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Film Policies within the EU: Building a Common European Identity

European identity has been simultaneously difficult to define and determinant for the political project of the European Union (EU). The growing importance of European culture in recent years coincides with a shift from essentialist to constructivist conceptions of European identity. This paper starts by looking at the evolution of the concept of European identity as well as the focus on culture in the European integration process. Arguing that cinema is involved in the identity-building process in Europe, it then focuses on the policies developed by the EU in support of the audiovisual industry, the MEDIA programme in particular. The increasing investment in the distribution and circulation of European films within Europe's borders suggests that, for the EU, it is by observing other cultures that the peoples of Europe learn about their differences and similarities. In this context, the last section of this paper analyses *Joyeux Noël/Merry Christmas* as an example of a film distributed with the support of MEDIA. This is an interesting case study not only because it exemplifies the representation of history in contemporary European cinema, but also because it explores, within its narrative, the formula unity in diversity.

1. European Identity and the European Integration Process

Although the idea of Europe and the identification with the European continent had existed for centuries, the concept of "European identity" started to be explored after the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 – blurring the distinction between the notion of identity within the broader European context and that of the European Union (EU). In

1973, the European Community published the *Declaration on European Identity*, approved in Copenhagen. The “unity in diversity” motto that has, since then, been the foundation of European identity, was clearly stated at this early stage, and is best illustrated by the following sentence:

“The *diversity* of cultures within the framework of a common European civilization, [but, at the same time] the attachment to *common* values and principles, the increasing *convergence* of attitudes to life, the awareness of having specific interests in common and the determination to take part in the construction of a *United Europe*, all give the European identity its originality and its own dynamism [my emphasis]”. (European Communities 1973: 118)

According to Bugge, the *Declaration on European Identity* “articulated a crudely functionalist view of identity-building, which was seen not as a pre-requisite for, but rather as a by-product of, economic integration. (...) In the final analysis, however, it was the very absence of such a by-product that prompted the EC to take an interest in the subject and indeed to propose various ‘identity policies’”. (Bugge 2003: 62) In the subsequent decades, the discussion about European identity assumed a great importance on the political level, becoming an increasingly pertinent debate as the EU welcomes new members and works on a Constitution that is facing serious criticism. Beyond institutional or political aspects of identity, defined by concepts such as territory, citizenship and borders, there was a focus on cultural aspects of the idea of Europe. Because, as Str ath (2002: 387) puts it, “identity becomes a problem when there is no identity”; this re-focus stems from the wish for greater integration, as well as simultaneous concerns over its effectiveness. Indeed, a “Herculean task” (Llobera 1993: 78) as it is, a more concrete definition of identity has been, since the 1990s, pointed out

as necessary, if the EU, criticised by many for its lack of democracy, and understood as a construction of the elites, is to have some legitimacy (García 1993: 1).

The centring of European policies around the topic of culture became particularly relevant after the publication of the report on “People’s Europe” in 1985. The frequently cited statement by Jean Monnet, “if I were to begin again, I would start with culture” (cited in Collins 1994: 81), seems to have provoked a turn in the interests of policy-makers, officially empowered in cultural issues after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Curiously, as Collins notes, although found in many texts, there is no original source for this quotation, which is not present in the *Memoirs* of Monnet. Indeed, according to Isabel Capeloa Gil, this sentence was misquoted from a speech by Héléne Ahrweiler. Ahrweiler herself explained the error in an article in *Le Monde*, in June 1998, as is also referred to by Gil:

“I would like, nevertheless, to make something clear about the erroneous attribution of this formula to one of the founding fathers of Europe, since I am, although involuntarily, responsible for its diffusion. In fact, when at the meeting of the États généraux des étudiants européens, more than ten years ago, I was the principal of the Paris Academy, and in my opening speech, I quoted that sentence, attributing it to Jean Monnet, in the conditional form – “Jean Monnet could have said”. This essential nuance was disregarded from the redactor of the minutes of this meeting, and the quotation has had the destiny we know of today.” (cited in Gil 2009: 7)¹

