Introduction to Contemporary European Cinema

Claus Tieber

1. Introduction

Following an academic convention, defining the terms in the title of this lecture seems to be an easy task. At first glance, there are no difficult, controversial or idiosyncratic notions in it. Nevertheless, once started, the task becomes more and more complex.

What is European Cinema? Cinema in Europe? What are the differences between contemporary EC and historical EC? Given the widespread variety of films produced in Europe – is it possible to define or construct characteristics of EC? Do they form an identity? Do they distinguish EC from other modes of filmmaking? Is contemporary European cinema – as Thomas Elsaesser suggests – just another part of World Cinema or – as a recently discussed, but not yet (definitely) defined term implies – of a "cosmopolitan" cinema? (Elsaesser 28)

These are the issues I want to introduce and discuss in this lecture. First I will present a short overview about the basic questions we have to deal with, when investigating Contemporary European Cinema and an survey about ongoing (academic) discourses, instead of a list of films and their directors.

Do not expect definitive answers, it is more important to ask the right questions. All I have to offer are remarks, notes and contexts – the very beginning of every scholarly expedition, thus an "introduction."

2. Europe

Today's Europe is in a critical state, right wing populism and extremism is on the rise, terrorism is threatening European values and lifestyles. Surveillance, the end of familiar notions of privacy and public, the refugee crisis and Brexit are signs and symptoms of a social and political crisis, not only within the borders of the EU. The very basic civil values and human rights that Europe was built upon are threatened. Values that were once defined and fought for ever since the beginning of the European Enlightenment and
the French Revolution. The colours of the French flag representing the three main values liberté, égalité, fraternité, (today we would call it solidarité) is the title of Kieslowski’s filmic trilogy "Three colours: Blue, Red and White" shot in 1993-94. A Polish director negotiates the essential European values in a French-Polish-Swiss coproduction – a typical example of (New) European Cinema.

Talking about CEC also means talking about the current state of Europe. No matter if one considers cinema as a window to the world or as a frame in which a very own world is created, there is no doubt that the filmic representation of the "real" world (realism) is as much shaped by the economic, political and social surroundings as the creation of an alternative, artificial world. In either case, the relationship of cinema and reality is a complex one.

The issue of contemporary European cinema is therefore anything but a purely academic one, it touches our own everyday life and discussions.

3. Does a European cinema exist?

One of the guiding questions for our expedition into Contemporary European Cinema is simple: Does European Cinema exist that is more and something different than the sum of its national cinemas?

According to Thomas Elsaesser, European Cinema from the Post War period until the 1980s was characterized by different national (art) cinemas, new waves (Nouvelle Vagues, Neues Deutsches Kino, Czechoslovak New Wave, Polish Film School etc.), and famous auteurs (Bergman, Fellini, Godard to name just a few). (Elsaesser, 23)

After the end of the Cold War and the re-unification of Europe, a new transnational European cinema emerged. EURIMAGE and other important funding programmes by the European Union began supporting co-productions of at least three countries. More and more filmmakers were working across inner-European borders. The economics and politics of film financing in Europe are just one, but probably the most important precondition for a European cinema. The other is an ongoing self-referred discourse, a growing interest, not only a scholarly one, in EC as an entity in its own right that emerged during the 1990s.
In my attempt to answer this question and to look at the characteristics of CEC I will focus primarily on films from the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, from the last 16 years, mostly for pragmatic reasons: the amount of films to be recognized has to be limited, but I also assume that a significant difference can be detected in European films from the 1990s and the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. The EC I want to talk about is primarily a phenomenon of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.)

4. Characteristics

I want to discuss the characteristics of CEC on the following levels:

- Economics: Funding, Financing, Distribution, Exhibition and the role of Festivals
- Narration
- Authorship/Realism
- Discourses/Issues & Themes

4.1. Economics: Funding, Financing, Distribution, Exhibition and the role of Festivals

How a film is produced, financed, distributed and exhibited influences its mode of narration as well as its style. It is therefore essential to consider the specific European mode(s)of production.

In economic terms European films form a negligible part in comparison to the international, Hollywood-dominated film industry. Almost all films we talk about are funded, subsidized or financed with the help of loans by the EU.

