documented the initiatives taken by the film industry and a succession of Britain's top producers (A. Korda, J.A. Rank and L. Grade) to break into the US market between the 1940s and 1960s. But Buscombe also made clear his own dissatisfaction with the anti-British, anti-national cinema stance taken by the theoretical journal *Screen*. Significantly, perhaps, his essay was first published in the *Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, more sympathetic to Lukacsian Marxism and Lucien Goldman's "genetic" structuralism than to Althusser and Lacan. Phil Rosen's essay from 1984 compared Kracauer's assumptions about national cinema with those of Noel Burch, who had just published a major study on another national cinema, that of Japan, using formal criteria and theoretical concepts quite different from those of Kracauer. Rosen is resolutely constructivist, asking whether it was textual coherence that allowed the national audience to (mis-)perceive an image of itself in the cinema, or on the contrary, if it was the gaps and fissures of the text that were most telling about the nation and its fantasies of identity.

- 8 These essays (to which one should add a polemical note by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith)<sup>4</sup> are in a way indicative of the directions that the national cinema debate in Britain was to take in the following decade. But before sketching this trajectory, it should be noted that a key moment in consolidating the constructivist paradigm was the appearance of a book that seemed to speak to a central doubt, before this doubt was even fully conscious, namely, how decisive finally are the media in soliciting one's identification with the nation and in shaping a country's national identity? Are not other social structures (such as the family), geography (the place one comes from), a particular religious faith (Christianity, Islam) or loyalty to a certain shared past (national history) far more significant? Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* came to the rescue, offering at once empirical evidence, a historical precedent, and an elegantly formulated synthesis of traditional anthropological fieldwork and thorough familiarity with Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Anderson's slim book on colonial and postcolonial nation-building and identity formation in what became Indonesia answered the problem, barely posed, about the status of the media in the national identity

<sup>3</sup> Ed Buscombe, "The Idea of National Cinema," *Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, no 9/10, 1981, p. (...)

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "But Do We Need It?," in: Martyn Auty, Nick Roddick (eds.), *British Cinema N* (...)

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1992).

debate, by making a convincing case for constructivism as a method, and by unequivocally giving the media – in Anderson's case, the print media – a crucial role in narrating the nation. Conveniently for scholars, Anderson also emphasized the power of pedagogy (teachers, bureaucrats, people of the word) in fashioning the nation as an imaginary, but nonetheless effective scaffolding of personal and group identity. According to Anderson: "nations" were constructed by intellectuals, journalists, pedagogues, philologists, historians, archivists who were "carefully sewing together dialects, beliefs, folk tales, local antagonisms into the nationalist quilt."<sup>5</sup>

- 9 Ed Buscombe's essay associated the return to the idea of national cinema neither with a discursively constructed national imaginary, nor with post-colonialism. His ostensible starting point was the decline in popularity and relevance of Britain's mainstream popular cinema. He criticized the rather faltering and – according to him – often misdirected efforts to create a British art- and counter-cinema, and instead, pleaded for a more accessible "middlebrow" British cinema that neither went for the lowest common denominator of Britishness (embodied in the *Carry On* comedies) nor for the structuralist-materialist, Brecht-inspired efforts of the British avant-garde movements, identified with the names of Peter Gidal, Steve Dwoskin, Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey. Looking at the British cinema that did become successful internationally from the mid-1980s onwards into the new century – the already mentioned "heritage" genre in the shape of Merchant-Ivory adaptations of Edwardian literature, films based on Shakespeare (his plays and his "life"), costume dramas, filmed Jane Austen novels and Hugh Grant comedies – Buscombe's wish for well-made films seems to have come true, maybe with a vengeance. In between, the debate about the British-ness of British cinema flared up several times more. For instance, it became virulent a few years after Buscombe's piece, when it appeared as if, with *CHARIOTS OF FIRE* winning at the Oscars, and its producer, David Puttnam, embarking on a (brief) career as a Hollywood studio boss, Britain had finally made it into the Hollywood mainstream. This proved an illusion or self-delusion. In 1984, *The Monthly Film Bulletin* commissioned three articles to assess the hangover that followed, with Ray Durnat, Charles Barr, and myself as contributors. Durnat, updating his socio-cultural analyses from *A Mirror for England* once more tried to read, in the manner of a more acerbic and canny Kracauer, the national mood from the films. He detected in 1980s cinema a Thatcherite politics of style and status over substance, and noted how middle-class upward mobility covered itself with a mixture of cynicism and self-irony. Barr pointed out how inextricably British cinema was now tied to television, financially and institutionally as well as in its mode of address, and what the contradictory consequences were of artificially wishing to keep them separate. Focusing on a double perspective – the view from within, and the view from without – my essay tried to test around the British "renaissance" of the 1980s, the paradigm of self and the (significant) other, first elaborated by me around Weimar Cinema and the New German Cinema.
- 10 The idea of a national self-image specific to the cinema and yet with distinct contours in each national media culture is therefore – for better or worse – different from Anderson's imagined communities.<sup>6</sup> If extended beyond the media of print, pedagogy and bureaucracy, and if aimed at "developed" rather than "emerging" nations, Anderson's scheme would be likely to apply to television more than to the cinema. Face to face with US television and a new domestic channel, both the BBC and its commercial counterpart, ITV began addressing the nation differently. No longer playing the nation's schoolmaster, British television found itself at the cusp of not quite knowing whether to address its viewers as part of the national audience (and thus in the mode of civic citizenship), or as members of ever more sharply segmented consumer groups who all happen to live in the same country, but otherwise have different tastes in food and fashion, different sexual preferences, different ethnic backgrounds, faiths and even languages.