¹ My translation. In French in the original: “(...) je voudrais néanmoins donner une précision sur l’attribution erronée de cette formule à l’un des pères de l’Europe, puisque je suis, bien involontairement, responsable de la diffusion de ce mot. En effet, à l’occasion de la réunion des États généraux des étudiants européens, il y a plus de dix ans, alors que j’étais recteur de l’académie de Paris, j’avais, dans mon discours de bienvenue, cité cette phrase, en la mettant dans la bouche de Jean Monnet, à l’irréel du présent (« pourrait s’écrier Jean Monnet »). Cette nuance essentielle a échappé au rédacteur des actes de cette rencontre, et la citation a connu la fortune que l’on sait.”

In the words of Sassatelli, this sentence has been widely quoted since it is “clearly filling a gap in legitimacy for the emerging European cultural policy and providing a revisionist narrative after the not so total success of monetary union in making Europe a new socio-political unity”. (Sassatelli 2006: 25) The fact that the mistake was only made clear by Ahrweiler in 1998 denotes a change in the conception of European identity and culture. Monnet “could have said so” two decades ago, but it seems less plausible today. The sentence was useful in setting in motion programmes in support of European culture, but is questioned as a preoccupation with an *a priori* definition of European identity gives way to a discussion of more pragmatic aspects of programmes in the areas of culture and education. In fact, despite the increasing interest in European culture and the growing number of EU initiatives in the domain of culture, the definition of a European identity has been, in recent years, perceived as expendable.

In 2004, a broader political debate on European culture arose, with the writing of the Constitutional Text. Not only does it contain the first official definition of the EU as both a union of citizens and a union of States, the Constitutional Treaty also lists some of the values already mentioned in the Declaration of 1973. These are identified by Luisa Passerini (2002) as: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, human rights, pluralism, and non-discrimination. Furthermore, the Constitutional text adds to these values the symbols of the Union, now officially listed as: the flag with the 12 stars, the anthem based on the Ode to Joy by Beethoven, the Euro, Europe Day on the 9th May, and, as hinted by the Declaration of 1973, the motto “unity in diversity”. Although abandoned, the Constitutional Treaty is still an important reference for the understanding of how culture is being defined by the European institutions. In fact, despite not having been ratified, so does the Lisbon Treaty, signed in 2007, re-states the values mentioned above, as it defends the creation of a Europe of rights and values.

Thirty years after a Declaration already founded in these terms, José Manuel Durão Barroso, recently elected President of the European Commission, also supports the formula that is now an official symbol of the Union. At the moment of the signing of the Constitutional Treaty, in Rome, the 29th October 2004, Barroso addressed the audience in the following terms:

“More than a century ago, at the opening of the Paris Peace Congress, the great French writer Victor Hugo pronounced a speech which called on the European nations to join in a superior unity, to constitute a ‘European fraternity’ without losing their distinctive qualities or their glorious individualities. These words appear as prophetic today. I hear their resonance in this room today...”. (Barroso 2004a: 1) ²

The reference to Victor Hugo highlights a common approach to the European identity – one that situates its origin in the past and history of the Old Continent (and one which, as I will discuss later, is also explored in some contemporary European films). But despite the insistence on a historical lineage to European identity, the 2004 re-focus on culture must be seen as a new phenomenon. A month after the signing of the Constitutional text, Barroso was invited to give a speech for the opening of a new initiative called “A Soul for Europe”. Referring to the enlargement process of the EU, the writing of the Constitution and the institutional reforms of the European Parliament and Commission, he affirmed that, although not new, the role of culture in the construction of Europe had acquired “a new sense of urgency” (Barroso 2004b: 2). Like the organisers of the conference, the recently nominated President suggested some

² My translation. In French in the original: “Il y a plus d'un siècle et demi, à l'occasion de l'ouverture du Congrès de la Paix à Paris, le grand écrivain français Victor Hugo prononça un discours qui appelait les nations européennes à se rassembler dans une unité supérieure pour constituer la « fraternité européenne », sans pour autant perdre leurs qualités distinctes et leurs glorieuses individualités. Ces mots apparaissent comme prophétiques aujourd'hui. Je les entends retentir dans cette salle...”.

