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# **French Cinema in the Era of Media Capitalism**

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## French cinema in the era of media capitalism

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### Introduction

The intense circulation of images in the contemporary world has led to a growing awareness among film and media scholars of the need to go beyond national frameworks for the study of film production, circulation and reception. However, because the national construct still remains a meaningful category, the complex interaction between global and national forces begs further examining. In particular, given the pressure of globalization on nations and their increased integration into the capitalist world system, special attention must be paid to the concrete cultural manifestations of the resulting interdependence between the national and the global cultures.

It is hoped that the following analysis of France's film policy will provide a concrete example of the way national and global cultures interact in the advanced stage of the capitalist system. I will first describe how the current effort to produce Hollywood-like blockbusters adapted to the pursuit of global film markets departs from a traditional approach to French cinema and has a potentially homogenizing effect on national culture. I will then show how the concurrent support for 'non-commercial' *auteur* cinema and the production of diverse films usually tied to national and local cultures appear to prove the innate ability of national groups or subgroups to resist this homogenization, in spite of the globalizing economy. However, I will further argue that even *auteur* films serve a dual economic and political purpose, as domains of specialized market expansion and, above all, as sources of international prestige sustaining France's leadership position in the world. Taken together, this two-pronged global/national approach to cinema illustrates some of the complex ways France is constructing a new national culture to meet the demands of globalization.

### Postnational films for the global market

Since the mid-1980s, as a response to the pressure of globalizing economic forces and stronger competition from Hollywood blockbusters, French government officials have repeatedly stated the urgent need to boost the international presence of French

cinema. They have intended to do so by integrating cinema into a bold multimedia approach – an approach originally spelled out at a 1986 symposium organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Coste, 1987: 15). A subsequent report on film exportation strategies by the director of the French film board, the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC), restated the primordial importance for French cinema of securing a significant share of the global market through improved exportation schemes and careful preplanning for ambitious globally oriented productions (Wallon, 1994: 19).

Recent legislative changes reflect this more aggressive approach to film practice designed to target global audiences. In the late 1980s the French government recommended concrete measures, in particular new tax incentives for high budget spectacles, usually co-produced (Danan, 1996: 78). As a consequence, the number of high budget films (over 50 million francs, or about \$8 million) rose from 3 in 1988 to 22 in 1997 (CNC, 1998: 32). But the most drastic departure from past policies in a country known for its staunch defense of the French language as the greatest symbol of its cultural identity may reside in regulations allowing for the use of English. In 1989 a first decree adopting a more lenient definition of 'French film' to confer the *agrément* needed to secure state subsidies made English-language 'French' films suddenly eligible for state subsidies. Although this 1989 decree restricted such films to a maximum 80 percent of the subsidies available for French language films, the legislation started such a flow of English language productions that additional decrees in 1992 and 1993 sought to impose stricter conditions for eligibility. However, the resulting sharp drop in the production of English language 'French' films was perceived as detrimental to widespread global success, considering that only three 'French' films in the last ten years, all shot in English, secured over 50 million francs in exportation revenue: Milos Forman's *Valmont* in 1989, Jean-Jacques Annaud's *L'Amant* in 1992 and, most recently, Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997) (CNC, 1998: 22). Therefore, the newest 1999 legislation is seeking to reverse the trend once more while achieving a delicate balance between English and French language productions through a flexible point system. Although the use of French is technically encouraged with a 25 percent bonus, optimal subsidies are now available to English language co-productions (Danan, 1996: 80; France, 1998).

The particularly financially ambitious English language projects not only use English and follow the Hollywood mode of production, but they also adopt a textual strategy similar to their Hollywood counterparts in an effort to target global markets. They do so through their choice of general interest themes, an emphasis on action often centered on heroes interpreted by famous international stars, the choice of a glossy aesthetics, and the downplaying or erasure of cultural references unknown or damaging to foreign spectators. Even though they may be known as French and retain their French label, their texts bear little mark of 'Frenchness' other than through superficial or stereotypical images as seamless and impersonal as advertising. Therefore, these depthless commodified images detached from the complexity of history and from concrete, situated life can function as 'postnational' spectacles able to appeal to both international and national audiences (Danan, 1996: 78–80; Jameson, 1991: 6, 18, 46).

