National, transnational or supranational cinema? Rethinking European film studies

Tim Bergfelder
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON, UK

The purpose of this article is twofold: to consider how the concept of European cinema has featured in academic discourse over the past 15 years, and to challenge in the process some of the critical parameters that have underpinned this discussion. My emphasis thus will be less on the minutiae of policies, production initiatives or individual case studies, and more on broader theoretical implications, with a particular focus on the Anglophone academic context. Although European cinema has become a consolidated field of academic research and criticism since the 1990s, resulting in a steady flux of publications throughout the decade and beyond (e.g. Sorlin, 1991; Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992; Petrie, 1992; Hill et al., 1994; Vincendeau, 1995, 1998; Everett, 1996; Finney, 1996; Forbes and Street, 2000; Holmes and Smith, 2000; Konstantarakos, 2000; Aitken, 2001; Fowler, 2002; Jäckel, 2003b; Ezra, 2004), what has been striking is how little impact the supranational implication of the term ‘European’ has had on theoretical frameworks and methodologies in this area. Indeed, in most cases, research into European cinema still equals research into discrete national cinemas.

In its contested position between national and supranational interests the study of European cinema can be seen to mirror the central debate of the European project more generally, namely to negotiate and reconcile the desires for cultural specificity and national identity with the larger ideal of a supranational community. What, however, as far as film studies is concerned, does the label ‘European’ mean and contribute to the case studies of seemingly discrete national film cultures? In order to answer this question, and to suggest possible alternatives to current conceptualizations of European cinema, this article will emphasize issues of transnational...
interaction and cross-cultural reception, and reposition some areas of European film history which, until now, have often been seen as peripheral.

To argue that the study of European cinema is a new development may sound somewhat absurd. European cinema has always been on the agenda of film studies, and indeed one could argue that the aesthetic study of film originated, or at least was significantly fostered, in a European context. Traditionally, European film studies has focused on historically specific movements such as Russian montage, German Expressionism, Italian neorealism or the French nouvelle vague, and on individual auteurs (e.g. Bergman, Godard, Fassbinder, etc.). If I am thus positing a new turn in European film studies in the last 15 years, I am referring to a reconceptualization of the field, which has significantly paralleled and been motivated by the wider process of political European integration during the same period. The renewed urgency of this topic has on the one hand been linked to the need to protect a vaguely defined yet strongly perceived European film heritage, which supplied the major rhetorical tool for European member states (led by France), to resist American media dominance during the GATT talks in 1993 and 1994. 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 Commission’s MEDIA programme, and the Council of Europe’s production fund Eurimages. Another reason for the renewed interest in European cinema has been the fundamental geopolitical change of Europe itself in the 1990s, and particularly the new opportunities and challenges posed by the impact of migration on the one hand, and by the new access to film industries and production facilities in the former Warsaw Pact states (Iordanova, 2002).

In line with these wider geopolitical frameworks, academic discussion of European cinema has over the last 15 years centred on three major issues: the problematization of the term ‘Europe’, the question of national and cultural identity, and the question of cultural distinctions and hierarchies between high and low (or popular) culture.

The problem of European art cinema

One definition of European cinema which came under particular scrutiny in the 1990s was the traditional concept of a European art cinema (Petrie, 1992: 1–9). Given coherence and legitimacy by the notion of a common high cultural heritage which encompasses the history of European thought and the canons and features of Western art and literature, this paradigm of European cinema prescribes a history of masterpieces, stylistic movements and schools, and, above all, of individual directors. What elevates film
directors to the canon of European art cinema auteurs, however, is not just their specific national identity, but their perceived commonality of independent artistic expression or style, and a wider humanistic concern, as well as creative autonomy and independence. According to this framework, then, ‘European’ functions less as the signifier of a specific culture, and more as an abstractly supranational, and quasi-ethical framework of cultural practice. In other words, the notion of ‘European art cinema’ promotes the wider project of an interconnected European culture, and advertises this project through traditional Western – and frequently high bourgeois – values. It is thus no surprise that European art cinema has been critiqued for its strategies of cultural homogenization and sociocultural bias, and has been accused of elitism. European cinema, conceptualized along these lines, can moreover be challenged for its exclusion of regional specificities, popular cultural forms and mass audiences.