“soul-searching” was necessary in order to find a “common ground” for the development of a cultural Europe.

Despite the consensus that the idea of European identity is fundamental for the European integration process and the increasing political interest in the topic, neither scholars, nor the EU have been able to define its cultural aspects in concrete terms. As Mayer and Palmowski suggest, not only have the legal and institutional aspects of the European integration been studied more often than culture, but also, the EU is involved in a complex process, performing “both a composite *and* a mediating function”. (Mayer and Palmowski 2004: 590) This composite function of the EU had already been identified by Thomas Guback, whose reading of the *Declaration on European Identity* contrasts with Bugge’s idea that identity was seen as naturally arising from economic integration. Already in 1974, Guback referred to the fact that “the major emphasis is not upon *preserving* a variety of cultural heritages, but rather upon drawing up a new one which will be in tune with supra-national economic considerations”. (Guback 1974: 10) But despite the references to European values in the Constitutional Text of 2004 and the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, recent EU official documents present identity as a fluid and shifting concept. As Barroso claimed in a conference in 2004, “one recognises identity, one does not define it. Europe can be recognised, but it is hardly defined”. (Barroso 2009: 21) ³

As the official institutions of the Union leave behind the definition of a European cultural identity, the focus is on cultural policies, and in those in support of the audiovisual industries in particular. As Dimitris Eleftheriotis puts it:

³ My translation. In Portuguese in the original: “[A identidade] reconhece-se, não se define. A Europa reconhece-se, mas dificilmente se define.”

“the contradiction between essential ‘unifying concepts’ and ‘cultural diversity’ is impossible to resolve in any meaningful way except through ad hoc political pragmatism. European unity in the sphere of culture, then, becomes an objective rather than a given, and it is to be achieved through measures and policies introduced”. (Eleftheriotis 2001: 7)

This double positioning of the EU on cultural matters underpins the political investment in the idea of a European identity: although there is no definition for this concept, there is a strong political will to promote it. The interest in defining European identity, and the budgets of programmes in the cultural domain, have, in the last decades, been inversely proportional.

2. Cultural and Audiovisual Policies in the EU

The pragmatism identified by Eleftheriotis can be observed in cultural policies developed in the past two decades; and my focus is on those in support of the audiovisual industry. After the European Film and Television Year in 1988, the European Commission, following a proposal of the European Parliament, launched an experimental phase of the MEDIA Programme, which was officially inaugurated in 1991 and is now in its fourth phase.

For Richard Collins, broadcasting and audiovisual policies within the EU have a complex history, shaped by three major dynamics:

“the opposition between policies designed to foster cultural unity and policies designed to foster cultural diversity (...); the opposition between liberal (market) and administered (interventionist or *dirigiste*) means to achieve desired policy goals; and opposition between

institutions (within and without the Community) that have sought to augment their own influence and power". (Collins 1994: 3)

Inverting the order in which these dichotomies are presented, brief mention should be made of the fragile political situation of the European Community at the time. For instance, Collins refers to struggles between the UK-supported Internal Market and Competition Directorate-General (DG); and the France-supported Culture and Information technology DGs. In addition, the period during which these policies were being prepared was also a time of major reforms of the Union, with the signing of the Single European Act and the aforementioned Treaty of the European Union. As Philip Schlesinger argues, "against this kind of uncertainty about what kind of political formation is emerging, we should hardly be surprised at the vagaries of cultural policy, as it has to negotiate different levels of political authority in an as yet unsettled framework". (Schlesinger 1996: 3) The audiovisual policies set in motion by the European Community in the early 1990s are influenced by and contribute to these institutional changes, and must be understood in those terms.

