

National Cinemas and Transcultural Mappings: The Case of France

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It has been suggested that cinema and nationalism are linked historically, as cinema was born at the end of the nineteenth century, the age of nationalism. The film scholar Susan Hayward has argued that cinema reflects the texture of society on a national level and is “the mobiliser of the nation’s myths and the myths of a nation.”¹ But cinema has also always been seen as a transnational medium, and according to Will Higbee “The French pioneers and entrepreneurs of early cinema were quick to grasp the potential of moving images to cross national and cultural boundaries, establishing a dominant hold over international distribution and production networks by the early 1900s.”² However, discourses on French cinema traditionally focus less on its transnational context than on notions of cultural specificities, cultural authenticity and indigenous production. As a result, French cinema is often considered to be the embodiment of national cinema. However, the aim of this paper is to show that the history of the French film industry with its government subsidies, national institutions and its ‘auteur’ films has paradoxically fostered transnationalism and transculturalism.

According to Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden,

The transnational can be understood as the global forces that link people or institutions across nations. Key to transnationalism is the recognition of the decline of national sovereignty as a regulatory force in global coexistence. The impossibility of assigning a fixed national identity to much cinema reflects the dissolution of any stable connection between a film’s place of production and/or setting and the nationality of its makers and performers.³

They add:

The transnational comprises both globalisation — in cinematic terms, Hollywood’s domination of world film markets — and the counter hegemonic responses of filmmakers from the former

¹ Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 14.

² Will Higbee, ‘Beyond the (Trans)national: Towards a Cinema of Transvergence in Postcolonial and Diasporic Francophone Cinema(s)’, *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2007), p. 80.

³ Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, ‘General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema?’ in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

colonial and Third World countries. The concept of transnationalism enables us to better understand the changing ways in which the contemporary world is being imagined by an increasing number of filmmakers across genres as a global system rather than as a collection of more or less autonomous nations.⁴

Ezra and Rowden juxtapose transnationalism and national sovereignty, Hollywood cinema and post-colonial cinemas, and assume that transcultural interactions are a new phenomenon. In this article I will argue that national sovereignty and transnationalism do not need to be thought about in binary terms and that if, as John Hill has argued, the concept of national cinema is “of vital importance at the level of state policy, particularly as a means of promoting cultural diversity and attending to national specificity”,⁵ it does also promote transcultural interactions. This article will show that the French film industry with its state-based support system has evolved throughout its history not only to support a national cinema but also to combine global and local initiatives in order to develop and foster a transcultural cinema.

In his essay on transnational connections, Ulf Hannerz suggests that films that are personal and small-scale are not necessarily confined in space, and “what spans continents may not be large-scale in other ways.”⁶ Small-scale, auteur films which receive subsidies from the French government are often considered to be typically national films by film critics and scholars. However, by looking more closely at filmmakers, topics, distribution, financing and production, we will demonstrate they have transcultural characteristics. In addition, films dealing with regional questions raise transcultural issues which challenge the concept of national cinema. Dany Boon’s film *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* will be used to illustrate these issues.

My analysis will lead to a discussion of the concepts of national versus transnational cinemas not as stable categories but rather as on-going processes marked by indeterminacy and in-betweenness, by negotiations between centres and margins. This state of affairs is partially and paradoxically due to government-sponsored initiatives such as subsidies and distribution networks to stimulate the local film industry. Resistance to Hollywood hegemony has also had a strong impact on the debate.

Several events have marked the history of French cinema as a national cinema: the massive influx of American films in the 1920s; the arrival of sound

⁴ Ezra and Rowden, *Transnational Cinema*, p.2.

⁵ Cited by Andrew Higson, ‘The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema’, in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 16.

⁶ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 98.

in the 1930s; the German occupation of France in 1940–1944; the competition with Hollywood since the 1950s; and the process of decolonisation. All of these events involve border crossing of films or people. The history of French cinema as a national cinema is marked by transnational interactions.

