

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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FILM CULTURE IN EUROPE

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FILM CULTURE IN EUROPE

Introduction: the loss of a popular audience

1. The central cultural fact about European cinema is the loss of its mass popular audience to television. This loss is final and irrevocable and it changes the nature of cinema as a cultural form whatever images and sounds film makers may choose to record on film. The United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany have long grown accustomed to this loss. What gives this conference its urgency and classifies the common European nature of this crisis is the final conquest by television of much of Europe's cinema-going heartland in France and Italy, as the detailed statistics in the accompanying paper clearly show (1).

2. We can only appreciate the real significance of this loss of audience to television and begin to react appropriately if we concentrate not upon the specificity of film as a technical medium (eg photographic emulsion, sprocketed celluloid, projected light, etc) but upon the specificity of cinema as a cultural institution, that is to say upon the ways in which it structures relationships between cultural production (the film) and cultural publics (the audience). We have to see cinema above all as a specific historical stage in cultural distribution rather than as a specific form of cultural production, in so far, that is to say, as you can separate these moments in a whole cultural process.

The specificity of cinema

3. Faced by television it is impossible to sustain a serious argument in favour of the specificity of film as the central characteristic of the cinema. Firstly one is faced by the fact that a significant proportion of TV output is either films actually made originally for the cinema or original TV material shot and transmitted on film. Secondly one is faced with the fact that, as the closed-circuit transmission of world heavyweight championships or the recent SFP (2) video-transmission experiment in Auvergne demonstrate, the consumption of audio-visual entertainment by an audience in a cinema in no way depends upon film technology.

4. Up until now the lightness of the camera, the easier separability of picture and sound track and the easier editing have made film a superior recording technology both in dramatic fiction and in news and documentaries, in whatever way the resulting audio-visual product was to be distributed. There are now clear signs that this technical superiority of film over video will not last much longer. The rapid development of electronic miniaturisation and digitalisation linked to the computer processing of video signals means that within the next five years video will be able to do, with a significant cost saving, all that film can do and more. However, this new generation of equipment will represent a significant initial capital investment which will militate against the cottage industry work patterns that have grown up in the European film industries. A few years ago it was portable video that was welcomed as the liberating and democratic audio-visual technology, with clear advantages of cheapness and ease of

(1) AS/Cult (30) 12: Claude Degand "The economic situation of the Industry in Europe".

(2) Société Française de Production (Paris).

handling. These claims for video have proved unfounded and ironically the final move from film to video will take place in the industrial mainstream of audio-visual culture, whereas film will survive, in its Super 8 form, as the medium of the amateur, the avant-garde and the political activist.

5. Thus for the purposes of this paper we can disregard the specific recording technology and concentrate on the differences between cinema and television as institutionalised forms of cultural dissemination. As propagandists for the cinema industry ceaselessly point out, the shift of the mass audience from cinema to television in no way represents a decline in the public's consumption of films, even when narrowly defined as films made for the cinema (see Degand paper). In terms of the total consumption of audio-visual entertainment and information the shift represents a massive rise. European television in general commissions a far wider range of films and brings them to a wider audience than the cinema ever did. In the Federal Republic of Germany 80% of film production is subsidised and two-thirds of that comes from TV. This output includes the avant-garde (Wyborny) and the politically committed (Ziewer) as well as mainstream art and entertainment. In France the Haut Conseil de l'Audiovisuel estimate that within 4 years one-third of film production investment will come from TV and INA (1) supports such progressive work as that of Godard and Armand Gatti. In Italy RAI has produced many of the most significant works of cinema in the last few years including films by Bertolucci, the Tavanni brothers, Bellocchio, Rosi and even such an intransigently minority film maker as Straub. In the United Kingdom, while cinema films are not supported, virtually all the significant dramatic work in film over the last decade has been made by TV. To understand the cultural significance of this shift from cinema to TV we need first to place it in a historical context,