*The Fifth Element* may be the clearest recent illustration of this postnational strategy. Financed by Gaumont, with international presales for foreign distribution surpassing its budget (including \$20 million towards US rights by Columbia Pictures), this production costing nearly 500 million francs (over \$80 million) was the most expensive ever made by a French filmmaker (Dacbert, 1999; Frodon, 1997: 11). In this fast-moving, slick-looking science-fiction-cum-romance story, the

oversimplified fight against evil bringing together a highly strung couple played by Bruce Willis and Milla Jovovich leads to the expected victory of good through the redeeming value of love. Despite the universal theme and absence of specific references to French culture, film reviews often stressed the film's so-called 'French' look because of Luc Besson's well-known name and the important role of several French artists: in particular, the costumes by superstar fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier, the production design (including many of the space creatures) by graphic illustrator Mœbius and cityscapes by art director Jean-Claude Mezières (*Entertainment Weekly*, 1997: 28; Johnson, 1997: 68).<sup>1</sup> *The Fifth Element* was the first 'French' film ever to top the box-office chart (for two weeks) in the United States, where it grossed \$63 million. This one film alone generated 460 million francs (\$76 million) in exportation revenue and gathered 60 percent of the 56 million spectators for all French films exported to 32 countries in 1997, (CNC, 1999: 26, 29).

The French label may have also helped *The Fifth Element* appeal to audiences in France, where it became the top grossing film of 1997 with 7.5 million spectators. Yet, the domestic success of this film may be rather symptomatic of the mainstream public's growing liking of Hollywood or Hollywood-like blockbusters, in a market dominated by American films – which secured 52.2 percent of the French market in 1997 and an estimated 63.5 percent in 1998 (CNC, 1999: 6).

### **Defense of a heterogeneous film culture**

Although encouragement for globally appealing productions may lead to greater acceptance or even naturalization of the Hollywood model among French audiences, the French government is insisting that this economic policy is essentially ensuring that the French film industry remain competitive so as to ultimately help finance a noticeably ambitious cultural policy. According to the CNC report on film exportation mentioned earlier (Wallon, 1994: ii), '[a] strong international presence of French cinema is indeed for cinema a question of survival (financial, economic, cultural)'.<sup>2</sup> One of the main objectives of France's current audiovisual policy, according to another CNC report, is 'to refine the balance between an opening up to international projects and the defense of a nationally-based production' (Wallon, 1993: 44). It is believed that this goal can only be achieved by securing a significant place for French cinema in the global market while preserving a 'French-style economy' through an independent production bound to the nation's cultural objectives (Wallon, 1993: iii, 23).

Thus, the state is reiterating its commitment to the mixed economy system, which has regulated French cinema since the creation of the CNC after the Second World War. Revenue from a tax on all domestic ticket sales (instituted in 1948), as well as a newer tax on television companies' earnings, feeds into the cinema support fund, which supplies automatic subsidies to mainstream French cinema. In keeping with the 1959 decree which helped launch the New Wave, the cinema support fund also provides for selective subsidies based on cultural criteria which encourage artistic innovation and an active auteur cinema. In particular, the advance on takings system (which are advances to be repaid in the rare case of commercial success), granted to film projects on the basis of their artistic and cultural merits (including a French language requirement), has freed a number of films from the constraints of profitability and allowed new talents and experimental forms of expression to emerge. To seemingly offset today's increasing market pressures, more films were recently produced with this advance than in the past: 71 and 68 films received the advance in 1997 and 1998 respectively, versus 53 in

1996, and 27 in 1981 (CNC, 1999: 78; CNC, 1992: 32).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, in direct opposition to the trend towards blockbusters, there has been a marked increase in the production of low-budget and, most recently, medium-budget films: in 1997 51 out of the 125 'French initiative' films (produced entirely or predominantly with French capital) cost under 15 million francs (less than \$3 million), and 28 had budgets between 15 and 25 million francs; in 1998 17 more productions out of the 148 French initiative films fell into the 15 to 25 million franc range (CNC, 1998: 30, 32; CNC, 1999: 39).