Even more problematically, in its most extreme form, European art cinema can be seen to support a cultural and ethnic ‘fortress Europe’, and as such has become the target for postcolonial critique. A particularly acute problem for the traditional concept of European art cinema has become how contemporary Europe’s multicultural diversity within and across national boundaries can be represented through a framework which is so strongly rooted in Western aesthetic traditions and cultural norms. The fact that the overwhelming majority of European auteurs have been and still are white and male underlines this dilemma. Both Sarita Malik and Deniz Göktürk have argued that the uneasiness with which Western Europe regards the challenges of multiculturalism encouraged in the 1970s and 1980s the emergence of national sub-genres that effectively ghettoized ethnic and cultural difference in endlessly recycled narratives of oppression and victimization (Malik, 1996: 202–15; Göktürk, 2002: 248–56). Anne Jäckel has similarly suggested that ‘France’s paternalistic attitude towards its former colonies produced in the 1980s and 1990s a situation where black and beur film-makers in France were “too close for comfort” to the funding bodies’ (1996: 85).

At the same time as promoting a broader European culture corresponding to a problematic notion of ‘the West’, and as a bulwark against Hollywood populism, however, the concept of European art cinema, especially in its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, has also been invoked to promote the cultural status and prestige of individual nation states. The New German Cinema of the 1970s serves as an interesting example in this respect. As John E. Davidson has argued, this movement’s ‘image of a particularly “German” cinema (having “aesthetic” and “political” variations) actually helped re-establish Germany (the Federal Republic) as a Kulturnation in a global context’ (1996: 51). Anne Jäckel has made a similar comment about France, ‘which draws as much prestige and status
from its international cultural policy as the film-makers it so generously assists, capitalizing on the overtones of excellence such policy implies’ (1996: 85).

The mechanisms and institutions that have perpetuated and protected art cinema as a preferred cultural practice have been remarkably similar across European countries over the last 40 years: a mode of production that is heavily reliant on state subsidies (particularly in Germany and France); a cross-European distribution network built on the marketing of festivals and prizes (Berlin, Venice, Cannes), a mode of exhibition centred on the distinctive arena of the art-house cinema; and, finally, a network of journals and newspapers committed both to the spirit and to the industrial framework of this practice. Crucially, this practice also provides the main reference for European cultural policy-makers, and the defence of an environment in which art cinema, in particular, could survive, was thus one of the central aims during the GATT debates in the mid-1990s (Mattelart, 1998: 478–85).

One of the more interesting developments since the GATT talks (and deeply ironic, given the fervent rhetoric of the preceding political discussions), has been the gradual erosion of art cinema as the master narrative of European cinema, both in terms of industrial practice and in terms of academic debates and preferences. In the 1990s, many European film-makers moved increasingly towards popular genres and narratives previously considered the domain of Hollywood (examples here include Luc Besson in France, or Sönke Wortmann in Germany), or turned the stance of genial auto-didacticism so frequently associated in the past with European film directors into a self-ironic promotion exercise (as in the case of the Dogme movement). At the same time, the notion of the European art-house auteur continues to exert considerable power, as proven by figures such as Lars von Trier or Pedro Almodóvar, the latter of whom has moved from an early commitment to subcultural politics and cult film aesthetics towards the conventions of the traditional art-house film in his recent productions. Other examples in a similar vein include Germany’s Tom Tykwer, who has followed his kinetic Run, Lola, Run (1998) with a number of very self-conscious attempts to emulate a classical art-house tradition, or François Ozon, who has adapted a Fassbinder play for the screen with his Water Drops on Burning Rocks (2000).

The turn to popular genres

Academic debates (especially in Anglo-American academia) have mirrored the dispersal of a clear master narrative for European cinema, and
increasingly focus on the formation of national and (sub)cultural identities through popular indigenous cinemas. Often methodologically informed by a cultural studies paradigm, critical re-evaluations of popular European genres have challenged distinctions between high and low culture, have criticized the class and gender bias of such distinctions, and have stressed the active agency and reading strategies of mass audiences. Consequently, there has been a shift in emphasis from questions of artistic merit and auteurist intentionality towards socially specific contexts of production and reception. As a result, fixed oppositions, such as between European high culture and American commercialism, or between capitalism and creativity, have become increasingly difficult to distinguish. Perhaps the most seminal academic intervention in reconceptualizing national film cultures along those lines has been Andrew Higson’s ‘The Concept of National Cinema’ (first published in 1989).