The European art cinema of the post war era was a cinema of \textit{auteurs}, following the theory formulated by Francois Truffaut and Alexandre Astruc, that the director is the sole author of a film. The famous auteur theory was not just a form of rebellion against "le cinéma de papa", it was also a strategy to establish film as a legitimate art form, worth of public funding and academic research.

In the funding policy in Europe of the last decades a change can be registered where the focus shifted from art film and the auteur in the 1960s and 70s to the notion of diversity and European identity that is building a case for European cinema today.
It could be argued that the West-European new waves and auteur cinemas were made possible because of these governmental subsidies of film production as well as the contemporary phenomenon of a (transnational) European cinema could only come into being because of specific programmes by the EU, such as MEDIA and EURIMAGE.

The MEDIA programme started in 1991 and ended in 2013. It funded 1420 films (until 2012). EURIMAGE was established in 1989 by the European Council. The proposed values of the Council are clear

"human rights, cultural democracy, cultural diversity and identity and mutual exchanges and enrichment across boundaries and centuries. They act as channels for intercultural dialogue and promote better knowledge and understanding of a European cultural identity."

(www.coe.int)

Other factors and differences to the financing models of the 1960s and 70s are the role and functions of television and film festivals. Television stations, mostly public service broadcasters, but also private ones, are important financers of European films.

Films are today mostly financed by a group of sources, not just by a single one: on a European level (co-production is a precondition for that), on national and regional levels, and by national (or in the case of ARTE transnational) television stations.

The European Union as well as most national programmes and institutions also support distribution and the participation in festivals. Distribution, especially outside of the countries of origin is still a problem for many films, mostly due to language issues. More and more films are shown only at festivals and more and more films are produced as festival films.

The tasks a film has to fulfil in order to get the best available funding is therefore difficult and sometimes contradictory: a co-production of at least three countries, some local/regional aspects (setting) in order to get money connected with tourism, and narrative and formal aspects that ensure that the film would also fit into TV programming. High budget films are able to manage these challenges, but many smaller films can only be seen at festivals, which is why film festivals play such an important role with regard to CEC, besides their cultural, educational and communicative functions,
Europe still hosts the most important "A"-level festivals with international competition (Cannes, Venice, Berlin) and countless smaller festivals, some of them specialized in European Cinema (e.g. Crossing Europe in Linz). To be selected for the competition of an A festival means reference points in many national funding programmes. These reference points can be made into funding for the next project of a producer, thus being selected by important festivals is now as important as ticket sales, which is why many films are not only shown exclusively at festivals, but are specifically made for the festival circuit. The festivals and their curators on the other hand became gatekeepers and are significantly involved in Contemporary European Cinema, in which cultural or symbolical capital plays a role almost as important as real money.

One result of these politics can be seen in the emergence of a (New) European cinema. Take f.e. Michael Haneke, a German-born Austrian filmmaker shooting films mainly in France. Or Lars Van Trier, a Danish director, who shoots his films in English with international actors in no geographically specific setting, but who is deeply rooted in European culture and philosophy.

Based in this mode of production, what characteristics – if any – of CEC can be detected on the levels of narration, authorship/realism and themes and issues?

4.2. Narration

EC has found its identity for a long time in its opposition to Hollywood and the way classical cinema tells its stories. Hollywood storytelling is considered as focusing on a goal-oriented protagonist and consisting of two plot lines – one action, the other romantic. Hollywood storytelling is easy to “read”, causal and mostly chronological. Important information is repeated, happy endings are common, most stories have at least a closure if not a happy ending. This mode of narration corresponds with the way the audience is addressed. A film is supposed to create an illusion, the audience is made into voyeurs, every device of filmmaking is supporting the narration.

There are European films, which also follow this "standard model", but in general, European filmmaking is connected with different and alternative ways of storytelling, especially since the heyday of European auteur cinema. I will discuss the aspects of protagonist, chronology, and meta-narration to demonstrate these differences.
4.2.1. Protagonist/Hero

According to Thomas Elsaesser, the European Auteur cinema is based on "three kinds of heroes, who are close cousins":

- Odysseus
- Orpheus
- Parsifal

The heroes of European cinema are thus "quest heroes" and "wanderers", often passive, unlike the active agents of Hollywood cinema, who are actively propelling the plot. Their story follows the model of the Bildungsroman, the coming-of-age and awareness of young men, or the "impossibility of the couple" (Elsaesser 49).