France's renewed commitment to a more diversified approach to production has contributed to a marked rebirth of creativity, especially among younger filmmakers in their 30s and 40s. Since the mid-1990s especially, this young cinema with little known or sometimes nonprofessional actors has revived a form of realism and social consciousness often neglected since the New Wave by auteurs more concerned with intimist psychological explorations and formal experiments. Films by the younger generation of directors often aim at a harsh commentary on marginalized characters in underprivileged *banlieue* or provincial settings, beset with problems of unemployment, violence and racism, as in Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* [Hate] (1995), Bruno Dumont's *La Vie de Jésus* [The Life of Jesus] (1997), Manuel Poirier's *Western* (1997), Robert Guédiguian's *Marius et Jeannette* (1998) and, most recently, Erick Zonca's *La Vie rêvée des anges* [The Dreamlife of Angels] (1998). Although most auteur films are primarily made for a specialized public of cinephiles, the films mentioned above have also succeeded in attracting much critical attention *and* in broadening their appeal with a relatively large domestic (and sometimes European) public. *La Haine* reached 2 million domestic spectators and *Western* 1 million, while *La Vie rêvée des anges* had already gathered 1.3 million French spectators by the end of 1998. *Marius et Jeannette* shared the 1997 César for best French film with *On connaît la chanson* [Same Old Song] by the established auteur Alain Resnais, and each film attracted around 2.5 million French spectators (CNC, 1998: 9; CNC, 1997: 10; CNC, 1999: 7, 8).<sup>4</sup> As for Bruno Dumont, whose *La Vie de Jésus* won the prestigious Jean Vigo prize, his recent Grand Prize at the 1999 Cannes festival for his second film, *L'Humanité*, may help him achieve the wider recognition he deserves.

Although the state remains a key player in the vitality of current French cinematographic production, it is insisting that it is now essentially playing the role of a mediator ensuring that both economic and cultural aims are being met (Wallon, 1993: 30). As a consequence, cultural initiatives are being noticeably decentralized, especially in the case of the less prestigious ones (Urfalino, 1993: 847). Such a shift may have encouraging effects, as some local institutions are starting to support innovative films steeped in the social realities of their regions. For example, three of the acclaimed auteur films mentioned earlier (*La Vie de Jésus*, *L'Humanité* and *La Vie rêvée des anges*) were financed in part by the Nord-Pas de Calais Region (where the action takes place) with the assistance of the Regional aid fund for cinematographic production (CRRAV) created in 1990 (Conseil régional, 1998). Greater creativity coupled with decentralization may be further exemplified by the fact that although more novice filmmakers are making films, a smaller percentage of these first films than in the past received national support. Out of the 148 films financed primarily with French capital in 1998, 58 were by first-time filmmakers (versus 46 in 1997, 37 in 1998 and 26 in 1988), but only 21 of these first films – or about one third – benefited from the advance on takings, as opposed to about 50 percent until 1995 (CNC, 1999: 39).