The Massive Influx of American Films in the 1920s

The reaction of French cinema industrialists to the massive influx of American films in the 1920s was not a protectionist attitude. On the contrary, seeking an international model, they opted for competition through new ventures with American companies and investment in high-budget super productions. Later they also developed a pan-European cinema with an international character, similar to Hollywood films.

Inspired by American films, a new Hollywood-style film genre, the “studio spectacular genre”, emerged. French female filmmaker, Germaine Dulac (1882–1942) stands as a good example of the filmmakers of the period. At first, she directed small-budget avant-garde films (*La fête espagnole* in 1917), which would nowadays be labelled auteur films. They attracted very small audiences. However, European investors in the 1920s who understood her potential as a commercial filmmaker invested large sums in her films, as a result of which she was able to direct successful commercial films (such as *Âme d'artiste*, 1925). Some film scholars have considered the production of this type of large budget film as the sign of the globalisation of cinema: “Cultural differences were neutralised by the deliberately uniform style of acting.”⁷ Yet it allowed the success of the first French female filmmaker who, thanks to her commercial films, was in a position to continue to make the experimental films for which she has become known. Hence, diversity was maintained through an interaction between national and transnational initiatives. However, we already see the beginning of a debate among film scholars about national cinema, which was perceived as protecting cultural differences, versus transnational cinema and globalisation, accused of erasing cultural specificity.

The Arrival of Sound

The arrival of sound in the 1930s increased the appeal of cinema but created barriers to the exportation of films, making them more confined within their linguistic borders. It also gave rise to a more literary cinema: great novels were adapted for the screen, and scriptwriters were treated as the authors of films.

⁷ Martine Danan, ‘From a “Prenational” to a “Postnational” French Cinema’, in *Film History*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1996), p. 74.

Consequently, as cinema became more nationally specific, it was proclaimed “a national institution” deemed to be as much in need of government protection as other cultural artefacts. State intervention in the film industry in France can only be understood in the historical context of the long relationship between the French state and culture. Since the Revolution, France has had a cultural policy endorsing government intervention to protect the national culture. When the government of the time became aware that cinema had great appeal to the public, who felt pride in scripts which reinforced their sense of French identity, films became part of the national “patrimoine”. As Susan Hayward indicates, “For the state, the products of its culture are both a sign of health of the nation and an exportable commodity that serves the renown of the nation.”⁸ If cinema was thought to be worthy of protection, it was because it was recognised not only as an art but also as an exportable one, and as such an efficient medium to disseminate French culture outside of its national borders, thus contributing to the prestige and influence of French culture in the world.

With the arrival of sound in film, cinema became on one hand more national, because language has “dominated our thinking about cultural boundaries, since it has coincided with notion of nation [...]”⁹ On the other, because Western civilisation has made it increasingly easier for goods to circulate, and instead of being locked inside its national borders, cinema has crossed national frontiers regardless of the limitation of language and thanks to the development of media technology such as dubbing and subtitling. French films are widely exported, especially to other European countries but also to North America, Africa, Asia and Australasia, and increasingly so.

These transnational transfers have raised interesting questions of a cultural nature as films are subjected to cultural adaptation and variations, which some film critics see as violating the film’s original meaning and cultural content. As films travel, they are transformed to suit the specific needs of audiences and cultural contexts through promotional material, dubbing or subtitling. Misreadings and misunderstandings are inevitable in these transcultural transfers as some cultural references may be lost in translation or impossible to grasp, and other unintentional references may be created by international audiences according to their own experiences and history. We may need to consider those variations not as deviations from the original but as strategies of adaptation, as legitimate processes of appropriation of cultural artefacts, and as ways of enriching film texts: “the resultant readings are at

⁸ Hayward, *French National Cinema*, p. 16.

⁹ Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, p. 98.

least as pertinent as any original (national) intentionality.”¹⁰ If we look at the exportation of films from a transnational perspective, we could say that the process is culturally enriching as it allows new complex meanings to be constructed within various and sometimes very specific cultural or political settings.