I am as sceptical about the simplification of a great variety of stories to three basic models, as I am of Elsaesser's assumption that cinema can only be popular if it finds a way to connect with mythology. On the other hand, it seems obvious that the mentioned models of male heroes are still at work in many European films. For now, it is enough to note, that the protagonists of European cinema can differ significantly from the active, goal-driven hero of the Hollywood standard model, and that this difference has crucial consequences for the narrative structure.

4.2.2. Chronology

Contemporary European Cinema often plays with causality as well as chronology. Harold Pinter used a reversed chronology in 1978 in his play Betrayal, adapted as a film in 1983, decades before this deliberately puzzled storytelling in Memento (2000) made the British director Christopher Nolan famous in the US.

Francois Ozon picks up reversed chronology in his 5x2 (F, 2004), starting with the break-up of a relationship and ending with the first encounter of the two lovers. Irreversible by Gaspar Noè (F, 2002) is another example for a reversed chronology in a contemporary European film. Lola rennt (G, 1998, Tom Tykwer) famously repeats the same timespan with significant differences.
But European filmmakers also go a step further: they don't just play with chronology, but the narration itself.

4.2.3. Self-reflexive Narration/Metanarration

Pedro Almodovar and Francois Ozon are only two examples for writer-directors who played with the act of narration in some of their films. In Almodovar's *La Mala Educacion* (ES 2004), the story is told by the brother of a dead character, who has taken over his brother's role after his death. The story of the dead brother is written as short story and adapted as a film within the film. This also means that some characters are played by different actors. Almodovar is thus breaking up the dramatic unities and closed form of narration and makes the narration itself one of the core issues of his film.

Francois Ozon's *Dans la maison* (F 2012) is another example for putting the act of storytelling center stage. A young, talented student is encouraged by his teacher to write. His writings have an impact on real life and the audience no longer knows if a scene is part of the film's diegesis or of a story written by a character of the film. Films such as these can be called *metafiction*.

For this lecture the important point is this: CEC is joyfully playing with conventions and expectations of storytelling. Postmodern "puzzle" or mindfuck films are a global phenomenon, but what can be found in CEC is another form of audience address: deliberately using devices that distance audiences from the film, inspired by and in the tradition of Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt" (distancing effect), sometimes just playing with the various elements of narration: chronology, characters, levels of narration (diegesis).

Because of its economic marginality, its self-conception as at cinema, and national and European funding guidelines CEC does not have to follow certain conventions, it is free to use the vast archive of filmic devices, modes of storytelling and ways of addressing an audience. It seems that this freedom is no longer just used to deliberately withhold narrative information and disappoint viewer’s expectations as in many European films from the second part of the 20th century, but to willingly play with this freedom. CEC is a cinema that is very self-conscious and aware of its history and of the aesthetics and ideology of its constructed *Others*: Hollywood and television.
4.3. Authorship/Realism

Two major issues in the discourse about European Cinema are authorship and realism. (These issues are closely connected, which is why I shortly want to discuss them together.)

At least since the Italian Neo-Realism European Cinema is associated with realism, be it social or psychological realism. European Cinema sets itself apart from Hollywood in its close connection to the "real world", in functioning as a window to the world. The documentarian qualities of cinema are praised in the first theoretical writings about the medium: from Siegfried Kracauer to André Bazin, cinematographic realism was created as a specific value of the medium.

In CEC social realism can be found in the films of Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, the Darenne Brothers or Ulrich Seidl to name just a few.

Today realism has become just "a mere set of conventions that could be performed, prescribed, or abrogated" (Elsaesser, 487). Filmic realism in CEC is often reduced to a shaky camera, more pan shots than cuts and no extra-diegetic music, it has become a film style available to everyone, easily emulated and thus in fact as constructed as any other style. In other words: filmic realism has lost some of its value, CEC can no longer be defined as "realistic", although the named filmic devices can be found in many films whose style and issues can not be reduced to the notion of realism.