In this respect, whether through direct government involvement or local initiatives, France may be achieving its official goal of resisting the homogeniza-

tion which threatens cultural representations, and especially national cinemas, because of Hollywood's hegemony. Catherine Trautmann, Minister of Culture and Communication (in the footsteps of her flamboyant predecessor Jack Lang, who in the early 1980s launched the battle against American imperialism in the most virulent fashion), has repeatedly stated that French cultural policy aims at protecting 'cultural pluralism' against the 'perverse effects of globalization and cultural homogenization' (1998a). Such a position about the importance of culture in providing citizens with a unique identity and sense of belonging in the national community was highly publicized during the dispute over the cultural exception during the GATT negotiations in 1993. Based on the vitality and diversity of its film production, the policy in favor of postnational films ensures that French cinema remains economically competitive but does not appear to alter the government's commitment to the preservation of diversity. With a rising number of films encompassing a whole spectrum of production practices catering to general audiences and film lovers, France seems indeed determined to ensure that cinema survives as a pluralistic form of creative expression.

Production, however, is not the only measure of cultural pluralism. Nations do not only need to preserve pluralistic forms of cultural production, but also facilitate 'democratic access to culture', because both priorities are essential in order to bring together 'the diverse people of the nation' and 'keep a society alive', according to Trautmann (1998c). Nevertheless, in spite of the Ministry of Culture's repeated commitment to cultural democratization and the fact that some critically acclaimed films have had a relative commercial success, as discussed above, ticket sales are primarily concentrated on a handful of well-advertised American blockbusters, and to a lesser extent, a few French mainstream films. In 1998, 30 out of the 40 films which reached over 1 million spectators were American (CNC, 1999: 6). Furthermore, non-English language foreign films are having a more and more limited audience, from an 11.9 percent market share in 1982 to 4.6 percent in 1998 – despite the remarkable success of Italy's *Life is Beautiful* that year (CNC, 1999: 6; CNC, 1992: 20). Instead of greater access to a pluralistic culture, therefore, only a cultural elite seems to be taking advantage of the wide spectrum of films, while the tastes of the majority are narrowing.

One may consequently wonder whether the apparent continuity in French film policy, through its commitment to both economy and culture, is masking a profound rift between an old elite devoted to a traditional high culture seemingly removed from direct economic considerations, and a new elite, converted to the homogenizing culture of capitalist expansion. Or is there a new logic which reconciles the apparent contradiction between old and new cultures in such a way that heterogeneity and homogenization need to coexist?

### **Image of culture for global consumption**

European art films, through deliberate differentiation from Hollywood's commodities, have for a long time been able to carve out a specialized commercial space, as Steve Neale has pointed out (1982: 14). One may therefore argue that even high cultural works, in spite of their relative freedom from economic demands, have always carried some economic weight by catering to a niche clientele.

To some extent, the French government's auteur policy and pursuit of specialized audiences simply perpetuate this approach to art films, even if new strategies are designed to adapt to the current technological environment. For example, it is hoped that satellite and cable technology, bypassing the closed theater network, especially in the United States, will make it possible to offer diversified pro-

gramming to specific cinephiles' markets. CFI (Canal France International), one of the two channels (with TV5) devoted to French programming for international audiences with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is even investigating the idea of a 'virtual movie theater' for 'French cinema lovers': two-hour blocks of encrypted programming around a film, to be carried by CFI satellites and sold to pay channels in the USA and Canada (Bloche, 1998). In addition, the Internet and information technology, declared priority areas of development by the French government, are now considered crucial for the promotion and dissemination of French films. Unifrance, the official body in charge of the promotion of French films abroad, has designed a web site covering information such as festivals, new releases and box office figures since 1997 [www.unifrance.org/]. Beyond this general information, the government is encouraging each film company to promote individual films through their own web sites and suggesting that the choice of language and design for these sites be more ambitiously geared towards international clients.

