



The Cosmopolitanization of French Cinema

Michelle Royer

Ulrich Beck defines cosmopolitanization as internal globalization, globalization from within national societies¹, a process that comes from the growth of transnational social spaces, social fields and networks. Living in a transnational world, individuals, according to Victor Roudometof, can assume an open, encompassing attitude or a closed, defensive posture², they can adopt a cosmopolitan perspective or take a protective, local stance which can be very influential in many social and cultural areas. Cosmopolitans and locals occupy the opposite ends of a continuum consisting of various forms of attachment to and support of a locality, a state, a local culture, and they diverge with respect to the degree of economic, cultural and institutional protectionism they espouse. However, Roudometof insists on the necessity to regard these two alternatives not as discontinuous variables but rather as forming a single continuum. In addition, it is possible for an individual or an organization to combine both global and local forms of actions, which is what Roudometof calls "Glocalized cosmopolitanism". This article will examine how the French film industry with its state-based support system has evolved throughout its history to combine global and local initiatives in order to develop and foster diversity in cinema inside and outside France.

In France, the birthplace of cinema, cinema enjoys a special status: it is considered not only an art form and an industry but it is also thought to be a cultural force in the world. "Cinema matters more to the French than it does in most European countries".³ It has been suggested that cinema and nationalism are associated, that it is no coincidence that cinema was





born at the end of the nineteenth century, the age of nationalism and narcissism. It reflects the texture of society on a national level and is “the mobiliser of the nation’s myths and the myths of the nation”.⁴ However, it can also be argued that cinema is a transnational medium by nature as images can easily circulate across national borders and cultural boundaries and because of “the global networks of production, distribution and exhibition within which national cinemas function”⁵. Cinema in France has been regarded by government institutions as both, a national means of expression and a transnational medium, although it is often thought that the government controlled regulatory framework of French cinema has led to a closed system, overprotective of its national industry. This is especially so since the 1993 GATT negotiations when the French defended the concept of films as art and introduced the notion of cultural exception to fight the invasion of American films. However, in this article I will argue that the survival measures as well as other initiatives such as the Cannes Film Festival have encouraged the cosmopolitanization of the film industry and its diversity. In this regard, cosmopolitanism is clearly different to the concept of globalization. While globalization creates a homogenising influence, cosmopolitanism implies that initiatives are taken in order to maintain diversity as well as to foster interrelations between cultures.

French cinema has not always been a national cinema or at least it has not always seen itself as such⁶. The state has not always been interested in its cinema as an art form: in the late 1910s and early 20s, it was as Martine Danan labelled it a “prenational cinema” which, when faced with a massive influx of American films, searched for an international model and opted for competition rather than a protectionist attitude. Industrialists sought joint ventures with American companies and French majors invested in high-budget superproductions such as *L’Atlantide* (Jacques Feyder, 1921). However, most of them, with the exception of *L’Atlantide*, were unsuccessful in their attempt to penetrate international markets. The failure of these initiatives to compete with and resist Hollywood’s expansion led French industrialists to develop other alternatives: produce continental films, develop a pan-European cinema with an international character, similar to Hollywood films, hence potentially



capable of competing with it by attracting American and European audiences. In both instances - superproductions and pan-European cinema - the French film industry did not react to the crisis by adopting a local perspective and retreating defensively within its national borders but on the contrary it sought to open its film culture to transcend boundaries. In order to fight American domination, the French film industrialists favoured the cosmopolitanization of their methods of production and the internationalization of film content.

In the second half of the 1920s, a new Hollywood-style film genre, the "studio spectacular genre", emerged, inspired by American films. Germaine Dulac (1882-1942) stands as a good example of the filmmakers of the period. At first she directed avant-garde films (*La fête espagnole* in 1917) that attracted very small audiences. However, in the 1920s she directed successful commercial films (such as *Âme d'artiste*, 1925) financed by European investors. Some film scholars have seen the films as the embodiment of the globalization of cinema: "cultural differences were neutralised by the deliberately uniform style of acting; and although the action was set in London, it could have easily taken place in any industrialised country"⁷. Yet it allowed the success of the first French female filmmaker who, thanks to her commercial films, was also allowed to continue to shoot experimental films. Hence, diversity could be maintained.