#### The cinema and the industrialisation of culture

6. Cinema, as we have come to know it, developed as part of a wider process of the industrialisation of culture, a process begun by the printing press but which really developed as a major feature of industrial societies during the last three decades of the 19th century. The industrialisation of culture saw in the first place the rise of mass newspapers, and popular literature, mass professional spectator sport, and the music hall; in the second phase the development of the gramophone and the cinema followed by radio and television. This process was part of the wider process of 2nd stage industrialisation which saw the creation of a mass consumer market, closely associated with the development of advertising. This general stage of economic development, sometimes known as monopoly capitalism, saw the invasion of the home, of a private sphere until then largely outside the reach of exchange value, by the forces of the market. It saw the beginnings of the factory preparation of food and of mass catering, especially in the drink trade with which the early development of mass entertainment were closely associated. Manet's "Bar at the Folies Bergère" is the classic icon of that period.

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(1) Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (Paris)

7. The central economic problem to which solutions were found in this period was the problem of distribution, the creation of markets big enough to sustain the economies of scale of mass production. Thus in the industrialisation of culture the central problem was the creation of audiences and it was for this purpose, not for the manufacture of new cultural products, that technologies of reproduction were brought into play.

8. Without technologies of reproduction the audience, even when made readily available in greater numbers than before by urbanisation, public transport and artificial lights was still limited to those who could get within direct physical sight and sound of a performance.

9. The first truly industrialised cultural form to be developed was the newspaper, depending as it did not upon a technological breakthrough, but upon improvements to the original and long-established reproductive technology of print. This primacy of the newspaper is important in relation to cinema when we come to consider the position of contemporary political film-making, for the cinema, unlike radio and television, was never able to challenge the newspaper as a distributor of mass information owing to the relative slowness of its distribution system.

10. The cluster of technical developments which we now know as cinema was fused into the institutional form we have inherited by the economic pressures to solve the problem of the mass distribution of performances; to apply to the fields of the music hall and the theatre similar economies of scale to those operating in print. Such was the force of that economic dynamic that in 1896 the first public cinema performance took place almost simultaneously in all four major industrialised countries, US, UK, France and Germany and within 25 years world cinema had assumed under the hegemony of Hollywood the economic, institutional and cultural forms with which we are all familiar.

11. From the start the cinema was a heterogenous and parasitic cultural form. Utilising economies of scale it made available to a wider audience pre-existing cultural forms. In this respect TV is repeating and extending, according to the same logic, a process of which cinema was merely a historic stage and it ill behoves cinema people to complain and scream for protection.

12. The cinema was an accidental realisor of that great cultural project of 19th century romanticism, Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk. It took over the role and forms of popular fiction, of the music hall, of the theatre, of the circus, of the concert hall. Both the Melies tradition of illusionism and the Lumiere tradition of realism were rooted to pre-existing stage forms and to this day fictional cinema continues to struggle with and draw sustenance from the tension between the narrative forms of the novel and of the stage play.

Culture and class struggle

13. But as well as taking the forms and characteristic concerns of pre-existing cultural activity, the cinema also intervened in and crucially developed a cultural class struggle. Once again the shift to TV has to be seen also in this light. One can, grossly over-simplifying, see the development of European culture in three broad stages. First a feudal stage in which there developed on the one hand an elite court culture and on the other a folk culture held in tension between the forms of church-dominated religious art and older pre-Christian forms. This culture began to break down from the 15th century onwards with the development of a bourgeois challenge to the culture of both court and church. This slow development gave us what are still the dominant forms of high art, the music of the concert hall and opera house, prose drama, the novel and easel painting created for the private house, above all the landscape, the still life and the portrait. At the start of this development in Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes, the nascent bourgeois culture took sustenance from the folk tradition, but with rising self-confidence, increased division of labour and associated social stratification and above all, with the development in the 19th century of the industrial proletariat, the bourgeoisie set about controlling and suppressing what they saw as the demonic and anti-social urges of folk culture. This attempted suppression took a variety of forms of which the development of state education was one of the most important, but it also included the very inventions of the categories art, literature and culture and of an associated critical and academic activity to establish and support these essentially social distinctions.

