

Huw D. Jones¹

Crossing borders: the circulation and reception of non-national European films in Italy²

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explain why some non-national European (NNE) films – i.e. films produced in one European country but released in another (e.g. a French film released in Italy) – are more successful at the Italian box office than others. Drawing on theories about the transnational circulation and reception of films and other media products, along with a range of qualitative and quantitative methods and sources, I compare the cultural and industrial characteristics of ‘successful’ NNE films (i.e. films that achieved 200,000 cinema admissions or more in Italy) with ‘unsuccessful’ NNE films released in the period 2005-15. My analysis reveals that few of the NNE films which succeeded at the Italian box office have characteristics we would expect to find in films that travel well across national borders. Indeed, most are low-budget independent arthouse or middlebrow films with stories that are dialogue-heavy, complex and culturally specific. Nevertheless, these films perform well not only because they appeal to audiences (particularly university graduates) who watch films for their cultural or artistic value, rather than purely for entertainment, but also because these successful arthouse and middlebrow NNE films have other key characteristics which ensure they receive widespread distribution and thus higher audiences. These characteristics include major awards, positive reviews and the involvement of international stars, critically-acclaimed directors, or pre-sold material (e.g. based on a bestselling book). Since most of the NNE films which succeeded at the Italian box office also performed well in other European countries, these findings can be applied to other national contexts. That said, there are some attributes of the NNE film market in Italy that are specific to the Italian context. For example, arthouse NNE films tend to perform better in Italy than countries like the UK, partly because such films are dubbed rather than subtitled, and partly because arthouse distributors and cinemas have a larger share of the theatrical market, though there are signs this is changing.

Key Words: arthouse, distribution, European film, Italy, transnational

¹ Department of Film, University of Southampton, UK – h.d.jones@soton.ac.uk

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1. INTRODUCTION

European films often struggle to cross national borders.³ About half of all films produced in Europe in the period 2005-15 secured international distribution in another European country, according to the MeCETES Film Database.⁴ Yet the audience for these non-national European (NNE) films – that is, films produced in one European country but released in another (e.g. a French film released in Italy) – was often tiny: a median average of 8,000 admissions. Altogether, NNE films account for 12% of cinema admissions in Europe, compared with 65% for American films (both Hollywood studio productions and independent films) and 21% for national films (e.g. a French film released in France). Across all media platforms, only 14% of EU citizens regularly watch NNE films, according to a 2014 European Commission survey.⁵ These avid NNE film viewers tend to be “younger, more often women living in medium-sized cities, with low revenue, high education, good [media] equipment, heavy media viewing and easier access to theatres”.⁶

Admissions for NNE films vary from country-to-country. Small European nations that have low film production capacity but share a common language with a larger neighbour tend to have the highest market share for NNE films. In German-speaking Austria, for example, NNE films average 24% of cinemas admissions, largely due to the popularity of imported German comedies and family films. By contrast, countries that combine a strong domestic film industry with no common language with their European neighbours tend to have the smallest market share for NNE films. In the UK, NNE films – most of them intellectually-demanding arthouse or subtitled films – average only 3% of admissions.

With a 13% market share for NNE films (about the European average), Italy sits between these two poles. On the one hand, its strong domestic film industry limits demand for NNE films. In the period 2005-15, for example, Italian national films averaged 27% of admissions, partly due to the success of comedies like *Benvenuti al Sud* (Miniero, 2010), *Che bello giornata* (Nunziante, 2011), and *Sole e catinelle* (Nunziante, 2013). Moreover, with

³ ‘Europe’ is defined as European Union (EU) or European Free Trade Area (EFTA) member states. In the case of co-productions or incoming investment features, the country-of-origin is defined as the member state where the main producer is based.

⁴ The MeCETES Film Database combines data from the European Audiovisual Observatory’s Lumiere Pro World Database, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and other industry sources (e.g. the EU’s MEDIA programme).

⁵ European Commission, *A Profile of Current and Future Audiovisual Audience: Final Report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014, 152.