The goal of such a promotion, however, is not simply to expand the international audience of single films. Rather, it is hoped that it will enhance the overall reputation of French cinema and ensure that France remains recognized worldwide as the country of critically acclaimed 'art' films. For example, in an article entitled 'A Certain Philosophy of Film' from the magazine *French Label*, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Arnaud, 1995), one can read the following answer to the question 'Is there such a thing as French film today?':

The number and variety of recent film productions still denote a certain French approach to cinema as art and to the special role of the author-director. . . . moviemaking in France obeys certain rules and requirements that do not exist elsewhere. The French have a certain idea of the movies: cinema as art. Cinema is a key to matters of the spirit, creativity and values of civilization.<sup>5</sup>

Minister Trautmann reasserted her support for policies boosting the international prestige of French cinema as the world center of film culture. In particular, she announced the future opening (by the end of 2000) of a House of Cinema, a centralizing place for all French institutions devoted to cinema as an 'art and culture object', ranging from regional film institutes and art theaters to research centers, publishers and universities (1998b).

Paris is the world capital of cinephilia, as all great foreign filmmakers agree . . . [The House of Cinema] will be the greatest symbol of the French cultural exception which France applies to cinema.

Emphasis on the 'cultural exception' is heightening the international prestige and visibility of French cinema, and through it, of French culture at large. Thus, auteur films represent a 'cultural capital' which transcends the actual market value of traditional art objects. In short, French cinema has become an internationally known brand of exceptional value for France, according to a report entitled *The Desire for France: The International Presence of France and Francophonie in the Information Society* (Bloche, 1998).

[French cinema] has its public everywhere in the world and especially in the United States. Although it is a niche audience, it is also an elite audience, given that our films have such a reputation for being intellectual, perhaps a little verbose and complicated. Our cinema is a brand.

Indeed, some film critics in France and abroad are eager to relay this image, sometimes hastily referring to a 'new New Wave', as does Marie-Claude Trémois in her

book devoted to French cinema in the 1990s (1997) or Stephen Holden in the *New York Times*.<sup>6</sup> French cinema has become a brand promoting its luxury film products for a minority, but also lending French culture at large a symbolic production value, in the same way as product and service brands (Bic, Danone, Perrier, Publicis, France-Telecom), or also historical brands like 'Sorbonne internationale', according to the same report. Such brands are helping culture 'made in France' keep its distinctiveness and 'quality label' as one of the strategies for worldwide exports.

In this perspective, exporting 'art' cinema as well as postnational films becomes part of France's 'diplomatic arsenal' in the 'culture wars' which support a nation's 'struggles for political rights and recognition' in the world economy (Smith, 1990: 185). Through its cultural diplomacy, according to Hervé de Charette, Minister of Foreign Affairs (whose ministry devoted 35 percent of its budget to cultural action in 1997), France must lead the fight against 'Coca Cola culture' but also stand for universal values rather than 'Camembert culture' (Dorville, 1997). Thus, France's dual policy in favor of postnational and auteur films no longer appears as a contradiction but rather as a synergetic battle for international visibility within an integrated approach in favor of global economic expansion (Wallon, 1994: 36, 54). Like art films, postnational films do not simply bring in direct economic gains but promote a positive image of France. These top of the line, most commercially viable products, which represent a large share of French film investment money and are most heavily advertised, also convey the image of a competitive European film industry leader whose products are capable of high production values and technological sophistication. The image of French cinema as a film industry leader, in turn, is a reminder that France is still a leading international economic power (the fourth) and major force in the global economy. Both components of this policy, therefore, are the result of a new form of state practice dependent upon the making and dissemination of images in our 'spectacle society' with the assistance of new technology. And both encourage identification with the global consumer culture while reasserting the specificity of the nation.

### **Conclusion: new function of culture in the capitalist nation-state**

Such an image of France demonstrates that it is not quite the end of national cultures predicted by some theorists for the new global space. Fredric Jameson, for example, had warned that with the new global space progressively superseding the national space of monopoly capitalism, national cultures were in the process of turning into folkloric, archaic remnants (Jameson, 1991: 412). Indeed, since global mass culture appears to be a 'homogenizing form of cultural representation' subordinated to the expansion of capital, according to Stuart Hall's analysis (1991: 28), the nation-state must erode any significant resistance to the hegemonic order dominated by the logic of global markets, concentration of capital, and consumerism. However, Hall has further argued that capital expansion must operate through or even enhance national differences to achieve this globalizing objective, hence the presence of a dual homogenizing/differentiation process:

[This peculiar form of homogenization] is very powerfully located in the increasing and ongoing concentration of culture and capital. But it is now a form of capital which recognizes that it can only, to use a metaphor, rule through other capitals, rule alongside and in partnership with other economic and political elites. It does not attempt to obliterate them; it operates through them.