14. This process of cultural hegemony was, of course, resisted by both nascent proletariat and peasantry and the struggle and determination of that resistance can be seen in the deep and continuing class-based antipathy to established high cultural forms in all Western industrial societies. This cultural struggle was fought out not just between cultural forms but also within them. The struggle between amateurism and professionalism in sport is one example. From this perspective the industrialisation of culture can in part be seen as a struggle between classes for control of the leisure time activity and thus of the cultural consumption of the majority, be they working class or peasantry.

15. The music hall represented a classic site of this struggle, a form in which the bourgeois concert party and the folk tradition of the fairground were fused. We know that, as with the development of a popular press under the economic and ideological control of advertisers, the development of the music hall in search of the widest and most prosperous audience which was needed to support the increasing capitalisation required by, among other things, not only larger halls but also a developing star system, publicity, etc, led to the suppression of the more obviously socially and politically oppositional content.

16. This process by which the expression of social conflict, the development of distinctively proletarian cultural forms, was blocked by the economic dynamics of an institution which increasingly separated the performer or producer from the audience and its social concerns and preoccupations, in its search for ever greater economies of scale was massively reinforced by the introduction of cinema. You can see both in the movement of the cinema out of the fairground and into lush and relatively expensive picture palaces, as well as in the struggle in the forms of the early cinema between traditions of the music hall and the circus (eg slapstick, etc) on the one hand and the forms of bourgeois theatre, such as drawing room comedy and melodrama, on the other, the general process of cultural recuperation being fought out anew and on a wider battlefield. This struggle has now shifted to television and is one of the things that gives to TV its cultural centrality and force, for this process of recuperation, of cultural struggle, is continuous in any medium that is involved with the popular audience and thus must in part at least speak to its characteristic concerns and preoccupations. Once a cultural form vacates that space it is in constant danger, as the cinema now demonstrates, of being sucked back within the narrow confines of bourgeois culture and, in ceasing to talk to a social totality with its tensions, contradictions and fissures, becomes merely a symbol and reinforcement of social exclusivity. It is to this dilemma, as Degand's paper points out, that the Malecot report addresses itself.

#### European film culture today

17. Against this general historical background we can now return to examine in more detail contemporary European cinema. We find broadly four distinct cinemas. First there is the surviving mainstream popular entertainment cinema employing stories and well tried narrative formulas. Its only remaining *raison d'être* is either to provide experiences of sheer show that TV cannot emulate (eg the science fiction boom with Star Wars and Close Encounters) because they depend upon the darkened auditorium, wide screen and quadrophonic sound and/or to cater for a specific youth audience for whom going to the cinema represents escape from parental control and part of courtship rituals. In this market Europe competes less and less effectively with the United States, for both cultural and economic reasons. The imminent demise of an indigenous European intervention in this market is to be expected and, given the cultural marginality of this sector compared with TV, it must be questionable whether it is worth any cultural defence, particularly as it in part depends upon the international position of the English language and thus poses serious problems for any European competition.

18. Secondly there is an art house cinema represented for instance by much of the new German cinema (Wender, Fassbinder, etc), by Chabrol or Tavernier in France, by Tanner and Goretti in Switzerland, by the Tavani brothers and Bertolucci in Italy, etc, etc. This is a cinema that traces its roots back to the authors of the European cinema, to Lang, to Renoir, to Rossellini and draws upon the wider and deeper bourgeois cultural tradition of the novel and the theatre. When a popular cinema existed such films could appeal, often within the same film, to both majority and minority audiences and it is from that potential range of cultural reference that the strengths of such a cinema stem, but the loss of the popular audience has left these film makers in an increasingly disembodied limbo. They depend almost entirely upon public subsidy and speak only to an exiguous international audience made up of a fraction of the cultural bourgeoisie. The case for and against subsidising such a cinema is the same as that for the theatre. It is the form which it is

at present easiest politically to subsidise because it appeals directly to those notions of artistic quality legitimised by the mainstream of European culture. For this reason it is this type of cinema which tends to receive the bulk of existing direct state support.