Some audiences, notably American, do not like subtitling or dubbing but prefer to produce remakes which can be seen as cultural adaptations of foreign artefacts rather than, as is often the case, the downgrading of original productions. Sound has enriched cinema on a cultural point of view making it more specific, but the linguistic barrier has been easily if imperfectly overcome by subtitling or dubbing, raising important challenges about cultural flexibility, adaptation and cultural transfer. By importing a film into a new cultural setting, the film meanings are changed and the situation creates in many ways a new transnational product. Paradoxically, the exportation of French films is a way to promote France but in the process characteristics of Frenchness are lost and new meanings more relevant to local cultures are grafted on.

The German Occupation of France in 1940-1944

The German occupation of France led to the banning of American films by the German invader. This had a stimulating effect on French cinema with the production of many French films including Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*), made in the most difficult circumstances but voted “Best French Film of the Century”. Films, most of which were fantasies designed to avert German censorship, were very popular as cinema provided one of the rare opportunities for mass entertainment. The German production company Continental-Films (also known as Continental) created in September 1940 by the Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels aimed at giving Germans some control over the French film industry, a strategy designed to suppress French nationalism. Between 1941 and 1944 the company produced thirty full-length films and in an attempt to rival the achievements of Hollywood, employed the best directors such as Henri-Georges Clouzot, André Cayatte, Maurice Tourneur and Christian-Jaque and some of the most talented and popular actors of the time including Danielle Darrieux, Pierre Fresnay and Fernandel. These films were generally of exceptional quality and include a number that are now regarded as classics of French cinema, for instance, H.G. Clouzot's *Le Corbeau*. Despite their association with the Nazi Occupation, the films made by Continental are now considered to constitute an integral part of French cinema history.

¹⁰ Tim Bergfelder, ‘National, Transnational or Supranational Cinema? Rethinking European Film Studies’, *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 27 (2005), p. 326.

During the German occupation, the French film industry expanded markedly, leading the Vichy government to provide the structures that remain almost unchanged until today. The Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC), a regulatory body whose role was to set up protectionist measures, was created. One might be tempted to see those measures as a defensive, inward-looking stance against the outside world, but contrary to Martine Danan's suggestion that they "transformed the French film industry into a quasi-closed system",¹¹ they, in fact, served diversity. If they were designed to maintain the survival of the national industry by providing financial incentives to filmmakers, producers and distributors, they were never designed to make the industry nationalistic or closed to international influence. On the contrary, they have served diversity by supporting a large variety of productions and co-productions and many non-nationally oriented initiatives.

The Competition With Hollywood Since the 1950s

France, which has always considered European co-productions as a useful tool to fight Hollywood hegemony, signed its first co-production agreement with Italy in 1949. By 1957, over 230 films had been made in co-production with Italy.¹² Co-productions, which have always been eligible to receive national subsidies, have become very popular, to the extent that most films are now co-produced. According to statistics published in 2007 by the CNC, French film productions supported by the CNC numbered a total of 203 in 2006. Of these, 76 films or 37.4% were co-productions with one or more of 29 different international partners. European co-productions have attracted criticism, being labelled "Europuddings" by cultural purists, but the sheer number of co-productions does point to the necessity of a redefinition of national cinema or even to the questioning of the usefulness of such a concept if it is thought to be in opposition to transnationalism. The history of international co-production agreements shows that French cinema has never been insular and that transcultural interactions are not a new phenomenon, although they are obviously on the increase and are an integral part of the national film industry.

Faced with Hollywood dominance, French cinema has had to invent new protectionist strategies since the 1980s and political European integration has had a major role. It has led to a reconceptualisation of national and European cinemas and the desire "to establish or reaffirm a pan-European production base had, since the mid- to late 1980s, given impetus to new film funding and film-making initiatives such as Euro-Aim, the European

¹¹ Danan, 'From a "Prenational"', p. 76.

¹² Anne Jäckel, 'Dual Nationality Film Productions in Europe after 1945', *Historical Journal of Film and Television*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 231-243.

