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The idea of a 'national cinema' cannot be maintained in an era of global cultural production. Discuss with reference to specific examples.

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Introduction

In the following essay I will explain if the idea of national cinema can be maintained in an era of global cultural production. To explore this theory I will focus on the power of Hollywood and the pressures of global film industry versus the difficulties of national and art cinema of getting a niche in the film market.

Silent movies had their own universal language but it changed in 1920 when “the arrival of the talkies” defined the term “film’s nationality” (Forbes and Street 2000:29). Language is recognized as a fundamental part of a country’s culture so national cinema is linked with language too. Therefore, we could define national cinema as this one produced and filmed in a specific country in order to promote national culture, included language.

How is the relation between European and American cinema? According to Forbes and Street (2000:41) “the inscription of the relationship with Hollywood underlines the double address of national cinemas, simultaneously speaking to a domestic audience and embodying the national stereotype for foreigners”. It explains the importance of European and national cinema considered as vehicles to represent and protect countries values and heritage not just in its own country but abroad.

European Governments fund national filmmakers to conserve and promote their own culture. However, the Hollywood formula and its production methods are extended so fast in Europe that nowadays is more difficult to find real national cinema than some decades ago when Hollywood marketing was not so extended than today. Henry Kissinger pointed, “globalisation is really another name for the dominant role of the United States” (quoted in *Global Hollywood* 2011:17). This idea can be transferred to Hollywood, a dominant film industry that has become popular thanks to the power of the majors in addition to aggressive marketing strategies.

In order to fight against this “universalism” (Forbes and Street, 2000), art cinema creates a different way of understanding life, far away from the American paradigm. Though, it does not follow the commercial paths so is considered an exclusive cinema that just can survive thanks to public funding.

Art cinema should coexist with commercial one. The reason is even European cinema has originally belief as an art instead of an industry; Europe needs a strong European film industry in order to compete with America. Otherwise, Hollywood would always be the dominant and most popular cinema leaving the European one for a minority audience.

Art versus Industry

“Films that were more popular at the box office but not much admired by critics tended to be forgotten in History which attempted to emphasise European cinema as a superior alternative to Hollywood” (Forbes and Street, 2000:44).

Avant-garde cinema is still produced in Europe, it is considered as “high cinema” done for a minority while Hollywood films achieve a wide audience. Why American cinema is more popular than European one? Hollywood is a powerful industry and a lot of money is invested in every movie. Some spectators prefer to watch American films instead of national ones because they know these movies are better produced, better filmed and better edited. Quoting Neale, Hollywood movies are “unified and unifying mode of textual address, a genuinely popular form of entertainment with a mass rather than a class-based audience” (*European Cinema. An Introduction*, 2000:38).

European cinema usually develops interesting scripts but they are low budget movies so they do not reach the same technology quality than Hollywood ones. Some cinema lovers prefer the story beyond the technique; this is the audience defined by Forbes and Street as “better educated and more receptive to narrative experimentation” (2000). However, there is a wide amount of spectators that just want to be entertained and enjoy the “deliberately escapist” cinema (Forbes and Street, 2000:28). While Hollywood movies are “transparent, easy to read, goal-oriented, and structured around narrative closure”, art cinema uses characters who are “psychologically complicated” where “reality is ambiguous and subjective”

foregrounding the author as a “structure in the film’s system” (Forbes and Street, 2000:37).

European art cinema produces unique films that usually do not follow any commercial formula in order to explore new ways of creation. Experimental cinema has never had huge audiences but commercial filmmakers have been influenced by these projects approaching original ideas to a wide audience. One clear example is the Terry Gilliam’s movie *Twelve Monkeys* (1995). It had an important commercial success but the script was based on a *rara avis* science fiction short movie called *La Jetée* (1962) directed and written by Chris Marker, an influential but minority French documentary filmmaker.

Examples like this one prove spectators are open to watch new things. However, why are always the same kinds of movies the ones which have the best commercial success? The answer is simple: marketing. Hollywood spends a lot of money in each stage of film production, including promotion and marketing. American movies always appear on mass media while many national films do not receive any attention from the press. Thus, those spectators who are not pure cinema lovers just will go to the cinema to watch the films they have heard about.

Even the cinema was invented in Europe by the Lumière Brothers at the end of 19th century, when it was exported to America the Hollywood studios invested in it so much that they transformed it into an industry. Nowadays, there is no doubt these main American majors have controlled world cinema industry leaving Europe aside. As the German filmmaker Win Wender said: “The American have colonized our subconscious” (Wenders quoted in *Global Cinema*, 2001:1).