19. Thirdly there is an avant-garde. The avant-garde can be divided into two, sometimes interrelated streams, what the French have dubbed Cinéma Différent and Cinéma Militant, the one being primarily concerned with formal experiment and the other with ideologically oppositional content. The origins of these streams within the history of the cinema go back at least to the early 20s.. Both streams, after a brief flowering in the early 70s seem to be on the wane.

20. The formalist avant-garde tradition has always to be seen in relation to traditional high art. It is part of the general modernist movement and has always wished to assimilate the film medium to the aesthetic concerns of such art. We see this in such films as Ruttmann's Symphony of a City, the films of Moholy-Nagy associated with the Bauhaus, the surrealist films of Man Ray, Bunuel and René Clair. It is a tradition which stresses the specificity of the medium and has been associated with a critical tradition whose overriding concern was to justify the cinema as the seventh art, to save it from its populist tendencies. It was thus always in opposition to the cinematic mainstream.

21. Its recent European renaissance of which the start can be marked by the festival at Knokke in 1967, can be traced to two causes, one precisely the loss of the cinema's audience to TV and thus a felt need among some film makers to develop an aesthetic of the specificity of film, a stress not only upon grain, sprocket holes etc, but also upon the unique group, cinema viewing experience, the other a search, especially in the United States, for solutions to aesthetic problems in other arts such as dance, sculpture and painting to which film seemed to offer solutions. The limitations of the resulting aesthetic rapidly became apparent even to its practitioners and indeed those limitations were and are part of a wider loss of faith in the modernist aesthetic. The result has been either a return to the more traditional arts from whence they came or a move, in search of an audience, towards the forms of conventional narrative film and towards television. Names such as Wyborny, Dwoskin, Straub spring immediately to mind.

22. For reasons of social structure the concerns of the avant-garde were always closer to the mainstream in Europe than in the United States which no doubt in part accounts for the popular dominance of American cinema. One thinks of such examples as Dr Caligari, Metropolis, the films of Eisenstein or the recent films of Bunuel. In France again for reasons of specific cultural history this close relationship has survived so that Cinéma Différent is comparatively undeveloped while a director like Rivette works on the edge at least of mainstream art cinema.

23. But the film avant-garde, while its home will no doubt increasingly be found in art galleries and museums of modern art and within the subsidy structure that supports such activity, shares with that wider cultural avant-garde a social role towards which it is ambivalent and at least in part to escape from which it turned to the medium of film. That is to say because cinema was a popular cultural form based upon a reproductive technology it offered an escape from the exclusivity of traditional culture. For the European avant-garde has specific social roots and a specific hegemonic function. The purpose of the avant-garde, as P Bourdieu and his colleagues have established, was and is to create ever more exclusive cultural products in order to raise the status and value of that fraction of the dominant class to which they, as intellectuals and cultural workers, belonged. The



purpose of the avant-garde is the creation of cultural capital. The creators of such cultural capital required, in parallel with finance capital's control of the means of material production, exclusive control of the means of cultural production. It required in fact the quite specific exclusion of the popular audience. It was upon its rarity that its value as cultural capital had to rest. Thus the avant-garde was the other arm of the bourgeoisie in that cultural struggle already described. While subverting alternative oppositional cultural forms by means of economic control, one's own cultural forms were protected by being made exclusive, thus reinforcing the social exclusivity and privilege of which they were an expression. The loss of the popular audience to TV has undoubtedly placed a large part of what is left of cinema activity in the hands, potentially at least, of this avant-garde.

24. As with the development of cultural exclusivity in general the development of the cinema is closely related to developments within the educational sphere. That is to say in order to be legitimised as a sphere of exclusive expertise the production and consumption of films must be brought within the process of scholastic certification. It is undoubtedly true that much of the surviving cinema activity in Europe now depends, as in the fine arts, upon the existence and development within the state-funded educational system of a self-perpetuating sector devoted to the study of audio-visual production and analysis.