This type of studio film was very successful until the arrival of sound, which increased the appeal of cinema but also created a language barrier for international distribution and thus contributed to making cinema a national medium. It gave the French literary tradition the opportunity to have a strong input through adaptations and scriptwriting making cinema more literary and nation specific, which greatly appealed to the public, who felt pride in the scripts which reinforced their sense of French identity. The French state realized only then the national significance of films and sought to protect the film industry by exercising control over it. This turning point can be traced back to 1928 when the French government proclaimed cinema "a national institution and the principle of state intervention into the affairs of the film industry was finally established"⁸. Government 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, the French state has had a cultural policy which, as explained by Susan Hayward, has evolved along three lines: the state as protector of the national heritage, as its patron and as facilitator of equal access to that heritage: "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"⁹. Cinema was able to benefit from state regulations only because the state considered it a cultural national institution.

However, it is not until the German occupation that the government - helped by the ban on American films by the German invader - gave the film industry its structure by creating the Centre National de la Cinématographie or CNC (the National Centre for Cinematography). Through the CNC, the state set up protectionist measures which in great part have remained unchanged. Protectionist measures are generally seen as an anti-cosmopolitan reaction, a defensive, closed-in attitude against the outside world. But is it truly the case? Measures were taken to maintain the survival of the national industry by providing financial incentives to filmmakers and producers but the CNC was never designed to make the industry nationalistic or closed to foreign influence. Contrary to Martine Danan's suggestion that the government's interventionist and protectionist approach "transformed the French film industry into a quasi-closed system"¹⁰, it has led in practice to the cosmopolitanization of French cinema. While it is true that state control has served the national industry it has done so also by supporting a large variety of productions and co-productions and many different non-nationally oriented initiatives.

Film funding is still nowadays administered by the CNC which runs schemes for the production and distribution of films, and "le compte de soutien", a support fund financed by a tax on television, on video and on online delivery services and by a levy on all cinema tickets in France, including Hollywood films. This means that the greater the number of film and television spectators, even if they watch American films, the stronger the support for national films. This is an important factor as American films attract large audiences in France: over 46% in 2005 against 36% for

French films. Hence they are contributing financially, if unwillingly, to the French film industry.

In his book *Cosmopolitanism Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Kwame Anthony Appiah takes French cinema as an example to illustrate his criticism of the way cultural preservationists have used the notion of cultural imperialism to explain why people like to watch American films. He opposes this “odd” attitude “No army, no threat of sanctions, no political saber rattling, imposes Hollywood on the French”¹¹ to the genuine issue of government subsidy to support the French film industry. However, when one looks closely at the support system in France, the distinction made by Appiah between preservationist attitudes and the system of subsidy to support national cinema is not as clear-cut as it may seem. In fact they are tightly intertwined. The state is using the popularity of Hollywood films and of television, that is “American cultural imperialism”, to finance the national film industry. Moreover, French television channels are the greatest consumers of national and American films, and the largest investors in the production of French films. One might then wonder what would happen to the French film industry if French spectators were to cease watching Hollywood blockbusters.

The “compte de soutien” budget goes to two schemes: the automatic aid (60%) and selective aid (40%). The Automatic aid, which must be reinvested in France, is given to CNC-agreed films, and tends to reward large budget films and successful producers. Selective aid, or “avances sur recettes” is a system of loans designed to help emerging filmmakers, first time directors and auteur films of artistic rather than commercial value. The existence of these two schemes ensures that both the industrial and the cultural goals of the industry are fulfilled.