While there is much to commend about this approach, it does often seem to foreclose the possibility of a European cinema beyond national boundaries. In fact, many recent studies on ‘European popular cinema’ have dealt specifically with separate national entities. Of course, any study which centres on a national definition of cinema reflects to a large extent the critic’s own investment in the formation and exclusion processes of national identities (cf. Higson, 2000). It is notable that in Germany, which for obvious historical reasons has a fraught and uneasy relation to the concept of nationhood, popular indigenous cinema has been critically viewed with profound suspicion. It is thus no surprise that the pessimistic perspectives of the Frankfurt School have dominated critical approaches towards the study of German cinema (cf. Bergfelder et al., 2002: 1–12). In countries such as Britain, on the other hand, where the given parameters of national identity are overall accepted more readily, national popular cultures are assigned a progressive potential far more frequently.

The affirmation of the national appears to be more pronounced and urgent in countries which feel beleaguered in their political or cultural identity, and in countries which see themselves as either economically excluded or culturally independent from the developments of central and Western Europe. What this suggests, then, is that the concept of European cinema and the writing of its history have been negotiated through culturally diverse discursive practices. These practices touch on the very foundation of individual and collective identity formations, and encompass both present concerns and an understanding of the past. In the following pages I shall attempt to historically reinstate, or re-imagine the term ‘European’ in European cinema, by placing it in a dialogic relation to such formations. Central to my argument will be the notion of a cinema of Diaspora, industrial practices of co-production initiatives and strategies of cross-cultural reception.
Liminality and marginality in European cinema

What I propose as my first working definition of the ‘European’ in European cinema, is to understand it not so much as a stable cultural identity or category, but rather as an ongoing process, marked by indeterminacy or ‘in-between-ness’. As Richard Sennett has argued, Western culture is ‘at its very roots, about experiences of spiritual dislocation and homelessness’ (Sennett, 1996: 6); and, in a similar vein, I would propose that the characteristics of European cinema, by any definition, should include liminality and marginality. Given Europe’s traumatic historical trajectory in the 20th century, this should not be too controversial. Yet it is worth noting that, while the influence of exile and immigration have been readily acknowledged as essential to the multicultural composition of Hollywood, migration has not become an equally integral element in the discursive construction of national cinemas in Europe itself.

Rather than focusing exclusively on separate national formations, a history of European cinema might well begin by exploring the interrelationship between cultural and geographical centres and margins, and by tracing the migratory movements between these poles. In this context, the various waves of migration into and across Europe, motivated by the two world wars, national policies of ethnic exclusion, and the post-war legacy of colonialism and economic discrepancy between Europe and its others are fundamentally linked to the development of European cinema. Equally important to consider is the facilitating and concentrating function provided throughout European film history by metropolitan cities (e.g. Berlin, Paris, London, Vienna), which became focal points and destinations for migrant film-makers at certain historical moments, and which thus transcend their status as purely ‘national’ locations.

Diasporic experiences and their influence on cinematic practice differ greatly, not only according to political circumstances, but also according to specific production contexts (which include, for example, the distinction between art cinema, community-based film-making and popular entertainment, cf. Naficy, 2001). They also vary in their different degrees of cultural assimilation. Whether the migrant film-maker ‘blends in’ or over-identifies with the host culture, rejects it or engages in a cross-cultural dialogue (as, for example, in much of 1990s Black British and French beur cinema), national film cultures and migrant perspectives (themselves rarely ‘pure’) are always locked in a reciprocal process of interaction.