The major debates taking place in the EU at the time also underpin the opposition between the liberal and the interventionist stand on cultural policies. Because my focus is on MEDIA, I will understand this dichotomy in a broader sense, as the opposition between economic and cultural aspects of this programme. This duality was identified by the European Commission already in 1988, which, in a booklet entitled *The audiovisual media in the single European market*, stated that the policies developed "are designed either to make the audio-visual industry more competitive, or to give a specifically European character to the sector's cultural dimension". (Commission of the European Communities 1988: 46)

The audiovisual policies developed by the EU can be seen as hesitating, or functioning in a permanent tension between these two poles, even if, as Guback stresses, the economic and the cultural are not easily dissociable. At the outset, the policies for the support of European cinema had a clear economic nature, partly because the European Union, at the time European Community, did not have any power on cultural matters. Hence, in 1985, Jacques Delors highlighted the economic aspects of the audiovisual industry (such as the creation of jobs), in an attempt to, according to Collins (1994: 26), bring “the cultural industries within the Commission’s realm of authority”. However, we can find evidence of a cultural conception of film already in 1988, in the conclusions of a European Council meeting in Rhodes, which stated that the policies set in motion for the experimental phase of MEDIA launched the same year “contribute to a substantial strengthening of a European cultural identity”. (Commission of the European Communities 1990b: 7) This permanent duality is better illustrated by a European Commission report on MEDIA, from 1990, which states:

“In addition to its potential for economic growth, the audiovisual sector is important because of its socio-cultural dimension: as a vehicle for the wealth and diversity of European cultures, its development gives expression to the very essence of the Community. It helps to shape public opinion and to establish references for both behaviour and consumption”. (Commission of the European Communities 1990a: 1)

The opposition between economy and culture has generated other dichotomies, which question the position of the EU as a global actor. As Eder (2001) argues, establishing an identity is always marking a difference. In line with the broader political context of the EU and with the official position towards European culture, MEDIA 2007 stresses the international dimension of the programme, which influence reaches

nations outside the European Union's borders. In the 2006 edition of the Cannes Film Festival, the European Commission launched the new MEDIA International initiative. In a document entitled "European films go Global", it stated "the circulation of European audiovisual works outside of the European Union should be given a greater priority in the foreign and trade policies of the member states and of the European Union". (European Commission 2006: 2)

The reference to other cultures and cinematographies outside the EU is all the more interesting as the interventionist / liberal tension identified by Collins, as well as the dichotomy between cultural and economic aspects, also generated another opposition, particularly visible in the context of the GATT talks of 1993. Although Collins makes no mention of this, European cinema has often been opposed to American, namely Hollywood productions, particularly in the 1990s, as journalists and industry commentators noted the implications of the European position in the famous "agreement to disagree" (Forbes and Street 2000: 24).

American cinema has been characterised by its economic and market-orientated nature, in opposition with the European conception of film, at least at the art cinema end of the market. "For the United States, audiovisual trade is *just* a business whereas for Europeans it is *both* a business and (when convenient) a cultural matter" (Schlesinger 1996: 10); but the comparison between the two audiovisual industries can be drawn in both economic and cultural terms. For Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1998), European cinema could well be the permanent understudy of Hollywood cinema, as its realism contrasts with romantic, wish-fulfilment comedies that seem more appealing to audiences. While this view does not take into account popular forms of European cinema, which despite facing serious difficulties in travelling outside their national borders, in some cases still do attract mass audiences in their countries, Nowell-Smith's

statement is in line with the widespread idea that the box office success of American cinema can in part be explained by the presence of universal themes.