<sup>6</sup> See, for an attack on both, the essay by Michael Walsh, "National Cinema, National Imaginary," *Film* (...)

## From National Cinema to Cinema in Europe

- 11 The changing function of television with respect to national self-representation might nonetheless be a useful pointer, when trying to understand the move from national cinema to European cinema. For once one accepts that "European cinema" cannot merely be either the historically conventionalized accumulation of national cinemas (most of which have been in commercial decline since the early 1980s) or the equally conventionalized enumeration of

outstanding directors (however crucial filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, Wim Wenders, Pedro Almodovar, Lars von Trier, Peter Greenaway or Krzysztof Kieslowski are in connoting "Europe," above and beyond their national identity) then the criteria for what is meant by "European" have yet to be found and defined. The question is the one that already stands at the heart of the national cinema debate. How representative are films produced in the various countries of Europe for either the idea of a nation, a state or a continent? Alternatively, what role can the cinema play in furthering social goals or political ideals such as European integration, multi-cultural tolerance and a sense of "European" identity that is supra-national but nonetheless committed to common civic values?

- 12 Philip Schlesinger, for instance, has claimed that the cultural argument so often put forward at GATT or WTO meetings about the need to defend the distinctiveness of European audiovisual production against the demand for free trade and liberalized markets, lacks empirical proof and is short on factual evidence. According to him, it is a fallacy to assume that just because the electronic media – notably television – are ubiquitous, they necessarily have an impact on a population's attitudes and behavior.<sup>7</sup> And yet, the "power of the media" has become such a deeply entrenched notion, when discussing the future of liberal democracies, the existence of a public sphere, multiculturalism, religion or any other issue of social, political or humanitarian concern, that one may wonder whether it is not television that is the barely acknowledged but structuring absence of national cinema, as it loses its representational role. Any future thinking about cinema in Europe would then also have to "face up to" the electronic and digital media, rather than stay "face to face" with the blockbuster, as the constantly invoked "threat" to European cultural identity and national diversity.
- 13 More simply put, privileging (national) television as the interface of European cinema in the 1990s suggests a more modest agenda than that implied by the post-1945 national cinemas of *auteurs* and new waves. But it has the advantage of taking account of the actual nature of film production, even in countries that have or have had a viable indigenous film industry. At least since the 1970s, films in most European countries have been financed by pooling very mixed sources, arranged under diverse co-production agreements, with television playing the key role as both producer and exhibitor of feature films. Channel Four in Britain, ZDF's *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* in Germany,<sup>8</sup> the VPRO in the Netherlands, and Canal Plus in France have nurtured a European cinema in the absence of a national film industry, allowing such television-produced films the chance of a theatrical release before being broadcast. This model, dependent as it was on the existence of either publicly funded television or on commercial broadcasters with a public service or arts programming remit, proved to be both highly successful if one thinks of the films it made possible, and transitional, if looked at from the increasing pressure from ratings that the remnants of public service television came under in the latter half of the decade. As a consequence, all the bodies just named have drastically scaled back their involvement in feature film production in the new century. Film production in Europe has had to re-orient itself, by looking for another economic model. A different structure of financing, production, distribution and exhibition from that obtained during the first phase of the new waves has become the norm in Europe, where national and transnational producers such as Pierre Braunberger, Carlo Ponti were able to finance auteurs' films alongside more directly commercial projects. But the current model also differs from the 'cultural mode of production' as it emerged in the 1970s and 80s, when national governments, especially in Germany and France, substantially funded an auteur cinema either by direct subsidies, prizes and grants, or indirectly, via state-controlled television. The new model, for which one could coin the term 'European post-Fordism', to indicate the salient elements: small-scale production units, co-operating with television as well as commercial partners, and made up of creative teams around a producer and a director (as in the case of Figment Films, founded by Andrew and Kevin Macdonald, who teamed up with Danny Boyle to make *SHALLOW GRAVE* and *TRAINSPOTTING*, or Zentropa, the company founded by Peter Aalbaeck Jensen and Lars von Trier), originated in Britain in the 1980s, with Palace Pictures (Nik Powell, Paul Webster, Steve Woolley and director Neil Jordan)<sup>9</sup> perhaps the best-known of this brand of high-risk ventures. Since then, similar units have emerged around all the major European directors, such as Tom Tykwer (*X-Film Creative Pool*, Berlin), Fatih Akin (*Wüste-Film*, Hamburg) or ex-director Marin Karmitz's *MK2 Productions* in Paris.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Schlesinger, *Media, State and Nation. Political Violence and Collective Identities* (London: (...))