⁶ European Commission, *Audiovisual Audience*, 109.

proportionally fewer university graduates than the EU population as a whole, Italians are less likely to fit the typical demographic for NNE films.⁷

On the other hand, NNE films face more favourable prospects in Italy than countries like the UK. Hollywood studios and Hollywood-orientated multiplex cinemas command a lower share of the theatrical distribution and exhibition market than the UK, while the proportion of the country's theatres belonging to the Europa Cinema Network – which prioritise the screening of NNE films – is slightly higher (13% compared with 7% in the UK).⁸ As such, almost half of Italians believe that NNE films are “sufficiently available on screens in my area”, compared with little more than a third of EU citizens overall, according to the European Commission survey.⁹ Most NNE films released in Italy are dubbed into Italian, making them accessible to a wider audience than subtitled films, while the offering is more mainstream, since it includes British-made action-adventure blockbusters and family films, such as the *James Bond* or *Harry Potter* franchises. Furthermore, despite the lower proportion of university graduates, Italians seem more receptive than most Europeans to the arthouse films that make up a large proportion of NNE film releases in Italy. For example, according to a YouGov poll commissioned by the MeCETES project, 22% of Italians saw the Palme d'Or-winning drama *Blue Is The Warmest Color/La vita di Adele* (Kechiche, 2013), compared with 4% of Britons and 5% of Germans; 26% saw the Danish thriller *The Hunt/Il sospetto* (Vinterberg, 2012), compared with 3% of Britons and 6% of Germans.

The appeal of arthouse films is perhaps a legacy of the strong cinephile culture established in major Italian cities like Rome during the 1940s and '50s.¹⁰ However, there are signs this tradition is struggling. According to the European Commission report, “Young adults are turning away from arthouse productions and cinema attendance is also decreasing among older adults”.¹¹ The Italian state – which has focused financial support on boosting the production of Italian national films – has done little to help the distribution and exhibition of NNE films.¹² The only significant distribution support comes from the EU's MEDIA programme – though in 2013 only 12% of NNE film releases secured MEDIA distribution

⁷ In 2017, 17% of Italians aged 15 to 64 have completed tertiary level education, compared with 28% of EU citizens. Eurostat, “Population By Educational Attainment Level, Sex and Age (%) - Main Indicators,” last updated October 11, 2018, <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

⁸ Europa Cinemas, *Europa Cinemas: Network Review No.27 Cannes 2016*, Paris: Europa Cinema, 2016, 40.

⁹ European Commission, *Audiovisual Audience*, 164.

¹⁰ D. Treveri Gennari, “‘If You Have Seen It, You Cannot Forget!’: Film Consumption and Memories of Cinema-Going in 1950s Rome,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 35, 1, (2015): 53-74.

¹¹ European Commission, *Audiovisual Audience*, 353.

¹² I. Weber, “European Distribution: Focus On Italy,” *Europa Distribution*, August 16, 2016. Accessed October 16, 2018. <http://www.europa-distribution.org/european-distribution-focus-on-italy>.

support, down from 43% in 2007. Accordingly, while the market share for NNE films in Italy has fluctuated from 18% in 2005 to 9% in 2010, before recovering to 13% in 2015, the overall trend is one of decline.

Yet despite these challenges, some NNE films do perform well in Italy. In the period 2005-15, 174 NNE films achieved 200,000 cinema admissions or more at the Italian box office, according to MeCETES Film Database. These ‘successful’ NNE films accounted for only 16% of NNE film releases, but 71% of total NNE film admissions – meaning they were amongst the few NNE films seen by significant numbers of Italian cinemagoers.

This article seeks to explain why some NNE films are more successful at the Italian box office than others. In the next section, I outline some of the key theories on the transnational circulation and reception of films and other media products which underpin my analysis of the Italian market for NNE films. I then outline my methodology, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods and sources, before presenting my results. One of my key findings is that few of the NNE films which succeeded at the Italian box office have characteristics we would expect to find in films that travel well across national borders. Most are low-budget independent arthouse or middlebrow NNE films with stories that are dialogue-heavy, complex and culturally-specific. Nevertheless, these films perform well not only because they appeal to audiences (particularly university graduates) who watch films for their cultural or artistic value, rather than purely for entertainment, but also because these successful arthouse and middlebrow NNE films have other key characteristics which ensure they receive widespread distribution and thus higher audiences. These characteristics include major awards, positive reviews and the involvement of international stars, critically-acclaimed directors, or pre-sold material (e.g. based on a bestselling book). My conclusion considers the extent to which these findings are applicable to other European contexts.