Commission's MEDIA programme, and the Council of Europe's production fund Eurimages."¹³ The GATT talks of 1993 and 1994 created the opportunity to strengthen pan-European initiatives, France leading the process of protection of European films industries against the dominance of American media. The threat to national cinemas created by the GATT negotiations has largely been responsible for the problematisation of the notion of national cinema to give it a transnational pan-European dimension.

The Process of Decolonisation

The various waves of migration into France motivated by employment or as a consequence of decolonisation have had a strong influence on film practice in the country, especially since the 1990s. CNC subsidy schemes have assisted filmmakers eager to make films about post-colonial France that present a different aspect of French history and identity by telling the unofficial stories of the nation. A new cinema dealing with emigration, exile, integration and decolonisation has emerged. Beur cinema (the word *beur*, the backslang derivation of *Arabe*, refers to French-born children of North African migrants) stands as an example of this new tendency of French cinema and has been called a "transnational film movement".¹⁴ These films turn their focus on the hybridity, the differences within the French nation, thus disturbing the image of French national cinema as Parisian, middle class, and mono-racial. A survey of low budget films receiving support from the CNC over the last decade confirms the funding goes to a cinema that deals with minorities. This cinema has been labelled an "anti-national national cinema", which indicates the centrality of the notion of the "national" in the conceptualisation of the transnational and the transcultural. Transnational films do not always cross national borders but they traverse cultural frontiers within the nation, thus redefining the concept of national cinema and questioning the notion of cultural homogeneity. These films, financed by state subsidies, reflect the diasporic component of the French nation but also transform it. As Bergfelder points out "Whether the migrant film-maker 'blends in' or over-identifies with the host culture, rejects it or engages in a cross-cultural dialogue [...] national film cultures and migrant perspectives are always locked in a reciprocal process of interaction".¹⁵

In order to foster diversity as a counter-hegemonic response to Hollywood domination, France through the CNC has set up special funds (such

¹³ Bergfelder, 'National, Transnational or Supranational', p. 316

¹⁴ Peter Bloom, 'Beur Cinema and the Politics of Location: French Immigration Politics and the Naming of a Film Movement', *Social Identities*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1999), p. 469.

¹⁵ Bergfelder, 'National, Transnational or Supranational', p. 320.

as The Fond Sud) to assist the film production of countries faced with economic difficulties and to support francophone films. The support given to francophone films has been a major involvement, with two recent initiatives designed to assist African filmmakers (Africa Cinemas in 2003 and Plan Images Afrique in 2004). The 'Fonds Sud' has also actively participated in the financing of more than a hundred films from nearly 40 countries, extending its aid to South American countries, Asia and the Middle East. The French involvement is certainly not disinterested; the nationalistic spinoff is not negligible and should not be disregarded, as it has been perceived as a new form of cultural colonialism recreating cultural dependence of developing nations. However, it has also provided a precious source of film financing, training for young filmmakers and has created a dynamic environment for the developing world. It also strengthens counter-hegemonic cinema by providing diversity to the homogenising influence of Hollywood cinema.

Financing films is not the only way to stimulate national film industries and transnational interactions such as the distribution of films is also essential to the survival of film industries. The CNC in this regard has been supporting art-house cinemas and film festivals in France that show auteur films from anywhere in the world. Small-budget films are shown in art-house theatres, providing those films with a small but international audience and contributing to weaving transcultural networks. This confirms Hannerz' previously mentioned point that transnationalism does not have to define large-scale cultural products but can adequately describe films of limited scope and budget.

The assistance given to migrant filmmakers, to films from developing countries and to the distribution of small-budget films allows spectators to view a great variety of films and to become aware of many different lives. As Hannerz points out, "Everybody, almost everywhere, is more than ever before aware of many possible lives; fantasy has become a major social practice."¹⁶ As explained by Bergfelder, inspired by Hannerz, "supposedly stable indigenous cultures (in their cultural practices, but also in their readings of cultural texts) actively and continuously participate in, perpetuate, diasporic imaginings"¹⁷, and cinema has become a very important medium to foster transcultural imaginings. However, transcultural interactions through cinema cannot be culturally neutral as exchanges take place within national structures such as distribution networks grounded within the national.