While such processes are perhaps most discernible in the independent film sector, it is important to point out that they equally occur within national mainstream or popular cinemas. National cinemas’ most valued filmic texts, exemplifying national qualities and traditions, have often been conceived by individuals who are cultural outsiders in more ways than one.
The 1930s films of Alexander Korda, a former supporter of a Communist state in Hungary, celebrated Britain’s imperial heritage and glory. Another Hungarian émigré, Ladislao Vajda, directed a series of popular films in Fascist Spain in the 1940s and 1950s, which wallowed in Catholic symbolism and folklore. In the 1980s and 1990s, the British ‘heritage film’ was significantly shaped by the collaboration of the American director James Ivory, the Indian producer Ismail Merchant and the Polish-German writer Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. Cultural interactions such as these, however, do not simply imitate or reflect already existing national discourses of either the host culture or the outsider. Rather, they ought to be understood as adding new discursive and aesthetic layers, which irrevocably change but also ultimately contribute to the continuing evolution of national cultures.

It has to be said that in accepting and valorizing the influence of cultural hybridization, film studies lags somewhat behind other academic disciplines. Indeed, most studies of national cinemas in Europe (and in this reflecting the wider public consensus on and media representation of this topic) remain couched in a rhetoric of cultural protectionism and fear of globalization, and they still perpetuate in many cases, whether unwittingly or not, the illusion of ‘pure’ and stable national cultures. In social anthropology, in contrast, notions of a ‘global Diaspora’ or ‘global ecumene’, of transnationalism, travelling cultures and cultural interconnectedness have become increasingly prominent. Countering prevalent suspicions towards cultural globalization, Ulf Hannerz has offered a more balanced and less defensive perspective, which might well be applied to the study of European cinema:

I am somewhat uncomfortable with the rather prodigious use of the term globalization to describe just about any process or relationship that somehow crosses state boundaries. In themselves, many such processes and relationships obviously do not at all extend across the world. The term ‘transnational’ is in a way more humble, and often a more adequate label for phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution, even when they do share the characteristic of not being contained within a state. It also makes the point that many of the linkages in question are not ‘international’, in the strict sense of involving nations – actually, states – as corporate actors. In the transnational arena, the actors may now be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises, and in no small part it is this diversity of organization that we need to consider. (1996: 6)

In its challenge of established perceptions of global cultural traffic, this definition is particularly useful for a reconceptualization of European cinema. Above all, it helps to deflate a number of generalizations, the most prominent example of which can be found in the apocalyptic narrative of the relationship between a perennially vulnerable Europe and predatory Hollywood that underpins so many discussions and debates on European
film history. Hannerz’s definition of transnationalism allows instead for more nuanced, and frequently more localized, manifestations and encounters. While such connections may not lend themselves to a linear or cohesive conception of historical or cultural development, they do create their own transnational ‘communities’. As Hannerz argues, ‘what is personal, primary, small-scale, is not necessarily narrowly confined in space, and what spans continents need not be large-scale in any other way’ (1996: 98). Hannerz underlines the importance of theorizing the media and studies in migration connectively:

In real life migration and mediatization run parallel, not to say that they are continuously intertwined. . . . Everybody, almost everywhere, is more than ever before aware of many possible lives; fantasy has become a major social practice. Yet people may act on such fantasy in different ways. They may, for example, engage with the media, and then migrate to a possible life depicted there. But once such a move has been made, that which one left has become another possible life. . . . Deterritorialization creates new markets for film companies, impresarios, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the relocated population for contact with the homeland. (1996: 101)

Hannerz’s argument here touches on a number of important issues. First, it allows us to acknowledge film as a medium whose historical emergence and whose modes of distribution and reception are closely linked to processes of globalization. Diaspora is defined by Hannerz not exclusively as an extraordinary personal experience, instigated by equally extraordinary political circumstances, but as a mode of everyday experience and, equally importantly, as a mode of imagination. Such a definition of Diaspora and transnationalism has consequences for the understanding not only of how exiles become integrated in national cultural environments. More fundamentally it posits that supposedly stable indigenous cultures (in their cultural practices, but also in their readings of cultural texts) actively and continuously participate in, and perpetuate, diasporic imaginings.