<sup>8</sup> *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* is discussed in a separate essay elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis, see Angus Finney, *The Egos Have Landed: the Rise and Fall of Palace Pictures*, (Lon (...))

## Post-National Cinema Europe?

- 14 While some filmmakers, notably from the countries of Central Europe, often have a very “post-national” attitude to cultural identity, others prefer to reinvent for themselves their cinema as “national,” but such nationalism is highly reflexive, either calculated in order to attract the “eye of the other”, or comparable to the various regional, territorial or ethnic movements, which also claim a distinct cinematic identity in Western Europe.<sup>10</sup> In this respect Hungarian, Bulgarian, or Romanian cinema, along with Basque or Irish cinema is – *mutatis mutandis* – similar to other parts of the world, where the post-colonial period has seen cultural and ethnic identity-politics join forces with nationalism, to assert autonomy and independence, and a return to local values as self-exoticism, in the face of a globalized world.
- 15 This form of retroactive cinematic nationalism would have to be correlated with, but also distinguished from the way the label “national” in the cinema has come back in almost every European country as a form of branding, a marketing tool, signifying the local – maybe here, too, re-inventing the national – for external, i.e. global use. The already mentioned regional or metropolitan labels “Notting Hill” (a popular, ethnically mixed district of London) doubling as film title for a tourist romance, the much-discussed “Scottishness” of *TRAINSPOTTING*, the Berlin-effect of *RUN LOLA RUN*, the feisty, feel-good movies with regional appeal (*THE FULL MONTY*, *BRASSED OFF*, *BILLY ELLIOT*), the “heritage” novel adaptations such as *THE END OF THE AFFAIR*, *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*, *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY* are indicative of this tendency. The films’ signifiers of national, regional or local specificity are clearly not “essentialist” in their assertions of a common identity, however much they toy with nostalgic, parodic or pastiche versions of such an identity. The films have developed formulas that can accommodate various and even contradictory signifiers of nationhood, of regional history or local neighborhood street-credibility, in order to re-launch a region or national stereotype, or to reflect the image that (one assumes) the other has of oneself. To call these processes of re-assignment of the nation “constructed” would equally miss the point, insofar as the films openly display this knowledge of second order reference. More appropriate might be to compare this ironic-nostalgic invocation to the tendency towards auto-ethnography, auto-exoticism or “self-othering” already noted. Compare, for instance, the phrase from Wim Wenders’ *KINGS OF THE ROAD* about “the Yanks have colonized our sub-conscious” with the scene in *TRAINSPOTTING*, where Renton despairs of being Scottish: “We’re the lowest of the fucking low, the scum of the earth, the most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat into civilization. Some people hate the English, but I don’t. They’re just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonized by wankers.” Such a double-take on self-loathing is also a double-take on national identity, and marks the difference between Wenders’ self-conscious assumption of his role as a German auteur, and *TRAINSPOTTING*’s post-national Scottishness. The two films bridge the gap and make the link between the auteur cinema of the 1970s and the post-national European cinema of the 1990s, on its way to becoming part of “world cinema” (also, as I have argued elsewhere, entailing some form of self-othering, if mostly less sarcastic). It indicates the extent to which such films now address themselves to world audiences (including American audiences). Post-national pastiche as well as self-othering represent more fluid forms of European identity, appealing to audiences receptive to films from Britain, France, Germany or Spain. They can play the role of the non-antagonistic other, against whom a national (or regional) cinema does not assert its identity in difference, but to whom it presents itself as the impersoNation of “difference.”