Equally, as we have seen before, the *Declaration on European Identity* of 1973 listed as “European”, universal values such as equality, human rights and pluralism – but do they assume a new form when situated in the European context? Martin Dale makes the case for a new European cinema in which “the themes will be universal – freedom, love, hope, but these themes will have a different expression when in a European, rather than an American context”. (Dale 1992: 92) Dale’s statement, as many others from the same period, completely fails to indicate concrete examples, never clearly stating what this European expression really stands for, or how the European context modifies such values. It is in this sense that this sort of distinction seems to be too vague and that, as Collins concludes, although for the MEDIA programme “cultural goals are paramount (...), European culture is defined very permissively and seems to have one key distinguishing principle; it is not American”. (Collins 1994: 98)

As a *Variety* article of September 2007 illustrates, European cinema is still characterised by the same oppositions, entangled in the webs of economics and culture, industry and art, America and Europe: “despite the rise of European co-productions and despite European film subsidy programs such as Eurimages or MEDIA, there’s no such place as *Eurowood* [my emphasis]”. (Hofmann 2007: 3) Pan-European initiatives in support of film are dismissed, as European cinema has yet to create a unified industrial base.

The frequent discussions around cultural and economic aspects of the EU’s audiovisual policies, as well as the recurrent comparison with American cinema, have been under scrutiny for almost two decades. The oppositional debate about European cinema can be seen in literature published by film industry commentators, journalists,

and academic scholars. For some, European cinema should be closer to Hollywood in economic terms, but still clearly distinguished in cultural terms. How then can a European cinema found in a tension (between cultural and economic aspects) present a unified image of “European identity”?

While it would be hard to dispute *Variety*'s claim that there is no “Eurowood”, the EU and its initiatives for the promotion of the audiovisual industries have indeed created a European cinematic space that allows films to travel within its territory. In line with Wim Wenders' claim that “there has been no better expression of European identity in this century than European cinema” (cited in Hill *et al.* 1994: 10), film, for the EU, clearly plays an important role in the construction and divulgation of a European identity. It is in this sense that I would like to rehabilitate the third dichotomy mentioned by Collins, exploring the ways in which film in the European Union context relates to the formula “unity in diversity”.

Although Collins' distinction referred to cultural unity and cultural diversity, it could be argued that while the unifying aspects of such audiovisual policies lie in the economic measures implemented, diversity lies in cultural features. As it became clear for the European Community in the late 1980s, in the name of the European integration, cultural products, and the audiovisual industries in particular, should enter the common market. By the time the first initiatives were developed, the European common market was already larger than that of the US, which was seen by many as an indisputable economic advantage. But despite the political will to unify the European audiovisual market (and thus gather the European audiovisual products in unity), for Collins, “MEDIA is an excellent example of the contemporary emphasis on diversity, rather than unity, in Community policy”. (Collins 1994: 93)

By stressing the importance of diversity in these terms, Collins sees it as a positive element, unlike those who advocate a more economically based development of the European audiovisual industries, and for whom diversity appears as an obstacle. For Schlesinger, although the argument about EU's large-scale market makes sense in theory, "European diversity stands in the way of following a US-style strategy as there are numerous linguistic and cultural barriers, based in the system of national-states in Europe that make such a solution inherently implausible". (Schlesinger 1996: 8)

Indeed, for the Committee of Experts appointed by the European Commission in 1990 and chaired by Sir Ian Trethowan, "the European Film and TV Industries reflect both the benefits and drawbacks of the Community's diversity – a rich and varied creative and cultural tradition, but a fragmented distribution system and a lack of common language". (Commission of the European Communities 1990b: 44) The appraisal of Europe's cultural heterogeneity and the defence of the diversity of the European cinematographies thus seem to stand in the way of the creation of a truly unified European audiovisual space.

Moreover, the unity in terms of audiovisual policies at the European level has clashed with distinct national policies, and with different conceptions of film and the role of the State in supporting the audiovisual industries. The effort to unify European cinema in economic terms, allowing for its cultural diversity to be represented within a common cinematic space, is thus further challenged by intrinsic features of the EU (its "vagaries", as suggested before) and by different spheres of regulatory bodies.