**Issues of production**

Apart from individual and collective processes of migration, industrial imperatives add a further agency to the cross-cultural transactions between European cinemas. As with the notion of exile, the economic drive towards exports, co-production and international distribution networks has been discussed mainly in relation to Hollywood’s global or specifically European aspirations. The American film industry’s relatively unchallenged position as the market leader (at least in the Western hemisphere) almost throughout the history of cinema, has made it easy to critically dismiss the various attempts of European industries to create a pan-European film market or ‘zone’. Indeed, neither the ‘Film Europe’ project of the 1920s
and 1930s (cf. Maltby and Higson, 1999) nor the call for a ‘European cinema’ in the late 1980s ventured far beyond their initial visions of a unified European industry and their idealistic rhetoric. Nevertheless, particularly since the end of the Second World War, bilateral agreements and multinational co-production pacts have been a defining feature of film production in Europe (cf. Jäckel, 2003a). Economic considerations have determined preferred production centres at particular historical moments (for example, the production boom in Italy, Spain and Yugoslavia in the 1960s and early 1970s, or the venture of big-budget location shooting into Eastern Europe after the fall of communism). Varying levels of production costs, exchange rates, taxation and market growth in different countries have determined shifting national clusters to counter both American dominance and the general dwindling of audience figures.

European co-productions have often been viewed by the critical establishment with distinct condescension, and dismissed for their low-brow appeal (for example, the spy thrillers and horror films of the 1960s and 1970s) and for their perceived blandness (the so-called Europuddings of the 1980s and 1990s). While it is possible to challenge or review such value judgements, it is also worth recalling that international pools of finance have supported not just popular genres, but also significantly fostered the careers of esteemed national auteurs, ranging from Fellini to Bergman, and from Volker Schlöndorff to Derek Jarman. This, however, is barely acknowledged in the standard narratives of European art cinema. As Mark Betz has argued:

European art films have been left free to carry on as signifiers of stable national cinemas and identities or as gleaming expressions of their auteur’s vision, somehow not blurred by the quite specific determinants of cross-national cooperation that leave their marks everywhere on the film, from its budget to its shooting locations to its cast to its soundtrack. (2001: 9)

As with the diasporic dimensions of national cinemas, the issue of co-production has featured in national film histories at best as a cursory footnote, or as a tolerable exception to the more desirable norm of indigenous and self-reliant national film production. At worst, co-productions have been denounced, somewhat hyperbolically, as threatening the very fabric of national identity (cf. Betz, 2001: 14–15). This strategy of demonization and exclusion, in my opinion, helps to perpetuate rather defensive narratives of national containment and homogeneity. A good example for this kind of rhetoric can be found in Stephen Crofts’ ‘Concepts of National Cinema’ (1998). Crofts considers the practice of co-productions, alongside ‘indiscriminate channel zapping and image mixing’, as a threatening symptom of accelerated American media and cultural dominance in the 1980s and 1990s (1998: 393). Internationalization is thus exclusively linked to Hollywood’s hegemonic, imperialist politics, whose
ultimate aim is worldwide cultural homogenization. Crofts, however, counters this spectre of macro-homogenization with his own model of homogeneity on a national-cultural level. The ‘cultural specificity’ he demands of national cinemas relates to specific, politically and aesthetically ‘alternative’, modes of film production (broadly coinciding with the notion of art cinema, or a narrowly defined ‘Third Cinema’), while any instance of non-American popular cinema can by its very nature only be a pale imitation of Hollywood.

Apart from the fairly reductive perspective this argument entails, it also reinforces American hegemony on a conceptual level. Assigned the status of being (Hollywood) internationalism’s other, national film cultures are effectively kept in their place. While it would be foolish to ignore or deny Hollywood’s power and dominance in the global marketplace, or the neo-imperialism that underpins much of US economic policy, it is none the less worth recalling Hannerz’s caution with regard to the employment of the term ‘globalization’ as a mere synonym for American imperialism. The internationalism of film production and media markets in Europe certainly suggests a more uneven historical development than is acknowledged by Crofts’ antagonistic scenario, in which national cinemas are assigned separate and neatly subordinate functions. I would argue instead that the primary agencies that have determined the development of European cinema revolve around the processes of dispersal, incursion and dissolving boundaries, and these processes are evident not simply at the level of production, but equally at the level of reception.