Scriptwriters, directors and producers, can apply on the condition that they have French nationality, or are a member of the EU or have resident status. The criterion of French nationality for a film is essential in order to obtain funding. One condition used to be that the film had to be shot in French. Jean-Jacques Annaud has strongly criticised the French nationality criteria and its effect on the industry: “Contemporary cinema is an international art, it is impossible to make films for a market



the size of the French market, which represents only 4% of the world film market. When Americans make films, they aim at the entire world. When the French make films they make them for Paris. It is time to stop putting national flags on films"¹².

However, in 1989, a decree was passed making it possible for English language films to receive the CNC agreement that confers French nationality on a film. This decree has been very controversial, as many perceived it as the signal that national cinema with its cultural specificity had become irrelevant and that Hollywood cinema had triumphed. They thought that this postnational mode of production "erases most of the distinctive elements which have traditionally helped define the (maybe) imaginary coherence of a national cinema"¹³ and that "New-Holly-Wave films" downplay cultural difference for the benefits of the global market. Referring to large budget films such as *L'Amant* (by Jean-Jacques Annaud), *Valmont* (by Milos Forman and written by Jean-Claude Carrière) or *1492* (by Ridley Scott and with Gérard Depardieu), all shot in English, Martine Danan writes: "The acceptance of this all-purpose Esperanto English, deprived of any coherence and cultural authenticity, may also point to the very process by which a new stateless, globalizing culture may be eroding sensitivity to cultural differences".¹⁴

Conversely, it has also been argued that the decree giving French nationality to films shot in the English language has allowed French films to move across borders, has made the industry more cosmopolitan and has redefined the notion of Frenchness in cinema. Ulrich Beck explains: "The cosmopolitan outlook means that, in a world of global crises and dangers produced by civilization, the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival".¹⁵

Today, shooting in English is seen as an important tool to access worldwide audiences by French filmmakers with global ambitions. However, these filmmakers can still receive funding from the CNC if their films meet the French nationality criteria which no longer includes shooting the film in French. Luc Besson, for example, has made sure that his films met the French nationality criteria, although they were shot in



English. He arranged financing, distribution, and also the appointment of technicians so that the films could be considered French, allowing him to receive funding from the CNC. The French system of subsidy is clearly able to adopt a combination of global and local measures all aiming at fostering a diverse cinema. The local and the global interact continuously in varying proportions, supporting Roudometof's idea that the two alternatives are not discontinuous variables but form a single continuum which varies throughout history.

France has always considered European co-productions as a useful tool to fight Hollywood hegemony and signed the first co-production agreement with Italy in 1949. The co-productions were eligible to receive national subsidies. By 1957, over 230 films had been made in co-production with Italy¹⁶. Recently, co-production agreements have been very popular as shown by the growing number of co-produced films. According to statistics published in 2007 by the CNC: the French film production (supported by the CNC) reached a total of 203 films, in 2006. Of these, 76 films or 37.4% were co-productions with one or more international partners. These films were co-produced with 29 different countries. European co-productions have not attracted the same degree of controversy as English speaking French films - although they have been referred to as "Europuddings" - possibly because they are often not very large budget films and do not use the same narrative strategies as Hollywood films. However, the increasing number of co-productions points to a redefinition of national cinema as an art and an industry always in process, ready to go beyond its borders and open to cosmopolitan changes.

Since the 1990s, the system of 'avances sur recettes' has assisted filmmakers eager to present a different aspect of French history and identity by telling the unofficial histories of the nation: a new cinema dealing with immigration, exile, integration and decolonization has emerged. *Beur* cinema (the word *beur* is the backslang derivation of *Arabe*) stands as an example of this new tendency of French cinema and has been labelled as a "transnational film movement"¹⁷ which explores the identity of a second generation of North African immigrants who have grown up in France. This suggests that filmmakers turn their gaze inward to

explore the hybridity, the difference at the heart of the French nation, and thus disturbs the image of French national cinema as Parisian, bourgeois, mono-racial, mono-ethnic and essentially preoccupied by interpersonal relationships. A survey of low budget films receiving support from the CNC over the last decade confirms that the funding goes to a cinema which deals with minorities and does not conform to the stereotypic image of French cinema. This cinema has been labelled an “anti-national national cinema”, the expression of a glocalized cosmopolitanism.