In this context, MEDIA's budget, which almost doubled since its last phase, has increasingly insisted on the distribution of films (55% of the total investment in 2007), opening the programme to other countries, even outside the EU-27 space. Moreover, the focus has now been placed not only on the promotion of films, but also of the

programme itself. In 2007, the European Commission prepared five video clips, to be presented in the Berlin Film Festival and later at Cannes, as promotional tools for MEDIA. Composed of extracts of European films supported by this initiative, these five clips are a powerful marketing device, consisting of one “best-of” clip, and four thematic short features: one clip entitled “Joy”, two clips on love, one clip on sadness.

By choosing to promote its major programme in support of film and the audiovisual industries in these terms, the Commission seems to insist on the power of universal values. Joy, love or sadness could hardly be seen as specifically European (just like the ones described in the Declaration of 1973), although, as Martin Dale earlier suggested, they can be shaped by a European context. While some critics point out the overconfidence of the EU in trying to appropriate these topics as if they were exclusively European, it could be argued that the variety of languages, landscapes, faces, or cinematic approaches, does give a diversity tone to these universal topics, characterised elsewhere by uniformity.

The highly fragmented nature of European cinema may also account for the difficulty in studying it as an entity. Just as a European cultural identity has been left aside by many studies, so has European cinema as a unified body of work been less approached. The permanent tension between the two opposed levels of economy and culture has not, however, prevented a renewed interest in the topic by Film Studies scholars in the 1990s. As recent studies focus on production and distribution contexts, the literature published in the last fifteen years includes attempts to group the cinemas of Europe among common stylistic features (particularly those of art-cinema, as many studies leave aside popular forms of entertainment), as well as frequent themes, which will be explored in the next section.

3. Unity and diversity in Contemporary European Cinema

– the case of *Joyeux Noël*

As stated before, references to European past are frequent among those trying to define Europe's identity – and filmmakers are no exception. For Ginette Vincendeau (1995), the most common topics of European cinema include the two world wars (especially World War II) as well as European historical and mythical heroes (and anti-heroes). Likewise, for Wendy Everett cinema is the ideal time machine, which closely links European films to memory and past, and denotes “an almost obsessive need to explore and interrogate memory and the process of remembering, apparently convinced that therein may be found the key to present identity”. (Everett 1996: 14)

From the vast number of films supported by MEDIA every year, a considerable amount of those narrate past events or the lives of important historical figures. Bearing in mind the dual function of European cinema highlighted by Everett – visiting Europe's past and investigating Europe's identity – I would like to focus on *Joyeux Noël/Merry Christmas* (Christian Carion, FR/GER/UK/BEL/ROM, 2005). Unlike the historical films of the 1980s, which according to Sorlin (1980) seldom go beyond their national barriers, *Joyeux Noël* focuses on an event with obvious transnational implications. Its plot concerns an episode in the history of World War I, when French, German and Scottish troops called a short ceasefire on Christmas Eve in 1914. Spoken in three languages (French, German and English), the film clearly presents itself as a pan-European narrative. While it fits perfectly within the “unity in diversity” motto, some critics saw it as “a bit of a Europudding” (Crook 2006: 57), a familiar disparagement of European co-productions. Meanwhile for *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Tesse 2005: 44) its transnational theme could be more easily apprehended in its credits (it is a

French, German, British, Belgian and Romanian co-production, filmed in three different countries with actors from many different backgrounds) than in the film itself, dismissed as a banal narrative.

Europe's culture has often been associated with a shared past. Barroso's earlier reference to Victor Hugo illustrates this tendency to invoke great figures of the past or glorious moments in European history. Commenting on the importance of cultural icons, the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism Ján Figel' has said: "the further back in history the better because they are less controversial". (Figel' 2006: 2) However, episodes of the European history of the 20th century are amongst those most often represented – and so is the case in *Joyeux Noël*.