2. TRANSNATIONAL FLOWS

Cultural factors partly explain why some films travel better than others. Straubhaar, for example, argues audiences tend to “prefer media products from [their] own culture or the most similar possible culture”.¹³ Similarly, Hoskins and Mirus suggest films rooted in one

¹³ J. D. Straubhaar, "Choosing National TV: Cultural Capital, Language, and Cultural Proximity in Brazil," in *The Impact of International Television: A Paradigm Shift*, edited by M. G. Elasmir, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003: 85.

culture “will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the styles, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioural patterns of the material in question”.¹⁴ Language is one of the main cultural barriers films face when exported abroad – few watch films in languages they cannot speak or comprehend – which explains why European countries which share a common language with a larger neighbour tend to have the highest market share for NNE films. Yet even films produced in a familiar language or ones that have been expertly dubbed into the local language can still face diminished appeal if they feature “dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music traditions, [and] religions” audiences are unfamiliar with.¹⁵

Hollywood studios have developed strategies to overcome these cultural and linguistic barriers. Successful Hollywood movies often place an emphasis on visual action and special effects rather than dialogue, making them easier to understand. They may also downplay cultural specificity (e.g. local dialogue or reference points) or blend elements from different nationalities to broaden their cultural appeal.¹⁶ Even when they are culturally specific or dialogue-heavy, globally successful Hollywood movies are often based on what Olson calls universally-recognised ‘mythotypes’.¹⁷ These include the use of archetypal characters (e.g. heroes and villains) and circular stories, where a disruption in the status quo is eventually restored (e.g. the villain is killed). This is not to suggest mythotypes mean the same thing across the globe. As Katz and Liebes’s pioneering work on the cross-cultural reception of the American soap opera *Dallas* shows, ‘universal’ stories may be interpreted in different ways by different cultural or ethnic groups according to their own societal norms.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as Hansen points out, Hollywood films have provided a common or ‘vernacular’ language about modernity that can be easily translated and reconfigured by different cultures.¹⁹ Finally, the most successful Hollywood films often feature ‘A-list’ movie stars who have established

¹⁴ C. Hoskins, R. Mirus, "Reasons for the United-States Dominance of the International-Trade in Television Programs," *Media Culture & Society* 10, 4 (1988): 499-515 (500).

¹⁵ A. C. La Pastina, J.D. Straubhaar, "Multiple Proximities Between Television Genres and Audiences: The Schism Between Telenovelas, Global Distribution and Local Consumption," *International Communication Gazette*, 67, 3 (2005): 271-288 (274).

¹⁶ F. Wasser, "Is Hollywood America - The Trans-Nationalization of the American Film Industry," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, 4 (1995); F. L. F. Lee, "Hollywood Movies in East Asia: Examining Cultural Discount and Performance Predictability at the Box Office," *Asian Journal of Communication* 18, 2 (2008); D. Crane, "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 20, 4 (2014).

¹⁷ S. R. Olson, *Hollywood Planet: Global Media and the Competitive Advantage of Native Transparency*, Mahwah, N.J. : London: Erlbaum, 1999.

¹⁸ E. Katz, T. Liebes, "Interacting With *Dallas*: Cross Cultural Readings of American TV," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 15, 1 (1990): 45-66.

¹⁹ M. B. Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity*, 6, 2 (1999). Accessed October 16, 2018: https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230274297_15.

an international profile and fan base.²⁰ Many also belong to well-established franchises, featuring reoccurring characters international audiences have become familiar with over time.