According to Gomery, the real success of American movies is based on the studio system: “By concentrating production within vast, factory-like studios and by vertically integrating all aspects of the business, from production to publicity to distribution to exhibition, they created a model system – the ‘studio system’- which other countries had to imitate in order to compete” (*European Cinema, An Introduction*, 2000:34).

Figures explain it better: “During 2000, US film took 73 per cent of the European market (70 per cent in 1999) and 93.3 per cent (92.1 per cent in 1999) in their home market (EAO, 2011a). In return, European films accounted for only 3.9 per cent of admission at the North American box office that year (3.6 per cent in 1999)” (Jäckel, 2003:92-93).

On the other hand, Hollywood producers invest so much money in their products that it is really difficult to compete with them. Quoting Le Film Français, “average film investments are low (US\$4.26 million) in comparison with the average cost of a film from a major Hollywood studio (in 2000, US\$76 million of which are direct production costs)” (*European Film Industries*, 2000:42-43).

Can Europe compete with Hollywood? If we should respond the question right now, the answer would be “no”. However, future could be different if Europe starts to understand cinema not just like an art but an industry too.

“It is now widely accepted that the European film industry needs commercial products generated in Europe and ‘commercial potential’ is now ‘given due consideration’” (Downey quoted in *European Film Industries*, 2003:113). Entertainment, genre and formula movies create profits. These benefits are necessities in order to invest, conserve and promote art cinema productions too. Otherwise, the European Film Industry is bounded to loose popularity, “no longer [approaches] a mass audience” (Forbes and Street, 2000:38), reducing its funding to promote national culture.

Historically, European cinema has been linked with art and it “has been accused of elitism” (Bergfelder, 2005:317). However, it is important to conserve it because it preserves national identity giving “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” (Bergfelder, 2005:316). This “high culture” can approach to a larger amount of people when it is expressed through a popular media like cinema. However, Hollywood dominance in the Film Industry and the spread of American culture has produced in contemporary art the “crisis of European identity” increased by “the economic and cultural forces of

globalisations” (Forbes and Street, 2000:48). Nowadays young European filmmakers are so influenced by the American ways of production that they are forgetting European film’s roots in order to achieve more profitable products.

Globalization is linked with the current lack of identity in European nations. According to Bergfelder (2005:316) there has been an academic discussion about European cinema 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”. Doubtless, American movies have contributed to the crisis of European identity. Mass popular culture like Hollywood movies are considered “low culture” and this kind of culture has extended basically to every country in the world. This is why the American stereotypes showed in their movies are so popular in European countries where they have already considered them as part of their own culture.

We can buy the same clothes, eat the same food and watch the same movies in different cities like London or Madrid. It is just an easy example of how “cultural diffusion has always been international, but the velocity and profundity of its processes seem to be on the increase” (Mann quoted in *Global Hollywood*, 2001:19). We live in a global society where Europe is losing its own roots promoting international culture instead of national one. Some small villages might conserve antiques traditions, but big and medium towns are quickly losing their authenticity, their own taste and flavour. Nowadays is more difficult to find differences between Western cities because they have the same global culture.

Public funding promotes art in order to perpetuate the idea of nation. When these grants are given to European filmmakers, institutions expect them to perpetuate certain ideas about Europe. However, if there is a crisis of identity in Europe, how these artists could transmit solid ideas and values about their own country or continent? On the other hand, as we have explained some lines above, art-house cinema addresses to a minority so even if they are promoting any kind of European identity this message just achieve a few and it does not spread on the society.

Some mass production films have such a great quality (technical and plot) that they get popularity and recognition. They are rare examples of popular cinema considered as art but most of the time commercial and artistic cinema will never be at the same level. One of the reasons is the difference between American and European way of film production. According to Forbes and Street, in Europe “making a film thus becomes more like writing a private diary than manufacturing a car, and the camera becomes the instrument for writing rather than a machine for producing”. In addition, they point the importance of the director because the movie is sold in his/her name instead of the studio’s name “as in the Hollywood tradition” (2000:38).

The Spanish cinema

The movies of the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar are clear examples of how national cinema might be international popular art too. As a self-taught filmmaker, during the 80s he has created experimental and wild movies that showed “a new cultural stereotype for a hyperliberated Spain” (Kinder quoted in *European Cinema. An Introduction*, 2000:41). In the meantime he worked as an office worker for the big Spanish company Telefónica. The fame came in the 90s, when he became an international well-known director winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1999 for *Todo sobre mi madre* (All About my Mother). In 2002, he repeated his presence in the Oscar ceremony winning the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay thanks to *Hable con ella* (Talk to Her).