¹⁶ Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, p. 101.

¹⁷ Bergfelder, 'National, Transnational or Supranational', p. 322.

***Welcome to the Sticks* a Transnational film?**

When discussing questions of transculturalism, the heterogeneity of nations is often overlooked, as are issues of internal migrations with their linguistics and cultural consequences. Recent French films have shifted the concept of the national from a focus on the capital to a strong interest for regional specificities, raising questions of national identity, regional conflicts and stereotyping and internal migration. An interesting example of the complexity of transcultural issues in cinema can be found in Dany Boon's film *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (*Welcome to the Sticks*) which examines and challenges stereotypic representations of the North of France. The film, a co-production between Pathé and Hirsch, also received funding from regional institutions. The CNC statistics on the state of the French film industry in 2008 reveal the remarkable fact that Danny Boon's film figures as the most successful French film of all time in France, where it had been seen by over 20 million spectators and where it had grossed the equivalent of 193 million US dollars, although its budget was only \$16 million. Sociologists have strongly criticised the film for being nostalgic: Michel Wieviorka for instance described it as a film that turns its gaze onto the past and shows stereotypic French values, disconnected from social realities.¹⁸ Although the film was considered by French intellectuals in particular to be nationalistic, it has crossed national borders with ease and has been very successful outside of France, particularly in Australia. Will Smith has signed a deal to produce a remake, as have the Italians.

It would have been expected that Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the National Front and a strong defender of national values and traditions, would have defended the film against anti-nationalistic critiques. On the contrary, he complained that the people of Nord-Pas-de-Calais do not look like the two main characters of the movie, adding "this is normal, since both of them are Arabs."¹⁹ Danny Boon, the director, and Kad Merad, the main actor, are both second-generation French Algerian. The film, which deals with regional identity, migration across regions, and cultural and linguistic differences, raises transcultural issues arising from the interactions between North and South. It is indeed interesting that Boon and Merad are both of migrant origin, and therefore aware of the linguistics and cultural consequences of migratory movements.

The film also angered advocates of French Flemish who are desperately trying to keep their language alive, because although it was filmed in Bergues

¹⁸ Michel Wieworka quoted by Régis Soubrouillard in *Marianne* 2, Mardi 15 Avril 2008 http://www.marianne2.fr/Bienvenue-chez-les-ch-tis-la-critique-sourit-mais-n-en-pense-pas-moins_a85632.html, Accessed 01/06/2010.

¹⁹ Jean-Marie Le Pen, 'C'est dans l'air', *France* 5, 5 May 2008.

where the locals speak both *patois* Ch'timi (a derivative of Picard) and French Flemish (a dialect of Dutch), the film only refers to the existence of Ch'timi. Furthermore, while trying to promote the Northern dialect of French and challenge stereotypes about the North, the film portrays people from the South as narrow-minded and prejudiced, while at the same time ignoring their language: with very few exceptions, none of the actors have the typical Southern accent.

The controversy triggered by the film is related to notions of identity and territory, and to the transgression of linguistic, spatial and cultural boundaries. If the film is a caricature of regional differences, it has nonetheless opened a transcultural dialogue. It has resonated across international borders seemingly because many nations have similar problems of regional stereotyping, showing that transcultural issues are not only about interactions between nations but also about border crossing within nations.

As we have seen, in many instances, films have transcultural elements which influence the national culture. French cinema explores transcultural interactions within national borders with films focusing on the consequences of internal migration and post-colonialism. That constant interaction between national and diasporic cinema, centre and margin makes it increasingly difficult to talk about a national cinema. The history of French cinema and of its government-funded initiatives shows the inevitable transculturalism inherent in cinema and in every national initiative aimed at stimulating the national film industry. Thus, the concept of a national cinema cannot be insulated from the concept of a transcultural cinema, and conversely, the notion of a transcultural cinema is, at least at the level of the funding institutions and distribution, grounded in the national.