French film funding has not been limited to local filmmakers but it has been traditionally open to foreign filmmakers who have encountered difficulties in their own countries in making films. Reputed filmmakers such as Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski or Andrei Tarkovsky have benefited from the French state system of subsidy. As pointed out by Anne Jäckel, France has drawn much prestige and status¹⁸ from such a cosmopolitan attitude, which is part of France’s international cultural policy and has been a key strategy in its resistance to American hegemony. By fostering cultural diversity, the French support system shows that it is not a closed system but that openness can be a way of protecting cinema by encouraging the making of different types of films the Hollywood film industry would never support.

In addition, France set up special funds to assist the film production of countries faced with economic difficulties. The “Fonds Sud” (set up in 1984 to help developing countries) and the “Fonds ECO” (set up in 1990 to help countries from Central and Eastern Europe) aim at developing the production of films which reflect local cultures. These films had to be shot on location in the foreign country and could be shot in French or in the language of the country. The ECO fund was later abandoned but had already contributed to the making of 65 feature films¹⁹.

By encouraging an international diverse cinema, the French support system counteracts the homogenizing influence of Hollywood cinema, a very important tool in resisting the American hegemonic attitude while reinforcing the image of France as the defender of cosmopolitanism.

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, the East and the Middle East. The French involvement is not disinterested, of course, and it has its critics. However, it has represented a precious source of financing and has created a dynamic environment for the developing world.

The French highly regulated model has been at the forefront of several European (MEDIA, EUREKA) and pan-European (Eurimages) programmes. France has always been a strong defender of European cinema and has been responsible for several important MEDIA initiatives to promote and develop the diversity and pluralism of cinema throughout Europe. Eurimages is a French initiative that encourages the co-production and distribution of cinematic works between European partners by grouping public funding from the member states.

The CNC, by supporting art house cinemas and the organization of film festivals in France that show auteur films from anywhere in the world, has also contributed to an active film scene beyond the limits of French cinema. It provides half of the budget of the Cannes Film Festival, whose budget amounts to approximately 20 million euros.

The Cannes Festival has continually had a cosmopolitan perspective, having continually aimed at fostering international collaboration. Its location in the tourist area of the French Riviera, with its connotations of glamour, luxury and cosmopolitanism that existed well before the creation of the festival in 1939, mirrors the ambitions of the festival to be the centre of an international cinematic network. Jean Cocteau, emphasizing the festival's cosmopolitanism, described it as "an apolitical no-man's-land, a microcosm of what the world would be like if people could contact each other directly and speak the same language"²⁰. However, it also plays a major role in the promotion of auteur cinema and the French film industry. In her article "Transnational 'French' Cinema: The Cannes Film Festival", Lucy Mazdon argues that while the role of the Cannes Festival is to promote and represent French national cinema, it also enables a re- or de-construction of the centrality of the nation. The Cannes Festival "is a central place for the construction and dissemination of French

cinematic prestige whilst simultaneously fostering the various forms of international exchange which identify contemporary film festivals and film industries"²¹. What this shows is that the best way to keep French cinema alive is to make it more cosmopolitan, to foster diversity and international exchange. However, as we have seen, the regulatory system which has kept the French film industry alive and dynamic while presenting an alternative cinematic culture to Hollywood represents a service whose benefits reach well beyond the frontiers of France and Europe.

The image of the French film industry as a rigid system of state subsidies rewarding only Franco-French films is not an accurate image of the support system. To guarantee the integrity of a diverse and plural cinema, the system had to avoid falling into "an unproductive and oppressive dualism between regulatory control and liberal innovation"²². The French model has so far avoided that pitfall and has shown it can change and adapt, combine many factors - artistic, social, economic, and cultural - and collaborate with many different players, television channels, Hollywood big players and majors.