<sup>10</sup> See Dina Iordanova who in several books has proposed a new territorial identity, namely that of “Ba (...)

## Beyond Constructivism: Commemorating a Common Past?

- 16 The cinema has contributed its part to this commemorative Europe, but had to be given a lead – some say regrettably – by Hollywood. Already in the 1970s, German filmmakers complained that the Americans, by making a television series called *HOLOCAUST* (1978) had appropriated their history. Fifteen years later Steven Spielberg was accused of trivializing the death camps with *SCHINDLER’S LIST* (1993) and appropriating WWII with his *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* (1997). Both films were big successes with the European public, while not faring well with the critics. Yet Spielberg’s iconography of death, destruction, loss and suffering can now be found in almost every television reportage on a war or a human disaster. The series *HOLOCAUST*, it is often pointed out, allowed

the German Cinema to reinvent itself in the mid-1970s around films dealing with fascism (Syberberg, Kluge, Fassbinder, Schloendorff, von Trotta, Sanders-Brahms), thereby for the first time attaining an international public. Similarly, in France (Louis Malle, François Truffaut, Joseph Losey) and Italy (Luchino Visconti, Bernardo Bertolucci, the Taviani Brothers), directors have made major contributions to “mastering the past” in ways that had often less to do with “writing history” and more with the formation of a common European “memory.” Films as different as Claude Lanzman’s *SHOAH* (1985) Lars von Trier’s *EUROPA* (1991), Roberto Benigni’s *LA VITA E BELLA* (1997), Roman Polanski’s *THE PIANIST* (2002) and many others have, irrespective of their specific aesthetic merits, put in place an imaginary of European history that lends itself to pious gestures of public commemoration at one end, and to clamorous controversy and scandal at the other. The German cinema, for obvious reasons, is prone to produce both, ranging more recently from Margarethe von Trotta’s well-intentioned but embarrassing *ROSENSTRASSE* (2003) and Schloendorff’s stiff *THE NINTH DAY* (2004) about a resisting priest, to films like *ENEMY AT THE GATES* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001, about Stalingrad) and *DER UNTERGANG* (Oliver Hirschbiegel 2004, about the last days of Hitler), where historians rather than film critics find themselves called upon for media comment, earnestly discussing whether Hitler can be depicted as a human being. Next to these commercial productions, there are more oblique, often politically risky and “incorrect” works, such as Romuald Karmaker’s *DAS HIMMLER PROJEKT* (2000), Lutz Hachmeister’s *DAS GOEBBELS-EXPERIMENT* (2004), Oskra Roehler’s *DIE UNBERÜHRBARE* (2000), Christian Petzold’s *DIE INNERE SICHERHEIT* (2000) – the last two titles not directly about fascism or the Holocaust, but showing how the ghosts of each nation’s past haunt the present, and how important the cinema as the medium of different temporalities can be in showing Europe “working on its memories.”

- 17 There is, of course, no inevitable congruence between the official calendar of commemoration – often acts of State – and the cinema, re-articulating the national past around different markers of the national. Among these markers, general period settings – Edwardian England, France under the Occupation, Berlin in the early 1930s – are more prominent than specific historical events, and even then, the period often figures in the context of negotiating other issues, such as class, gender or sexual identity. This is the case with some of the films just mentioned, such as Visconti’s “German Trilogy,” James Ivory’s *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*, and includes the filmed novels or biographies of Jane Austen, E.M. Foster, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Virginia Woolf. But the new cultural studies or popular memory agendas also change the perspective we now have on the cinema of the 1940s and 50s. Films that according to the traditional canon were previously dismissed as routine and commercial, have become the classics or cult films of contemporary movie lovers, rediscovering the popular culture of their parents (Jean Gabin, the films of David Lean) or even grandparents (*BRIEF ENCOUNTER*, Zarah Leander), and making these films the veritable *lieux de mémoire* of the nation and of national identity. In Germany, a film from 1944 called *DIE FEUERZANGEN-BOWLE* and featuring the hugely popular Heinz Rühmann, has become just such a rallying point for the retroactive nation. Not only is it broadcast every Christmas on television; university students show it on the big screen in specially hired halls, with audiences dressing up and miming favorite scenes in the *ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW* manner. The extraordinary reevaluation that the British cinema has undergone in the past two decades is also partly based on such a revision of the criteria applied to the films rather than the films themselves. Coupled with the incessant memory work done by television, through its documentary output (which is, of course, often in sync with the state’s policy of commemorative history), media memory is now one of the major ways in which the nation is “constructed,” but also spontaneously “re-lived”: not least because so much of this tele-visual media memory draws on eye-witness accounts, personal reminiscences, family photos, home movies and other forms of period memorabilia accessible to all. In this respect, television does work from the “bottom up,” weaving together a new synthetic and yet “authentic” fabric of the past, which corresponds to and yet inverts the “quilt” of the nation that Anderson mentions in *Imagined Communities* as patched together by the bureaucratic-pedagogic establishment.<sup>11</sup>