Some NNE films also possess these characteristics. Yet most are less action-orientated and more culturally-specific than Hollywood movies. According to the MeCETES Film Database, half of all NNE films in circulation are dialogue-heavy dramas, while less than one in ten are visual-orientated action/adventure films, compared with one in five US films released in Europe. Many NNE films also conform to an 'arthouse' style, in which stories tend to be complex, ambiguous and thought-provoking.²¹ While these qualities may entice some audiences – particularly those with high levels of education – they limit their broader appeal. Most film viewers in Europe, for example, say they watch films “to entertain themselves and have fun” rather than “to discover and learn about people and cultures”.²²

Cultural factors do not entirely explain why some films travel better than others. There are also economic or industrial factors to consider. Hoskins and Mirus, for example, note that Hollywood studios have more money to invest in stars, special effects and other production elements likely to attract mass audiences because they can draw on the resources of a large home market.²³ Most European producers, by contrast, operate in small countries, which lack the capacity to finance big-budget productions. The major Hollywood studios are also 'vertically integrated', which means they control both the production and distribution of their own films.²⁴ This provides their films with a direct route to market and makes it easier to coordinate global campaigns. Most European film producers, by contrast, rely on small, independent distributors, which have far less money and resources than their Hollywood counterparts and often operate only within specific national territories. Consequently, NNE films often struggle to gain adequate publicity or access to screen space.

3. METHODOLOGY

Guided by these theoretical principles, my primary research involved analysing the cultural and industrial characteristics of NNE films released in Italy, to identify which of these

²⁰ A. De Vany, D. W. Walls, “Uncertainty in the Movie Industry: Does Star Power Reduce the Terror of the Box Office?” *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 23, 4 (1999): 285-318.

²¹ D. Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” *Film Criticism*, 4, 1 (1979): 56-64.

²² European Commission, *Audiovisual Audience*, 147.

²³ Hoskins, Mirus, “Reasons for the United-States Dominance of the International-Trade in Television Programs.”

²⁴ C. Hoskins, S. McFadyen, A. Finn, *Global Television and Film: An Introduction to the Economics of the Business*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1997: 45.

characteristics have led to box office success – i.e. achieve 200,000 cinema admissions or more. This threshold for a ‘successful’ NNE film is arbitrary, but it does allow me to identify films that attracted a fairly large audience, regardless of whether they enjoyed the film or not.

The first stage of my analysis involved extracting a dataset of all NNE films released in Italy in the period 2005-15 (a total of 1,063 titles) from the MeCETES Film Database. This dataset included the following information for each film:

- Title;
- Country(s)-of-origin;
- Production category (i.e. 100% national production, international co-production or inward investment feature);
- Financial support (e.g. major US studio, TV broadcaster, film fund)
- Budget;
- Language(s) of production;
- Genre(s);
- Awards;
- Distributor;
- Number of awards won (including major awards like Oscars);
- Metacritic score (an indicator of the film’s critical reception);
- IMDb user score (an indicator of the film’s audience reception); and
- Cinema admissions in Italy.

I then used this dataset to compare how the characteristics (as summarised in table 1) of ‘successful’ NNE films (Column A) differed from ‘unsuccessful’ NNE films (Column B) in terms of their proportion (Column C).

While some cultural or industrial characteristics (e.g. budget) easily lend themselves to quantitative analysis, others (e.g. narrative) require more qualitative methods. The second phase of my analysis therefore involved close textual reading of a small number of successful NNE films. Finally, to test my assumptions about why Italian audiences were drawn to these films and how opinions differed across age, gender and educational backgrounds, I conducted eight focus groups (involving a total of 42 participants) in southern Italy in May 2016.²⁵ These focus groups – which were conducted with the assistance of an Italian PhD student – involved showing clips and trailers of recent NNE films and asking participants which films they liked and why. I also analysed data from two major audience surveys – the European Commission’s *Present and Future Audiovisual Audience* (2014) which surveyed 465 people

²⁵ For context, 55% of participants were over 35 years old; 64% were female; 52% were graduates. Half the focus groups took place in Bari, a city with a strong cinema culture (including three Europa cinemas and an annual film festival). The rest – mostly involving older participants – took place in a village about 10km from Bari. Most participants had a good knowledge and interest in European cinema (e.g. 81% had seen three or more recent NNE films). These factors should be taken into account when reading the focus group responses.

in Italy aged 4-50, and the MeCETES' YouGov survey, which polled over 1,000 Italian adults (table 2) – to provide a more representative picture of NNE film viewers in Italy. Through combining both qualitative and quantitative methods and sources, I have been able to build up a comprehensive picture of the characteristics that enable NNE films to succeed at the Italian box office.