25. Political film making, cinema militant, can be found pursuing three broad aims. Sometimes these aims come together within the work of one film maker or film making group. At other times the choice of one or other aim can be the source of profound cleavage. The first aim allies political film making to the formal avant-garde in more than their common opposition to the cinematic status quo. From Vertov and Eisenstein onwards there have been those who have seen the dominant ideology as embedded in the languages with which we communicate and who thus see the criticism and renewal of these languages as a crucial political intervention. The best known contemporary representatives of this tendency are Godard and Straub. While this has undoubtedly been an important tendency in political film making and its associated critical theory since 1968 and while it has also been reinforced by the development of the women's movement with its particular concerns with forms of representation, precisely because it was so vulnerable to the charge of obscurantist elitism its influence could never be sustained and has waned along with that of the structuralist aesthetic in general. Its leading representatives are now seeking a wider audience via TV and it must be doubtful whether their aesthetic can survive this experience.

26. The other two broad aims of political film making are and have been since the early days of cinema to present an alternative content to that of mainstream cinema and to create a different audience and a different experience for that audience by substituting a more active, participatory viewing experience for the passive cultural consumption of mass cinema-going. There is an important sense in which this type of cinema needs to be seen in relationship to the press rather than the rest of cinema. That is to say from their oppositional political perspective the problem was to construct alternative channels for the distribution of alternative information and of alternative political interpretations of that information, a battle that had been waged for a long time in the sphere of the press and into which the cinema made only minor interventions. It is significant that the dominant mode within this field of film making is documentary and, in the United Kingdom in the 30s for instance, such an aesthetic choice was seen as alternative to a cinema dominated by entertainment, entertainment which was seen as passivity inducing opium as opposed to the active knowledge created by documentary confrontation with the real world. The capture of the mass audience by TV has thus affected this

type of film making in a different way. In one sense it has sharpened its oppositional stance precisely because TV makes a massive intervention in news and documentary coverage and thus what before was a divided enemy, the press and the cinema, now coalesces into one. At the same time the nature of argument has become more complex. Precisely because European TV is in general publicly funded with an obligation to political balance the argument must now shift to one concerning the role of the state and its degree of control over information and political debate and it is within that general context that the future of this type of political film making needs to be considered. The argument in favour of supporting such activity is not an argument principally about the cinema as such, but rather about the extent to which publicly funded and controlled television can involve the mass audience in the full spectrum of political debate. Since the argument concerns the ability of the state not only to tolerate diversity and opposition, but actually to fund it, in this field no distinction needs to be made between cinema and TV. Unless that is one wishes cynically to suggest that it is safer to subsidise such film making outside TV, since thus removed from a mass audience it will be powerless.

27. The alternative argument to this brings us back to the creation of an alternative audience experience. Here TV is seen as worse than cinema in that it not only creates a passive audience, but also a privatised one. By bringing people together into a cinema it is argued at least there is both the opportunity for group solidarity and also the possibility of a two-way discussion between film maker and audience. Undoubtedly this is true and undoubtedly film has been, is being and can continue to be used as a focus for group discussion, as a tool of what the French call animation. However film is only one such tool and in this mode its future needs to be considered within the context, not of cinema, but of the problems of socio-political organisation in general, of the democratic process itself. The death of cinema as we have known it affects the issue neither one way nor the other.