**Distribution, translation and cross-cultural reception**

Historical studies of distribution patterns and cross-cultural reception between European countries are few and far between, and are, to a certain extent justifiably, overshadowed by the role American film distribution has played in European markets. Received critical opinion conveys a rather sketchy picture of such interactions at best, and tends to rely on the assumption of fairly static and unchangeable national audience preferences, which then are translated back into simplistic accounts of market hegemonies of the kind Crofts and other film historians postulate. That these hegemonies are far less consistent than previously assumed, has been suggested in a number of studies, such as Joseph Garncarz’s analysis of German audience preferences in the post-war decades, which documents, for large parts of this period, a considerable resistance towards Hollywood products, despite the fact that American companies have exerted a strong hold on national distribution since the Second World War (Garncarz, 1994).
Hollywood’s dominance in European markets has often been explained as being caused by Europe’s diversity. According to received wisdom, meaning is articulated through cultural and language difference, which supposedly sets European films apart from the international appeal and intrinsic polysemy of Hollywood. In contrast to the ‘open’ American film, the closed textuality of European films (and of nationally popular genres in particular) is perceived to demand a culturally competent viewer, which simultaneously denies access to mass audiences in other countries who do not share or acquire the same competence. One fundamental problem with this argument is that it depends primarily on the verbal or linguistic dimension of cinema, while completely ignoring the processes of visual communication at work in film reception. While it may be true that language defines our understanding of filmic texts to a greater extent than the visual information a film provides, the respective importance of images and verbal language in the making of meaning in cinema remains a rather under-explored area, despite the interventions of semiotics and cognitive psychology. At any rate, any answer to this question will need to engage with European cinema not so much as a mode of production, but rather as a variable cluster of diverse instances of reception across various cultural boundaries. Ulf Hannerz suggests that:

... language has probably dominated our thinking about cultural boundaries, since it has coincided with notions of nation, and the active involvement in other symbolic modes – music, gestures, and others, and their combinations – has tended to be mainly confined to local, face-to-face settings. Now that media technology is increasingly able to deal with other symbolic modes, however, we may wonder whether imagined communities are increasingly moving beyond words. ... Leaving aside the important fact of bilingualism and multilingualism, the various symbolic modes which are now mediatized probably entail their own literacies ... (1996: 21)

As European films are mostly treated as discrete cultural phenomena, transnational modes of reception are frequently ignored. A further problem, however, is that most assumptions about audiences are based solely on the interpretation of textual evidence. A good example is Jean-Pierre Jeancolas’ influential article on French regional comedies of the 1950s, in which he argues that these films’ specific frameworks of cultural reference rendered them unintelligible, inexportable and insignificant for audiences outside their regional context (Jeancolas, 1992). It is of course a truism that there are national or subnational genres in European cinema that do not export well, or export less well than others. The question remains, though, whether this failure is caused by the films’ cultural specificity, or rather by a lack of production values, marketing and adequate exhibition windows. Conversely, of course, as Garncarz’s research on German audience preferences has shown, economic power does not always guarantee or match export success. As a more general explanatory framework for
inter-European distribution and cross-cultural reception, Jeancolas’ critical model seems flawed in two of its basic premises: the perceived stability of textual meanings, and the requirement of an acculturated spectator. As I have argued above in my discussion of diasporic influences and co-productions, a nationally specific and stable meaning is often highly difficult to determine at the level of production itself. Furthermore, once filmic texts enter the context of transnational transfer and distribution, they become subject to significant variations, translations and cultural adaptation processes. It is at this level, not at the level of production, that the question of intelligibility is decided.

The role and value of these processes is highly contentious among film critics. For some commentators, they violate, or constitute ‘misunderstandings’ of, a film’s ‘original’ meaning and its national-cultural roots (cf. Crofts, 1998: 393). Complementary to Janet Staiger’s (1994) definition of misunderstandings or misreadings as primarily historical variations in reading strategies, Hannerz sees misunderstandings as inevitable cultural variations. He suggests that we ought to consider how:

...differentially cultivated competences for symbolic modes relate to the flow of cultural forms throughout the world... Perhaps we have to draw different boundaries of intelligibility for each symbolic mode; if that is the case, the notion of the boundaries of ‘a culture’, as a self-evident package deal, with a definite spatial location, becomes suspect... (1996: 22)

Applying this model of transnational flows to the understanding of European cinema, the practices and processes of cultural translation, transfers and adaptations become legitimate strategies through which different audiences make sense of cultural artefacts. In this reading, then, the resultant readings are at least as pertinent as any original (national) intentionality.