The opposition between a national art cinema and the global Hollywood industry is not a helpful dichotomy to understand the way France has reacted to the popularity and availability of Hollywood cinema. In fact, as has been seen in this paper, the French film industry with its regulatory framework has always had, inbuilt in its system, a cosmopolitan perspective, which, paradoxically, is at the very core of its protectionism. The French film industry has been defined as pre-national, national, post-national, anti-national national and transnational at different periods of its history. All the labels to describe French cinema place the notion of the "national" as the reference point. However, if, inspired by Roudometof, we regard the alternatives national/local and global/cosmopolitan not as opposite alternatives or discontinuous variables but rather as forming a single continuum, the history and evolution of the French film industry can be seen as an example of the cosmopolitanization of national institutions or it can be said to reflect an attitude of, according to the term used Roudometof, glocalized cosmopolitanism. However, this perspective is not the result of a coherent ideologically based philosophy of openness

to the other, but rather the result of a combination of factors at different levels: a high regard for cinema as art in France, a historical relationship between the state and the arts in France, a postcolonial and transnational context, and the necessity to reach outside of national borders in order to survive and counter the homogenizing effects of globalization. As explained by Ulrich Beck, "the cosmopolitan outlook does not signify altruism or idealism but realism [...], the enlightened self-interest of transnational states. This can be read in turn, as an example of the internal cosmopolitanization of national experiences and aspirations."²³

Notes

- 1 Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies", in *Theory, Culture and Society* 19 (1-2) (2002), pp.17-44 (p. 17).
- 2 Victor Roudometof, "Cosmopolitanism and Glocalization", in *Current Sociology*, 53 (1) (January 2005), pp. 113-135 (p. 121).
- 3 Phil Powrie (ed.), *The Cinema of France* (London & New York: Wallflower, 2006), p. 1.
- 4 Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 14.
- 5 Will Higbee, "Beyond the (trans)national: Towards a cinema of transvergence in postcolonial and diasporic francophone cinema(s)", in *Studies in French Cinema*, 7 (2) (2007), pp. 79-91 (p. 79).
- 6 Martine Danan, "From a 'prenational' to a 'postnational' French cinema", in *Film History*, 8 (1) (1996), pp. 72-84.
- 7 Martine Danan, p. 74.
- 8 Martine Danan, p. 74.
- 9 Susan Hayward, p. 16.
- 10 Martine Danan, p. 76.
- 11 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London & New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 107.
- 12 My translation. Jean-Jacques Annaud, interview http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/article-imprim.php?id_article=34381 (Accessed 12/03/08).
- 13 Martine Danan, p. 78.
- 14 Martine Danan, p. 80.
- 15 Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 14.
- 16 Anne Jäckel, "Dual nationality film productions in Europe after 1945", in *Historical Journal of Film and Television*, 23 (3), pp.231-243.
- 17 Peter Bloom, "Beur Cinema and the Politics of Location: French Immigration Politics and the Naming of a Film Movement", in *Social Identities*, 5 (4) (1999), pp. 469-486 (p. 469).
- 18 Anne Jäckel, "The Inter/nationalism of French Film Policy", in *Modern and Contemporary France*, 15 (1) (2007), pp. 21-36 (p.30).
- 19 Anne Jäckel, "The Inter/nationalism of French Film Policy", p. 31
- 20 see <http://www.festival-cannes.fr/index.php/en/about/festivalHistory> (accessed 18/02/2008).
- 21 Lucy Mazdon, "Transnational 'French' Cinema: The Cannes Film Festival", in *Modern and Contemporary France*, 15 (1) (2007), pp. 9-20 (p. 15).
- 22 Laurent Creton and Anne Jäckel, "A certain Idea of the Film Industry", in *The French Cinema Book*, ed. Michael Temple and Michael Witt, (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), pp. 209-220 (p. 220).
- 23 Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 177.