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European Identity in Cinema
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It is not only an honour, but also a delight to have been invited to talk (briefly) about European Identity in Cinema at today's event. After all, complex issues of multiple, and fluid identity are fundamental to European cinema, as indeed, to Europe itself, and it is arguably the case that it is the symbiotic nature of European identity and that of its cinemas that provides the key to understanding why, and in what ways, European Cinema is so essential to our cultural, social, political, and individual lives.

Before I explore these ideas more fully, I owe you an explanation, an apology, and perhaps a justification. While my concern with European cinema is professional as well as personal and passionate, in that I watch European films, analyse them, publish books and articles about them, lecture on them across the world and so forth, nevertheless, unlike most of you, I am not directly involved in either the creative or the commercial business of film making. I must, therefore, acknowledge that I am something of an outsider in this forum. Nevertheless, as I hope to demonstrate, it is perhaps this outsider status that enables me to provide a wider, trans-national perspective and – in so doing – to attempt to unravel key questions of identity in, and of, European cinema.

It is important to begin by acknowledging the impossibility of talking about *the* identity of European cinema, given that it is as multiple, complex, and diverse as the individuals that create it. Understanding and agreeing what *European* means is problematic enough, and defining *European cinema* inevitably involves wrestling with conflicts, contradictions, and uncertainties. And yet, of course, we all understand the concept of European cinema, and know that it involves something more complex and fundamental than just the nationality of the director, the place of filming, or the sources of funding, important though each of these elements may be. It would seem that, whatever our diverse perspectives, *as* Europeans, we share certain cultural roots, historical reference points, and even ways of looking and thinking, however different our individual perspectives may be. It is certainly the case that the more European films you watch, the more disparate their linguistic and geographical origins, the easier it becomes to identify certain common concerns and points of reference. Moreover, the very process of recognising shared concerns – whether practical and financial or thematic and cultural – actively confirms that the differences and fragmentation that lie at the heart of European cinema constitute its fascination and strength as much as its problems.

The problems are, of course, real: still inadequate infrastructures for finance, publicity, distribution, and exhibition; the apparent inability of European films to cross national borders; and the difficulty they have in reaching the top-ten, even in their country of origin, all these and more tend to dominate debates in which European film is repeatedly presented as problematical. And, as we all know only too

well, it is essential, even urgent, that efforts to address such problems be prioritized. However, the success of any such endeavours must rest upon total certainty that the effort is worth it: that European film is not a dispensable luxury but an indispensable necessity, and I would argue that this message is the one that should be communicated loudly, widely, and repeatedly.

We must have clear answers to such questions as: Would it matter if European directors were *not* able to make the sorts of films they think important? Do Europeans actually *need* European cinema at all or would a diet consisting entirely of Hollywood blockbusters suffice? Does film have a role to play beyond that of pure entertainment? What would we lose if European cinema was allowed to fade gracefully away? Crucially, what is it about European cinema that makes it so particularly important?

As I intimated earlier, answers to such questions can be found in the symbiotic identities of Europe and its cinemas. It is the case that concerns with identity (memory, history, the nature of the self) which, for centuries, have been fundamental to European thought, also marked European films from the very beginning. And despite, or perhaps in defiance of, the normalising currents of globalisation and an increasingly multi-cultural, transnational environment, issues of identity came to assume even greater relevance in the closing decades of the twentieth century, as political and social insecurity intensified the need for individuals to know who they were, and to reassess former allegiances with place and community. It is not surprising that cinema, creator of the moving images with which we make sense of our selves and our world, played a central role in this process. (As an example, we might consider the proliferation, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, of first-person memory narratives or filmic autobiographies through which European directors and audiences could re-examine the conflicts and hostilities of the past as a means of coping with the challenges of a new, unified Europe.)

What we mean by identity, itself the subject of prolonged and widespread debate has, of course, undergone radical transformation. No longer is it understood as either unitary or secure. Instead, whether subjective or collective, identity is seen as fluid, fragmented and multiple: an unstable mix of contradictions and ambiguities. Identity is an open-ended process of becoming rather than a finite state; a construct rather than a given. It thus follows that the filmic narratives and filmic images we watch are important not merely in helping us to explore and reassess former identities but also in actively shaping new ones, through their power to involve us imaginatively and emotionally, as well as intellectually, in the issues they articulate. Once we recognise that European films are thus both a mirror and a creator of European identities, we begin to glimpse their crucial importance.

Such comments may be seen to imply that European film is fundamentally worthy and proselytizing; nothing could be further from the truth. The range of films produced annually across Europe is breathtaking in its scope and diversity. Moreover, as today's event so convincingly illustrates, their openness to experiment and technical innovation enables them to remain fresh and vital. And in defiance of the rather lazy populist binary thinking which has it that a film must be *either* artistic *or* entertaining, European films, from the zaniest comedies to the most engaged documentaries, repeatedly prove that they can be both. Divergent and often subversive narrative traditions, relative freedom from the sort of control imposed by

an all-powerful studio system, centuries of distinct but interlinked cultural traditions, are responsible for the fact that films in Europe have rarely been considered mere, or at least straightforward, money spinners. (Of course, that this status has so far been protected, is in no small way thanks to the efforts of FERA, in relation, for example, to the GATT negotiations.) European films tend to be more multilayered, complex, and innovative than their mainstream Hollywood equivalents, more able, whatever their genre, tone or purpose, to be rooted in what – for want of a better term – we could call ‘reality’. In other words, they engage with the world of which they are a part rather than offering *mere* escape (although escape may well be a vital part of the experience).

Very few of my allotted minutes remain, precluding the possibility of analysing specific films to illustrate the identity relationship I have been discussing. Luckily, everyone in this room will have examples in mind and can test these ideas for themselves. But to finish, I’d like to highlight a few trends that may serve as the starting point for such a search:

- Consider the number of contemporary films which, directly or indirectly, whether from humorous or serious viewpoints, reference current economic problems, social inequalities, gender and sexual issues and so forth and, in so doing, provide vital new perspectives on contentious social problems.
- I mentioned the autobiographical tendencies of the late 1970s and 1980s. No less pertinent to this discussion are the journey narratives that have flourished since the 1990s: films which explore current concerns with migration, immigration, change and difference through mobile narratives that simultaneously encourage a rethinking of popular prejudice and, explore the fluid, open-ended processes of identity formation.

Conclusion

The creation of images is a complex process of making visible, of enabling spectators to make sense of themselves and their world. In the massive changes and upheavals that mark Europe’s transition to a multiethnic, multicultural way of life, in a complex present defined by plurality, diversity and difference, more than ever, we need our own images, to tell our own stories, and explore our own realities. This is the role of European cinema; this is its – and our – identity.