A transnational history of European cinema thus might focus precisely on the strategies and practices by which filmic texts ‘travel’ and become transformed according to the specific requirements of different cultural contexts and audiences. This might include issues of censorship, whether imposed by the respective-nation state or by external distributors, which can cause significant changes in films’ narrative structures, content and representation (Garncarz, 1992). Textual changes may also be motivated by historically specific exhibition practices and requirements. The most pervasive textual changes to occur in the foreign distribution of European films, however, are due to specific practices of translating dialogue. Translation practices and exhibition contexts are not only instrumental in the textual variations of individual films. They also determine to a large extent the way in which foreign films are valued or grouped together at particular historical moments and in specific cultural contexts. Owing to their
respective predominance in different European countries, dubbing and subtitles have acquired varying degrees of cultural acceptance, and, although generally perceived as minor variations to a film text’s meaning, I would argue instead that these practices have had, historically speaking, a fundamental impact on the perception of European cinema in different national contexts.

Industry practices such as the ones above constitute usually not literal translations, but are better understood as strategies of cultural adaptation and familiarization. In silent intertitles, for example, it was fairly common to replace protagonists’ names or specific locations with names or places the target audience was deemed more familiar with. Even today, culturally specific references (particularly to indigenous popular forms or icons) are frequently exchanged in translation for more or less similar examples from the target context. More generally, translations adapt the vernacular and language-specific idioms (often based on class, generational or subcultural variations) into a nationally recognizable correspondence between language, social status and character. The extent of such changes depends largely on generic differences, and is most notable in films that rely heavily on dialogue and social stereotypes, such as in comedies. Variations are arguably easier to notice in subtitling, if only for a bilingual viewer. In dubbing, by contrast, cultural adaptations can be taken further, for example by adding or changing specific qualities of characters’ voices such as timbre, pronunciation, pitch or regional accent. In countries such as Germany, where dubbing is the industrial norm, adaptation strategies have become increasingly pronounced, sophisticated and elaborate.

In Britain, in contrast, dubbing is habitually seen as a fundamental rupture in cinematic realism or verisimilitude and therefore largely rejected. In those rare instances where it is appreciated (particularly by ‘cult film’ enthusiasts), this appreciation often precisely relies on acknowledging a ‘false’ synchronicity between image and sound. This perception is at least to some extent dependent on the fact that dubbing technology in Britain, because of its industrial marginality, has never developed beyond a fairly primitive level. Moreover, dubbing has traditionally been associated in Britain with the more suspect end of the market, from 1960s exploitation material to European soap operas on late-night television. During the 1950s and 1960s, a rare boom period for dubbed continental films on British screens, European cinema was for many cinema-goers less associated with ‘art’ than with ‘naughty’ entertainment, shock value and sexual titillation. Joan Hawkins’ (2000) research on the distribution of European cinema within exploitation video circuits in the United States arrives at similar patterns and perceptions in America. In the last 20 years, dubbing has, with few exceptions, virtually disappeared from British cinema screens, alongside the demise of low-brow continental genres and their specific exhibition.
venues. Subtitles, on the other hand, are viewed as a more acceptable form of translation, yet simultaneously the practice is perceived by the majority of audiences as ‘difficult’, and seen to require a more concentrated viewing position. Conversely, it is precisely this ‘difficulty’, and the concomitant perception of consuming cultural or linguistic ‘authenticity’ (whether real or imagined), which appeals to art-house audiences, and which constitutes the cultural capital to be gained from watching subtitled films (Betz, 2001). In consequence this has not only created a fairly select and elite audience for foreign films in Britain (now almost all subtitled), but has also defined their distribution channels and exclusive exhibition context (the art cinema).