Nor can CEC be simply be defined as an auteur-cinema. Director’s names have become a way to sell and market films, similar to the economic function of brands or genres. The name of a director is able to create certain expectations within a specific audience (festivals, students, cineastes). Auteurism is still important, but is has become a second order category.

Within film studies the auteur theory is no longer seen as an appropriate way to analyse and read films. If authorship still matters, then as a method to identify "non-dominant positions" (Staiger) and marginalized voices in society, Directors who are representing marginalized gender, sexual, social or cultural positions are more important today than
in the cold war era. European auteurs were usually male and white (the whole concept is patriarchal in itself), today more and more female directors are changing the face of CEC, filmmakers coming from a second or third generation of migrants are starting to produce films, queer cinema has become almost a genre, sometimes able to reach beyond the boundaries of specialist festivals. (Almodovar f.e.)

To conclude this point: European cinema is no longer dominated by a number of male, white auteurs, the whole notion of authorship has lost value in academic discourses. Europe today is characterized by a more diversified group of voices that is able to use the medium as their form of communication and self-expression. Cinematic realism is no longer their preferred "weapon of choice", it is just a style among others, sometimes mixed with other, even contradicting styles.

4.4. Discourses: European issues

According to Thomas Elsaesser (2015, 22ff) Europe is haunted by three traumas that shape and influence recent European politics as well as European cinema:

1. Bio and Body Politics
2. Holocaust
3. Islam

4.4.1. Bio and Body Politics

Europe is facing significant demographic changes, the population is decreasing and growing older at the same time. This leads not only to problems of financing the European welfare states, but also to new approaches towards the topics of youth, age, and health. I would not go so far as to speak of a "cult of childhood" as Elsaesser does, but it seems quite obvious that children are more protected than ever before in history. At the same time the discourse about child molestation was never as widespread as today.

Films such as those by the Dardenes, (especially L’Enfant, B & F 2005), Lillya 4-ever (S, Est 2002, Moodyson), Jagden (D, 2012, Vinterberg), Festen (DK, S 1998, Vinterberg), or La Stanza del Figlio (I, F, 2001, Moretti) can be understood in this context.
On the other side films with protagonists of an older age, that explicitly are discussing ageing, become more frequent: Haneke's *Amour* (*F, A, G* 2012), *La Grande Bellezza* (*I, F, 2013*) and *Youth* (*I, F, CH, UK* 2015) by Paolo Sorrentino, *45 Years* (UK 2015, Andrew Heigh) or *Wolke 9* (*D 2008, Dresen*) to name just a few.

In connection with these themes Elsaesser also registers a new interest in the body, in skin and in sensual aspects of film that lately also emerged in research about the haptic qualities of cinema. In CEC the increasing amount of (often explicit) sex scenes as well as new sensibility for the body can be seen in the many films, the case of Claire Denis might illustrate this point (especially in *Beau Travail*, *F 1999*). From the 1960s onwards EC had more liberties to represent sexuality, so this point is in line with the history of EC, and it also works as distinction from Hollywood.

### 4.4.2. Holocaust

The political function and the afterlife of the Holocaust has changed, as Elsaesser notes. The memory of the Genocide is no longer a German-Austrian issue, but a European one. The Holocaust has become "the rallying point for a specific "European" moral and cultural unity" (Elsaesser 2015, 23)

It is therefore no surprise that films dealing with the Nazi past are coming not only from Germany and Austria (see here f.e. *Phönix* (*D 2014, Petzold*), *Die Fälscher* (*A, D 2007, Ruzowitzky*), but also *Das Weiße Band* (*A, D, F, I 2009, Haneke*) about the sources of fascism, but from Italy, Poland or Hungary: *La Vita e Bella* (*I 1997, Benigni*), *Ida* (*P, D 2013, Pawlikowski*), *Son of Saul* (*H 2015, László Nemes*).

The latter film found a new way of dealing with the issue in a highly stylized, but nevertheless "realistic" way. (The handheld camera is always at arms length of the protagonist, a member of a "Sonderkommando", which had to carry the dead out of the gas chambers, the dead bodies are shown out of focus).

Films like *Ida* are connecting the memory of the Holocaust with a critical view of the communist past.
The Holocaust is of course the biggest trauma in European history, but it is not the only one. The communist past of Eastern Europe as well as the terrorism of the 1970s in Germany and Italy are also historical issues that European cinema is dealing with.