Conversely, in spite of the inescapable demands and perceived benefits of globalization, political elites intent upon preserving their hegemonic interests in the nation-state must find a way of maintaining the cultural differences which underlie social order and structure the lives of citizens. Consequently, a nation's leaders must encourage 'a loyalty to market economics' among consumers, while forming 'cultural citizens, docile but efficient participants in that economy and society mix', in a continual dialectical tension between selfish individualistic consumers and collective selfless citizens (Miller, 1993: xii, xiii). In other words, especially in its current intensified phase, capitalist expansion relies on this constant tension within nation-states, caught between the openness of capital and the closure of particular social structures, as Raymond Williams once demonstrated in a chapter entitled 'The Culture of Nations' (1983: 192):

Thus an ideal condition is relentlessly pursued. First, the economic efficiency of a global system of production and trade, to include a reorganised and efficient 'national' sector within an open and interpenetrating market flow. But at the same time a socially organised and socially disciplined population, one from which effort can be mobilised and taxes collected along the residual but still effective national lines.

As a result, the globalization phenomenon has not superseded national cultures but transformed them into increasingly complex manifestations complicating the role of the nation-state as it endeavors to maintain a delicate balance between homogenization and heterogeneity, or the universal and the particular, as Arjun Appadurai has further theorized (1990: 307).

Globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, clothing style and the like), which are absorbed into local political and cultural economies, only to be repatriated as heterogeneous dialogues of national sovereignty, free enterprise, fundamentalism, etc. in which the state plays an increasingly delicate role. . . . In general, the state has become the arbiter of this *repatriation of difference* (in the form of goods, signs, slogans, styles, etc.).

French film policy may be one of the most visible manifestations of this 'repatriation of difference' in this environment dominated by both globalization and heterogeneity. The French state is encouraging two new production trends which may at first seem at odds with each other. On the one hand, postnational films removed from concrete realities and primarily motivated by the unrestrained pursuit of profit present spectators with a unquestioning global outlook. On the other, socially conscious auteur films portraying the complex identities of marginalized or nonconformist characters appear to stem from a resistance to the homogenizing effects of globalization among citizens in search of meaningful local identities. Yet, this alternative cinema, which aims at fostering a fairer pluralistic society while attesting to the persistence of a distinct French culture, also fully participates in France's effort to benefit from global capitalist expansion. Ultimately, what appears to be a direct opposition between culture and commerce, or heterogeneity and homogenization, is in part a capitalist dialectics redefining the role of nations as they face changing economic demands. In its effort to adapt to these demands, France may be more concerned with what cinema, through its dissemination of powerful images, can do for the nation's ranking in the world than with encouraging democratic plurality and preserving the 'cultural exception' it had vowed to defend.

## Notes

1. For example, Brian Johnson from *MacLean's* noted that the film was an 'exercise in sci-fi haute couture' and added: 'Trust the French to deify a foreign, scantily clad, incomprehensible supermodel' (Johnson, 1997: 68).

2. My own translation from the French, as all other translations unless otherwise indicated.

3. These numbers also include advances sometimes given as an aid to post-production.

4. *On connaît la chanson* is in fact a French/Swiss/British co-production.

5. From the English-language edition of *Label France*.

6. Trémois's eagerness to affix a single label to many different approaches to current filmmaking has been criticized, for example by Myrto Konstantarakos (1998). About the perception of French cinema in the American press establishment, see Samuel Blumenfeld (1999).

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