4. SUCCESSFUL NNE FILMS

There were 174 successful NNE films in the period 2005-15, according to the MeCETES Film Database. These can be grouped – according to their target audience or market – into three main categories: commercial films; arthouse films; and middlebrow films.

Commercial films

A third of successful NNE films (64 out of 174 titles) were ‘commercial’ films (table 2). These included Hollywood-style action blockbusters and family films likely to appeal to audiences who watch films primarily for entertainment and prefer movies with big budget visual effects and international stars. With median average admissions of 409,000, commercial NNE films were the most popular type of successful NNE film at the Italian box office. The YouGov survey data suggests these films appeal to Italians of all ages, geographical regions and educational backgrounds, though some action blockbusters like *Taken* (Morel, 2008) are more popular with men than women. At the same time, commercial NNE films are often less popular in Italy than they are in other European countries. For example, according the European Commission survey, only 24% of Italians say they frequently watch ‘blockbuster films with star cast, big budgets [and] visual effects’, compared with 38% of EU citizens as a whole.²⁶ The French-made action blockbuster *Taken* had 0.4% penetration rate (i.e. number of cinema admissions per head of population) in Italy, compared with 2% in the UK.²⁷

Commercial NNE films have many of the characteristics we might expect from films that travel well across national borders. Industrially, they are mainly high-budget productions (55% had a budget over \$80m) made in large European countries – notably the UK, which

²⁶ European Commission, *Audiovisual Audience*, 153.

²⁷ “Taken: Rate of Penetration,” *Lumiere*. Accessed October 16, 2018. http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film_info/?id=30062&graphics=on.

produced the highly successful *Harry Potter* and *James Bond* film franchises, and to a lesser extent France, where Luc Besson's EuropaCorp has established a strong reputation for English-language Hollywood-style action films (e.g. *Taken*). Although officially European productions, over half these films were financed by major US studios. Just less than half were also distributed by major US studios, which ensured they received a wide release and heavy marketing. The British action spy thriller *Skyfall* (Mendes, 2012) – released by Warner Bros. – reached 668 theatres at its widest point of release, 58% of cinemas in Italy.²⁸

In terms of their cultural content, commercial NNE films often feature universal mythotypes, including archetypal characters, awe-inspiring spectacles and circular stories. In *Skyfall*, for example, action hero James Bond is on a mission to capture Bond villain Raoul Silva, a rogue agent who has destroyed the headquarters of MI6, Britain's secret service, and leaked the names of its undercover agents. The film opens with a spectacular chase scene involving an extended fight sequence between Bond and the mercenary Patrice on the roof of a speeding train. It ends with Bond killing his nemesis Silva in the Scottish Highlands (thus resolving the disruption Silva has caused) and returning to the rebuilt MI6 headquarters in London to accept another mission (signalling a restoration of the status quo).

Commercial NNE films have other cultural characteristics that may explain their popularity at the Italian box office. Many are seen as 'American' movies or films without too much cultural specificity, even though they often feature European stories, characters and settings. For example, although *Skyfall* is mainly set in London and the Scottish Highlands and features extensive British symbolism (e.g. the film ends with Bond stood on the roof of MI6 watching the Union flag flying over the Houses of Parliament), few of my Italian focus group participants saw it as a 'British' film. One described it as "typical *americanata*, a film full of special effects that costs millions of dollars".²⁹ Another "totally forgot" that Bond was a British agent, even though he had seen *Skyfall*, one of his "favourite films ever", at least "fifteen times".³⁰ Many of the stories and characters of these films are also already familiar to Italian audiences, because they belong to long-established franchises (e.g. *James Bond*, *Harry Potter*, *Asterix*, *Taken*) or are adaptations of well-known books or folk stories (e.g. *Robin Hood*, *The Little Prince*, *Belle et Sébastien*, *Paddington*). *Skyfall*, for example, was described as "classic 007" and praised for going "back to [its] origins".