The representation of history and, in particular, the recent past, is also something that, as Thomas Elsaesser argues, distinguishes European cinema from Hollywood and Asian cinemas, and must therefore be seen as an "identitarian" trait. For Elsaesser, European film provides its spectators with a historical imagery, as a "*dispositif* that constitutes, through an appeal to memory and identification, a special form of address, at once highly individual and capable of fostering a sense of belonging". (Elsaesser 2005: 21) *Joyeux Noël*, which clearly defines a group of main characters, also explores this tension between individual and universal identification. At the same time the film invests a significant amount of time into personal stories (the German Captain who is married to a French woman; the French Captain who has a newborn son; or the Scottish soldier who tries to conceal the death of his brother); it is also concerned with a much more general humanitarian message. In fact, in an interview in *Première*, Christian Carion has claimed that, while preparing *Joyeux Noël*, he was attempting to perform the work of a historian. As the director says: "I made this film for that reason only".

(Coustalot 2005: 20)⁴ Eventually dismissed, as a *Variety* critic suggests, by “cynics”, this message was perceived in that publication as having “multiple resonances for the current world”. (Nesselson 2005: 32)

On Christmas Eve, in the Scottish trenches, a stretcher-bearer (Gary Lewis) gets his bagpipe and, at the request of the soldiers, plays “I’m dreaming of home” (a song which, at the end of the film, will be hummed by the German soldiers, as they travel in a dark train carriage, after being punished for fraternizing with the enemy). A few minutes later the German tenor Nicolaus Sprink (played by Benno Fürmann) returns to the trenches after a private party hosted by the Kronprinz. He wishes to sing for his fellow soldiers, who feel envious of the laughter and cries of joy of the Scottish troops. Because, as he says to his Captain, “a little music would do no harm”, he starts singing *Stille Nacht* (in German). As the soldiers listen silently and emotionally, Scottish bagpipes join the tenor. It is through music that enemy troops first reach out to one another. Following this song, the Scottish player suggests *Adeste Fideles*, and the German tenor joins in promptly, giving rise to the film’s first signs of universality. He then leaves his trench and is cheered and applauded by the opposing troops. At the other end of the battlefield, a French soldier lip-syncs and hums the tune. This event triggers the reunion of the captains of the three armies, who, after a toast with champagne supplied by the French captain, declare a temporary ceasefire.

Depicting national *clichés* (such as French champagne and Scottish bagpipes, or signs on the trenches, which read “Rosbif Land” or “Froggy Land”), the film shows us how, after this poignant meeting, the soldiers of the three armies share chocolate bars and cigarettes, and show each other pictures of their wives. Later on, they participate in

⁴ My translation. In French in the original: “[*Vous vouliez faire un travail d'historien?*] Oui, je n’ai réalisé ce film que pour cette raison.”

a common mass, given in Latin by an Anglican priest, and appreciated by the German Captain, despite the fact that he later confesses to be Jewish.

Joyeux Noël's originality does not entirely lie in its usage of three different languages and presence of an international cast – other titles, such as *No Man's Land* (Daniel Tanovic, BH/SLO/IT/FRA/UK/BEL, 2001) do the same – but on its three-fold approach to the representation of this war. Indeed, the film starts by working as a triptych, as there are always three languages, three camera angles, and three points of view. This structure can be seen during the opening sequence, when Scottish, German and French children read poems about the war, and is maintained up until the toast between the three Generals, to a Merry Christmas, Frohe Weihnachten, and Joyeux Noël. Yet the insistence on different languages and on three independent nations does not single them out individually so much as it suggests a move towards universality.

Through music, sport, and religion (all activities that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers), the three segments are fused into one. The structure of *Joyeux Noël* shifts, both in visual and narrative terms. In the Christmas Eve scene, when the German tenor leaves his trench to sing for the Scottish troops, the shots alternate between close-ups of the singer and general views of the battlefield. After the mass, however, the film operates on one scale only. Burying bodies or playing football become common actions, for which only one single camera shot and one perspective is needed. But after two days of common activities, the soldiers return to their trenches and the officials are punished for high treason. The narrative and visual shift reverses. The unity of these three nations might take place through a universal language and universal actions, but it does not last forever.