In countries which predominantly use dubbing for translation purposes, different dichotomies of art versus popular, and of national versus foreign emerge. In Germany, dubbing represents a significant and technologically advanced subsidiary industry to which prestigious actors, writers and directors lend their names and voices. Dubbing has not only been the industry norm for translating foreign films (for cinema as well as later television) since the early sound period, but has also been a standard practice in using post-production sound for indigenous and co-produced films. While subtitling has become more widespread over the last 20 years, it still remains a fairly limited practice and confined to specialized exhibition outlets such as metropolitan art cinemas. As in Britain, subtitles are perceived in Germany by most audiences as difficult to follow or as distracting from the film’s visual information. Unlike in Britain, however, cultural acceptance of dubbing is fairly widespread in Germany, and does not seem to pose problems for the perception of cinematic verisimilitude at all. This effective ‘naturalization’ of dubbing as a practice of cultural adaptation has had significant implications for the circulation and reception of foreign-language films in Germany. Distribution and exhibition patterns as well as audience choices in Germany appear to be determined less by a film’s national origin, or even necessarily by market strength (Hollywood), but by broad generic categorizations. In other words, irrespective of its national origin, a film’s popularity or acceptance in Germany depends on how it conforms to established generic expectations and current preferences. Contrary to Britain, for example, where European or foreign films have somehow become interchangeable with the notion of art cinema, in Germany the category of ‘art cinema’ has been defined in strictly generic terms, and focuses on recurrent topics or narrational features. In other words, generic considerations, more than national labels, shape the perception of what constitutes popularity in the German context (Garncarz, 1994).

Popularity patterns may be too broad a category to determine the specific dynamics of actual audience preferences at any given time or in a particular cultural context. Moreover, such patterns convey the impression
of a changeable, yet still fairly homogeneous national audience, and fail to account for perhaps significant variations between different spectatorial groups. In a discussion of what a European cinema may generally entail, however, these trends can serve as useful indicators. First, the comparison between different conceptualizations of art versus popular cinema in Britain and Germany suggests that this distinction is ultimately relatively arbitrary, dependent on culturally and historically shifting contexts and discourses. Second, the standard historical perception of Hollywood’s hegemony in European markets versus ‘hermetically sealed’ national industries and audiences needs to be significantly revised or at least historically nuanced. Third, a given audience’s understanding of a foreign film is rarely based on its ‘original’ textual meaning (even if one could determine such a meaning, which is problematic in itself), but negotiated through specific translation and adaptation processes.

Writing European film history

In the preceding pages I have sketched some of the components according to which one might reconceptualize a history of ‘European’ cinema, rather than a history of ‘cinemas in Europe’. While I have admittedly focused on interactions and examples drawn from my own areas of research interest (German and British cinema primarily), I am confident that the more general arguments that I have raised are applicable to a range of other cultural contexts, both within Europe, and between European and non-European cinemas. In a continuously changing Europe, and in a global media landscape, the notion of European cinema provides to some extent simply one snapshot among other possible frameworks of cultural or industrial interaction. At the same time what I have hoped to convey in this survey is that European cinema is more than just the sum total of separate and divergent national film styles. In terms of production, cinemas in Europe have since the late 19th century emerged out of cultural hybridization processes, and processes of economic diversification. Simultaneously, the diversity of European cultures has encouraged the dispersal of fixed meanings into distinctive interpretative and textual variations. Like the European idea on a larger scale, European cinema as a concept is defined by the simultaneous agencies of dispersal and recentring, which perpetually challenge easy solutions to the questions of identity and ‘home’. Ideally, then, an alternative history of European cinema would thus avoid narratives and discourses of containment, replacing these with critical travelogues, charting the fluidity of identities, and tracing the brief encounters between films and shifting audience formations.
Note

1. This article is a substantially revised and updated version of an article first published under the title ‘Reframing European Cinema – Concepts and Agendas for the Historiography of European Film’, in Lähikuva (vol. 4, 1998).

References


Tim Bergfelder is Head of Film Studies at the University of Southampton. He is the author of International Adventures: Popular German Cinema and European Co-productions in the 1960s (Berghahn, 2005). He has co-edited (with Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk) The German Cinema Book (British Film Institute, 2002); and (with Sarah Street) The Titanic in Myth and Memory: Representations in Visual and Literary Culture (I.B. Tauris, 2004).

Address: School of Humanities, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK. [email: tab@soton.ac.uk]