If Almodóvar has never studied in a cinema school and he does not follow any Hollywood formula, why are his movies shown around the world? The answer is audience is still looking for original and shocking stories and Almodóvar’s films represents grotesque, colourful a unique sides of the Spanish culture. Quoting Forbes and Street: “The films of Pedro Almodóvar deploy comedic and melodramatic traditions that combine an acute sense of national specificity with cultural fascinations which cross national boundaries” (2000:43).

Nowadays, most of Hollywood movies are really similar, producers and filmmakers follow successful commercial formulas but sometimes audience needs to watch something different and not just “the same movie” breaking the Hollywood marketing

formulas. This unpredictable audience behaviour explains the international success of some art cinema like Almodóvar's movies.

Another example of popularity and recognition of a Spanish filmmaker beyond national borders is Alejandro Amenábar. Even we could consider Amenábar's film as national cinema, his work is closer to Hollywood movies than Almodóvar ones. The reason is Amenábar has studied in a cinema school. They usually teach students to make movies following the Hollywood way of production instead of the traditional art cinema one.

Amenábar is the paradigm of the young Spanish generation of filmmakers because he combines national cinema productions with Hollywood ones. The first Amenábar's movies, *Tesis* (1996) and *Abre los ojos* (1997) were low budget but its originality caught the attention of Tom Cruise who produced *The Others* (2001) starred by Nicole Kidman. In 2005, Hollywood recognised his work winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film thanks to *Mar Adentro* (*The Sea Inside*) starred by the most famous Spanish actor: Javier Bardem.

Both, Almodóvar and Amenábar are probably the two best-known Spanish filmmakers. However, their style is really different. Amenábar is closer to the Film Industry, that one so necessary to conserve European cinema, while Almodóvar is more considered as an artist, important as well in order to keep traditions and national heritage.

Even though, European art film usually does not receive much promotion but Almodóvar's one has always received the attention of the international press. Are we experiencing a change in the way of understanding European film production? Everything points that currently boundaries between art and popular cinema are being melted, both kind of cinema are coexisting with each other. According to Bergfelder, "in the 1990s, many European filmmakers moves increasingly towards popular genres and narratives previously considered the domain of Hollywood, 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)" (2005:318). It is a natural consequence of global culture production

where ideas like art on the cinema production and profits need to coexist if they want to survive.

At the same time, Bergfelder affirms there is still a place for “European art-house *auteur*” because they are still significant powerful “as proven by figures such as Lars von Trier or Pedro Almodóvar” (2005:318). However, Almodóvar or Lars von Trier are just two rare examples of popular art filmmakers. “Art-house *auteris*” usually need protection from the European and national Government in order to produce their projects and there are just a few of them who could produce their own films without these grants.

Conclusion

All the theories and examples explored in this essay point audiences want to be entertained but at the same time they are open to watch original and interesting stories. However, audience is not the only element in the cinema production. Public funding and globalisation are two important parts in order to understand the current era of global cultural production.

National cinema will survive if it keeps getting public funding otherwise it is damned to disappear. It is not usually profitable, so it cannot compete with Hollywood and it will keep addressing just to a minority. Though, many pieces of art are minorities as well and government and art institutions conserve and promote them because they are part of the national heritage. This should be the same method for national and art cinema. In addition, Europe needs to create a Film Industry like Hollywood in order to compete with it. Should European productions change their funding methods in order to turn into an industry? Doubtless it would improve filmmakers and producers responsibility but on the other hand it might be considered as the end of authentic and real national cinema, that one that conserves European identity instead of global culture.

From years, there has been a debate about these Government grants. They should be provided to these filmmakers that promote national values and explore into audiovisual art. Though, many times they just give the money to well-known directors

whose movies will receive commercial success. Thus, the debate points if the filmmakers who have already won money with their last movies should or should not receive public funding. Hollywood productions are made by private funds and producers risks their own money, not the Government's grants money. European movies that are made just to entertain and obtain commercial success might follow the same system in order to difference art from industry.

Forbes and Street points "in seeking to offer economic protection to their domestic film industries, European government were led to attempt to define a national film since this was both a form of distinctiveness and useful counterweight to the supposed 'universalism' of Hollywood" (2000:27). Following this idea, Government's grants should be given just to these projects that really promote national culture (roots, language etc) cutting off the money to these film that belongs to the industry instead of the national art.

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