Writing in *Positif*, Vincent Thabourey suggests that in *Joyeux Noël*:

“(…) it’s the whole of Europe that is thus reunited in the name of good Old Catholic values. The edifying vision of these men kneeling in the snow, tears in their eyes at an improvised recital by an attractive singer, turns the war into a show, in a high-budget European co-production with no epic or artistic value whatsoever. It’s beautiful like a constitutional treaty...”. (Thabourey 2005: 59)⁵

Thus the insistence on the nonsensical nature of war, the underlying appeal for peace, and the suggestion that all men are alike, have been read as this film’s contemporary messages. In this sense, it could be argued that *Joyeux Noël* is in line with the official discourse of the EU, which, already in its *Declaration on European Identity*, defined its core values as democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights, among others. Moreover, this sort of universality brings *Joyeux Noël* closer to the general idea of Hollywood cinema. Criticised by European critics for its blockbuster aesthetic, the film was received in the USA as a mainstream European product. Sales House Film Distribution’s CEO, François Yon, pitched the film, for US distribution, in the following terms: “It’s an emotional story, it’s well done, there are great production values and with the mixing of the languages, it gives the viewer the impression of having achieved a better understanding of Europeans”. (Yon 2006: 16) Dismissed as a “Euro-pudding” at home, *Joyeux Noël* is praised abroad for its representation of Europe. It is not the presence of foreign languages that makes it European, but the mixing of three idioms. Diversity thus appears as a European characteristic, which does not prevent the narrative of *Joyeux Noël* to be about the unity of its peoples.

⁵ My translation. In French in the original: “(...) c’est toute l’Europe qui se retrouve ainsi réunie autour de nos bonnes vieilles valeurs catholiques. La vision édifiante de ces hommes agenouillés dans la neige, la larme à l’oeil devant le récital improvisé d’une jolie cantatrice, transforme alors la guerre en show, en coproduction européenne haut de gamme mais dépourvue de toute soufflé épique ou artistique. C’est beau comme un traité constitutionnel...”.

European cinema works, as suggested by Everett, as a time machine, one in which travels to the past are always rooted in the present. *Joyeux Noël* is both a historian's work (as stated by its director) and a story with resonance in today's world (as argued by the *Variety* critic). Carion was trying to do the work of a historian, but the film was generally received as a metaphor for today's political situation in Europe. Emphasizing this historical event means highlighting its relevance for contemporary society. The work of the historian is to raise attention for past events, but to do so in the present context, therefore also questioning the present society. The engagement with past events is therefore also a need to summon history in order to better understand the present. History and past are very strong components of the European identity (and hence the continuous referencing of history, in official documents, in research on European identity and in contemporary cinema), but so is this capacity to question and understand them.

As Everett puts it, because Europe has identity issues, "its films explore the endless complexities of that problem, whilst themselves becoming part of the identity which it seeks". (Everett 2005: 14) By exploring, within its narrative, the dichotomy of unity in diversity, *Joyeux Noël* is a valuable example of the European films supported by MEDIA. It is its transnational perspective that allows it to speak about Europe; but it is also its choice of such a transnational perspective that reflects the state of Europe and European cinema today.

As the EU avoids concrete definitions of European identity, can cinema and the audiovisual industries fulfil this role? The idea of unity in diversity in European cinema does not lie exclusively on the conception of the policies in support of the audiovisual industry. Contemporary films themselves, either popular or *auteur* films, also reflect upon the state of Europe. Because the forms of expression, as well as the contents of

contemporary European cinema, are many and varied, Europe's identity is not exclusively found in its past. Indeed, many contemporary films represent current social issues, such as poverty and immigration. Hence, as the EU, so does contemporary cinema assume a composite and mediating function, as its search for identity also helps to build and interrogate it.

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