4.4.3. Islam

The recent wave of Islamistic terror in Europe as well as the fear of the cultural and religious "Other" are making debates about Islam the most recent and heated ones within European political discourse.

And yet Islam is not a new issue within Europe. The continent has its own history with Islam, from Turkey to the Ottoman Empire until the conflicts with former colonies (Algeria f.e.). Thus declaring that Islam is indeed a part of Europe is nothing more than recognizing European history.

The discourse about Islam and Islamism in Europe is overlapping the broader issue of migration.

In CEC these issues can be found on many levels, though few films deal with them explicitly.

The radicalization of the second and third generation of Muslim immigrants was depicted in European cinema as early as 1997 in Udayan Prasad's adaptation of Hanif Kureishi's short story My Son the Fanatic (UK).

This film also belongs to a diasporic cinema that emerged from the 1990s onward, most prominently in the UK, where it had hits such as Bend it Like Beckham (UK, D 2002, Gurinder Chadha). The animated Persepolis (F 2007, Marjane Satrapi & Vincent Paronnaud) or the films by Fatih Akim are other examples for a cinema that deals with the problems of migration and the fear of Islam.

The mentioned diasporian cinema brings new influences into European cinema. Thus CEC is not only shaped by its own history, its opposition to Hollywood, but also by influences of World cinema, f.e. that of India. Traces of Bollywood can be found in many British films, most famously in Slumdog Millionaire (UK 2008, Danny Boyle).

Hamid Naficy calls the diasporic cinema "accented cinema." Films of this accented
cinema use a "foreign" language as the means to communicate. Naficy:

"If in linguistics accent pertains only to pronunciation, leaving grammar and vocabulary intact, exilic and diasporic accent permeates the film's deep structure: its narrative, visual style, characters, subject matter, theme, and plot. In that sense, the accented style in film functions as both accent and dialect in linguistics."

(Naficy 2001: 23)

This understanding may deliver a new and fresh approach for dealing with the narrative and stylistic derivations of CEC. Which brings me to the last point I want to mention:

5. Conclusion

As I tried to examine various aspects of CEC, it was more important to me to give you an idea about its diversity and of the many different levels as to go into depth about just a few aspects. The overall question still remains:

"Is there such a thing as Contemporary European Cinema?"

This question can not easily be answered. But, as I have pointed out, CEC has a common way of financing, distributing and exhibiting films and this economic model shapes CEC and distinguishes it from others. CEC has its own issues, its own history, and its own way of dealing with the possibilities of today's filmmaking. It does so with a certain playfulness, even in films that look grim and earnest at first glance.

The last notion I want to emphasize as a characteristic of CEC is thus Performance. The success of the recent German-Austrian coproduction *Toni Erdmann* (D, A 2016, Maren Ade) is due to the performances of the protagonist (and its actor) within the film, who is constantly performing new identities in order to get the attention of his adult daughter.

The notion of performance is central to CEC and is not limited to performances of actresses and actors. In the context of the mentioned playfulness I would suggest that CEC is performing in many ways: f.e, CEC is "performing the nation rather than representing it" as Elsaesser puts it, it is performing realism, it is performing auteur-
cinema and it is performing narration. This does not mean that these elements are not serious parts of many European films, they are just not the essence of it.

This is what Elsaesser has in mind, when he calls CEC "already double occupied". CEC has no essence, it can not be reduced to one single aspect. It is always connoted (occupied, if you like) by one aspect as well as by its opposition. In the best examples CEC is demonstrating how this double occupancy is able to undermine the notion of a single identity – a term more dangerous than helpful. The subversion of identity in a playful and often also entertaining, but nevertheless serious way, could also be called "performing poly-identities".

Thus if there is indeed an “essence” of CEC, it has to be its diversity and its playfulness, its performative touch. From the outside CEC may be considered as a part of World Cinema (subtitles!), but from within I would rather prefer to see it as an important part of a new cosmopolitan cinema.

References


Elsaesser, Thomas (2009), Real location, fantasy space, performative place. Double occupancy and mutual interference in European cinema, in: Trifonova, Temenuga (ed.): European Film Theory. New York, London: Routledge, pp. 47-62