11 At the trans-national level, this memory work is done by the mainly US-controlled, but in Europe at (...)

## Conclusion= Reconceptualizing National Cinemas

- 18 Where the “post-national” national cinema most forcibly comes into its own is in the job of the producer. Like many a European entrepreneur, he or she will

utilize to the full the EU provisions for subsidies, tax-breaks and other community measures designed to minimize his business risk, in this case, of making films for an unpredictable internal market and with few export sales opportunities other than into the world's niche markets, namely art houses, public service television, and DVD-sales. Films produced in this way, i.e., European in their legal status, insofar as they enjoyed forms of subsidy and are bound to the contractual obligations that flow from them, would normally be co-productions, and have the country codes of several states in their production credits. Lars von Trier's *EUROPA*, for instance, has five of these (Denmark, Sweden, Germany, France, Switzerland), Kieslowski's *THREE COLOURS: BLUE* has three (France, Poland Switzerland), and *CHOCOLAT*, set in France and directed by a Swede is a UK/US co-production, with no French input. In other words, such films would still have to declare their nationality in all kind of other ways: for instance, by their stars, their settings and story. For audiences, finally, the criteria of choice are different still: they might recognize the name of a star, say Juliette Binoche, and think of *BLUE*, *CHOCOLAT* and *COPIE CONFORME* as French films, belonging together because of Binoche. *EUROPA* may look as a German film to them, because of its setting and of Barbara Sukowa, known from her roles in Fassbinder's films. But what would such a spectator make of *BREAKING THE WAVES OF DANCER IN THE DARK*? British the first, American the second? Then what are Catherine Deneuve and Bjork doing in *DANCER IN THE DARK*? Cinephiles, of course, will know that these are Lars von Trier films and associate them with Denmark, a nationality label that only the production credits will confirm, but neither language nor setting. Von Trier, of course, is the master of the national camouflage among European directors. Astutely mixing at least one recognizable American actor or actress into the European stew (Nicole Kidman, Willem Dafoe, Kirstin Dunst), his films are almost all in English, clearing the language barrier like horse that is show jumping. His settings are usually minimalist, fantasist or generic, further inflecting and bending the Danish elements, yet no one could possibly mistake his films for anything other than European "art cinema". An almost opposite strategy is employed by Claire Denis: several of her films – *BEAU TRAVAIL*, *L'INTRUS*, *VENDREDI SOIR* – try to do almost without spoken words, relying on music and a rich sound-scape to carry the images, and therefore slipping beneath the language barrier so to speak, rather than vaulting it. Michael Haneke, on the other hand, after camouflaging himself as a French director for a decade, has – with *DAS WEISSE BAND* – "returned" to Germany. Yet his Germany is so performatively instantiated that he uses gothic script to write its subtitle: *eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, while the production funds come from such "German" sources as Canal +, France 3 Cinema and the Mini-Traité Franco-Canadien.