28. Before leaving political cinema it is important to mention an alternative cultural strategy within the general aim of creating an alternative content. I have argued that in general in opposition to mainstream cinema this took a documentary form. However, there was clearly another strategy, another thrust, namely the attempt to provide an alternative entertainment cinema, a strategy that was seen as particularly important precisely because for entertainment a mass, working class audience already existed. Here the enemy was not entertainment cinema itself as much as the producers and studio bosses who controlled its content. A major recent example of this strategy was Bertolucci's 1900, a film that demonstrates both its potential strengths and actual weaknesses. This type of political film making has been affected in two ways by the shift of the mass audience to TV. On the one hand it can be argued that it was never very successful in altering the content of mainstream cinema and that given the capitalist nature of that cinema, this is hardly surprising. Thus it might have been expected that public, supposedly politically balanced TV would be more welcoming. I think that in many European countries, certainly in the UK and the Federal Republic of Germany, this has in fact been true. The political and ideological range of the subject matter of narrative drama on TV in these two countries is unarguably wider than that provided in the past or present by the cinema. One only has to mention the work of Loach and Garnett or of Trevor Griffiths in the UK, of Ziewer and his colleagues with their arbeiterfilm in the Federal Republic of Germany. In spite of this it is argued among film makers that TV as a system militates against artistic

and political freedom, not only because it is state or semi-state controlled, but because it is highly bureaucratised, an extreme version of the old Hollywood studio system. Artistic decisions, they argue, are taken by too few people for comfort,

29. In this argument the political film makers are joined by the avant-garde and by the art film makers. It is an argument that is in the main based upon a false nostalgia for the supposed freedom that went with the anarchy of a certain stage of film production following the decline of the big studios. But the content of mass cinema has always been narrow. It is far wider in TV whatever the objective nature of the control structure. Moreover it would be perfectly possible to reorganise TV if it were so desired to increase the diversity of the points of creative decision. What will never go away, and this in general is what film makers really seek when they complain about TV, is the dialectic between creative freedom and the need for an audience,

### Conclusions

30. To sum up:

- a. The specificity of cinema lies, not in its technology of reproduction but in its institutionalisation as a form of mass distribution.
- b. That form of distribution must be seen as transitional within a wider historical perspective.
- c. TV, as a more efficient form of distribution has taken over most of the cinema's traditional cultural roles and fulfills them, at least as well, if not better.
- d. In fact the shift from cinema to TV, given the form in which TV has been institutionalised throughout most of Europe, already represents a massive shift from private to public support for cultural production.
- e. Since TV is and is likely to remain the dominant cultural form in this area, attention should shift away from efforts to "save the cinema" and concentrate instead upon the best means of financing and controlling TV in order to enhance cultural and political democracy.

31. This being said, what role remains for the cinema?

- a. The provision of a limited range of large-scale entertainments for the mass audience, a provision which only the international market can support, a market in which it will be very difficult for Europe to compete even if it were desirable for it to do so. It is largely to this problem that Degand's paper addresses itself.
- b. The provision of the opportunity of repeated viewings of products previously shown to a mass audience on television. If a tradition of criticism is to survive and prosper such an opportunity, which only the cinema can provide, is essential. Without such a tradition the cultural producers themselves will be unable to develop their medium because

TV provides no adequate audience feedback, no adequate yardstick against which a film maker can judge the relative success or failure of his work.

- c. The provision of the opportunity for the enjoyment and study of that cultural tradition now represented by the cinema and indeed already the TV, of the past. Once again the need to have the cultural past available is essential not only for the general public but also for creative artists. For them it acts as a kind of artistic reservoir.

While TV can and should partially fill this role, it can never, because of the scale of its audience and the constant flow of its programming, adequately take on the role of a cinemathèque.

- d. The provision of the opportunity to exhibit work which cannot yet be shown on television because it is experimental in form or content. Clearly precisely because of its mass family audience, TV programming is governed by stricter social taboos, in the area of sex for instance, than the cinema is and there is likely to remain a body of work that can only be shown to minority audiences in cinemas. While this body of work is likely to be small and of marginal cultural importance the opportunity for its creation and exhibition should not be entirely closed off.

32. Apart from the provision of large-scale mass international entertainment, the other provisions will require and should receive, in association and collaboration with the institutions of TV and of education, support from the state, similar to that now taken almost for granted, for theatres, art galleries and museums.