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European Cinema as Cultural Diplomacy [1]

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Ever since the Lumiere brothers gave their first show of projected pictures to an audience in Paris in 1895, there was "*a keen awareness of the fundamental and open-ended relationship between the formation and articulation of identity-whether personal, national or European- and the moving image*." European cinema has over the course of the last century gone from having a seminal role in the invention of the new art form and dominating the international markets, to falling into the shadow of the financially incomparably more viable Hollywood films that proved to be more satisfying to the masses. Nonetheless, European cinema with all its strengths and weaknesses plays a major role in integrating and creating our individual understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

Of all the components of cultural diplomacy, especially when targeted at external audiences, nothing bears a European adjective as strongly as European cinema, which continues to mirror the European identity. Although Europe presents an uneasy and fragile allegiance of diversities, shaped by linguistic, political, and cultural differences, European cinema, demonstrates "*key trends and concerns visible across different national and regional cinemas that enable us to identify certain key characteristics*." These include cultural and historical traditions, as well as the new and complex notions of identity, new voices, gender issues, sexuality, immigration, exile, conflict, and change. These themes strongly communicate about Europeans and others in the multicultural context and allow a new insight into an idea of European identity which "*openly acknowledges multiplicity, instability and fragmentation*." European films have had a history of tackling very sensitive issues in the global, postmodern world like collaboration with the Nazis (Louis Malle, *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, 1987), assessment of national guilt in relation to its colonial history (Denis, *Chocolat*, 1988) as well as challenges to European preconceptions of place and identity (Kassovitz, *La Haine*, 1995). All these films, however, play a "*dynamic role in representing and re-evaluating Europe's complex past and more importantly in suggesting new routes to future understanding*."

European cinema is often equated with "*art cinema and high culture for the cultural and historic traditions it depicts*" and it is suggested that in order to be successful, European directors must learn to satisfy the audience. It is precisely this personal/local (parochial if you like) character of European films that distinguishes European films from the uniformity of Hollywood blockbusters, that adds a special flair, sensibility to them and contributes to their "Europeanness." Films like *The Full Monty*, *Trainspotting*, *Billy Elliott*, *East Is East* are all low-budget films, dealing with personal, local, regional, or national viewpoints and contain unfamiliar languages, cultural habits, and ideas. They offered something original, quirky and unpredictable to the audiences satiated with Hollywood predictability and uniformity which in turn brought them an extraordinary international success. The directors' intention was not to satisfy the audience, but to show that films have a role to play which is beyond pure entertainment. They were not afraid to challenge, provoke and inspire which proved to be all

the more rewarding.

Nonetheless, the European film production cannot ignore the mainstream U.S. cinema domination of Europe. Very few home-produced films make it to the top 10 anywhere in Europe. The market share of European films in EU cinemas has fallen to a mere 23% in 2000. In the words of Pierre Sorlin, "*Europeans create images of the world through Hollywood's lenses*." In turn, there are many constraints that limit the number of foreign films screened in the U.S. The severely underfunded European film industry cannot compete with mainstream Hollywood. Whereas the Americans consider film a commodity, the Europeans consider films as "*cultural good with a symbolic significance that cannot be reduced to a mere commodity*." Unfortunately, in cinema, it is the profits not the richness, diversity, and quality, that ensure the survival of film production.

Also, it seems that the European films don't travel well due to their linguistic, national, and cultural differences that complicate the circulation of films. Dubbing or subtitles are demanded from European films by different national audiences. That is one of the reasons why European films haven't been able to exploit the EU market as one of the largest markets in the world. It seems that European films are a more viable component of cultural diplomacy toward external audiences that recognize the originality and sensibility of European films and interpret them as conveying European identity as opposed to internal audiences that often see the films as belonging to their country of origin.

European films should be tirelessly used to promote the European cultural identity by offering a range of important new cultural perspectives and depicting universal concerns through intimate lenses. Europeans need more than ever their own images to tell their stories and to explore their myths and identities, to look afresh at themselves and others. As such, European films are an unalienable source of identity and means of its articulation.

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