- 19 These perhaps exceptional examples nonetheless indicate that national cinema has become a floating designation, neither essentialist nor constructivist, but more like something that hovers uncertainly over a film's "identity." The national thus joins other categories, such as the opposition posited between mainstream films featuring stars, and art cinema identified by a directorial personality; popular genre films versus documentary style and psychological realism. All these binary divides no longer seem to work, since a broader spectrum of possibilities now minimizes the differences between independent cinema, auteur cinema, art cinema, mainstream so that the great loser is national cinema, for which there hardly seems any space, recognition, or identity left at all, when looked at from the audiences' perspective. What may be distinctly European is the seemingly ever widening gap between European countries' cinema culture (the films their audiences like and get to see) and the same countries film production, where some films are made for the festival circuits and rarely if ever reach other screens, others are produced by and for television. Only a minority of European productions have the budgets, stars and production values even to try to reach an international mainstream audience, and often enough these films fail in their aim, not least because it means they have to disguise themselves to look and sound like they were American.
- 20 This year's Oscar Winners give us spectacular proof of how, for instance, the Franco-American competition functions, what I have elsewhere called the "mutual exchange of back-handed compliments": Martin Scorsese's *HUGO* pays handsome tribute and fulsome homage to Georges Méliès, but in the process the film appropriates Méliès' uniquely 'monstrative' staging-in-layers-of-depth, in order to make him not only seem the precursor of Hollywood's digital 3-D, and thus Scorsese his legitimate heir: it even suggests that, had he been able to, Méliès would have made his films in 3-D (when in fact it was the Lumiere Brothers who experimented with 3-D for the Paris World Fair of

1902). If Scorsese digitally recreated a fantasy of Gare Montparnasse circa 1925, Woody Allen, for *MIDNIGHT IN PARIS*, restaged every Parisian émigré cliché from Dali and Picasso, to Gertrud Stein and Hemingway, in such a way that American audiences could actually imagine “understanding” French without speaking a word of it. Reversing the paradigm – and with it, the direction of assault – Michel Hazanavicius’ *THE ARTIST*, under the guise of paying tribute to American silent cinema, not only shamelessly plunders a dozen or more films. It makes itself the Trojan Horse of entering the Academy Awards as a bona fide American competitor, and not under the category of ‘foreign language’ film. Neither jumping the language barrier nor slipping beneath it, Hazanavicius transfers the matter of language squarely to Hollywood itself, by making it the very subject of the movie’s plot, and the substance of its historical re-enactment. These examples, each in its way, show, I would argue, the persistence of being *toujours occupé*, as the very condition of possibility of European (art) cinema. Yet they also show how important it is to keep all its possibilities – comic, tragic and utopian, but also duplicitous, disguised and flamboyantly displayed – persistently in play.

## Notes



- 1 Melis Behlil, *Hollywood and its Foreign Directors* (Ph.D. thesis, Amsterdam University, 2007).
- 2 See Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies a Psychological Study* (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1950) and Ginette Vincendeau’s “Daddy’s Girls (Oedipal Narratives in 1930s French Films),” *IRIS* 8 (1995), p. 70-81.
- 3 Ed Buscombe, “The Idea of National Cinema,” *Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, no 9/10, 1981, p. 141-153. Thomas Elsaesser, “Film History and Visual Pleasure: Weimar Cinema,” now in P. Mellencamp, P. Rosen (eds.), *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), p. 47-85; Phil Rosen, “History, Textuality, Narration: Kracauer, Burch and some problems in the study of national cinemas,” *Iris* vol. 2 no. 2, 1984, p. 69-84. All three of us were present at the “Milwaukee Conference” (held in Asilomar, California) of 1982, where I presented the paper which set out my position, returning to national cinema after auteurism. For a course in the US on “German Expressionist” cinema in 1978, I began with a Foucault-inspired re-reading of Kracauer’s assertions about German cinema, replacing “Expressionist cinema” with “Weimar Cinema,” which meant a critical engagement with essentialism about the nation, but across the work of auteurs, notably Fritz Lang, G.W. Pabst, and F.W. Murnau.
- 4 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “But Do We Need It?,” in: Martyn Auty, Nick Roddick (eds.), *British Cinema Now*. (London: British Film Institute, 1985), p. 147–158.
- 5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1992).
- 6 See, for an attack on both, the essay by Michael Walsh, “National Cinema, National Imaginary,” *Film History*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1996, p. 5-11.
- 7 Philip Schlesinger, *Media, State and Nation. Political Violence and Collective Identities* (London: Sage, 1991), p 143.
- 8 *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* is discussed in a separate essay elsewhere in this volume.
- 9 For an analysis, see Angus Finney, *The Egos Have Landed: the Rise and Fall of Palace Pictures*, (London: Heinemann, 1996).
- 10 See Dina Iordanova who in several books has proposed a new territorial identity, namely that of “Balkan cinema”.
- 11 At the trans-national level, this memory work is done by the mainly US-controlled, but in Europe also very popular themed channels devoted to history and natural history, in whose programs on human and natural disasters one can see the two categories – history and natural history – increasingly overlap and imperceptibly blend.

## Pour citer cet article



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