²⁸ "Skyfall: Italy Weekend Box Office", *Box Office Mojo*, last updated March 14, 2017. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&country=IT&id=bond23.htm>

²⁹ Female, 25-34, non-graduate.

³⁰ Male, 25-34, non-graduate.

Arthouse films

About a quarter of successful NNE films (44 out of 174 titles) were ‘arthouse’ films (table 3). These are generally serious dramas likely to appeal to audiences who watch films for their cultural or artistic value, rather than purely for entertainment. With median average admissions of 270,000, these films attracted a much more niche audience than commercial NNE films. The YouGov survey suggests they particularly appealed to university graduates. At the same time, arthouse NNE films tend to be more popular in Italy than other European countries. For example, 8% of Italians say they frequently watch “independent or indie films, typically made with smaller budgets”, compared with 5% of all EU citizens. One of the most successful arthouse NNE films in Italy, Almodóvar’s *Volver/Volver – Tornare* (2006), was seen by twice as many cinemagoers per head of population in Italy than the UK or Germany.

Significantly, few successful arthouse NNE films have characteristics we might expect from films that travel well across national borders. Industrially, they are relatively low budget productions (58% had a budget less than \$10m) made by small, independent production companies. Many were produced in France (e.g. *The Class/La classe*, *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, *Amour*), which has a strong tradition of supporting arthouse filmmaking, or the UK (e.g. *The Angels’ Share/La Parte Degli Angeli*, *Mr. Turner/Turner*, *Shame*). Spain also raked up several successful arthouse NNE films in Italy due to the popularity of films made by the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar. However, a significant proportion of successful NNE arthouse films were produced in smaller nations not known for box office success, including Belgium (e.g. *Kid With a Bike/Il ragazzo con la bicicletta*), Finland (e.g. *Le Havre/Miracolo a Le Havre*), and Denmark (e.g. *Melancholia*). Few received financial support from Hollywood studios and most were released by independent distributors (e.g. BIM Distribuzione), which have more limited reach than their US counterparts. *The Angels’ Share* (Loach, 2012), for example, reached only 93 cinemas at its widest point of release.³¹

In terms of their cultural content, arthouse NNE films feature stories that are more dialogue-heavy, episodic and open-ended than commercial NNE films, often focusing on controversial or challenging social issues. *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, for example, explores the blossoming relationship between two young women in highly sexually explicit terms.

³¹ “The Angels’ Share: Italy Weekend Box Office”, *Box Office Mojo*, last updated April 16, 2017. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&country=IT&id=angelsshare.htm>.

These films are also more culturally specific. *The Angels' Share*, for example, features characters with heavy Glaswegian accents (although dubbing would have masked these in Italy) and numerous Scottish cultural references and in-jokes. These include the film's central conceit, which involves a group of unemployed Glaswegians stealing a precious Highland whisky from a distillery using bottles of Irn Bru, a drink popular with working-class Scots.

Nevertheless, the films in this category do feature some characteristics that make them more likely to succeed at the Italian box office than other arthouse releases. Firstly, though less predictable than commercial NNE films, these films often feature generic conventions which broaden their audience appeal. *The Angel's Share*, for example, was marketed in Italy as a comedy. Secondly, many were directed by well-established auteurs – critically-acclaimed directors who have established a recognisable style or themes over a significant body of work. Ken Loach, who directed *The Angel's Share*, was particularly well-known and admired amongst members of my focus groups. One participant, for example, described Loach as a “must see director”.³² Another claimed he was “very famous”.³³ Almodóvar was the only other well-known European director discussed in the groups. Thirdly, many successful arthouse NNE films have won major film awards. *The Angel's Share*, for example, won the Jury Prize at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival. They also tend to score high reviews – with an average Metacritic score of 72%. Finally, half received distribution support from the EU's MEDIA programme, which promotes the cross-border circulation of European films. *The Angel's Share*, for example, received €135,000 towards its distribution costs, while another Loach film, *Jimmy's Hall* (2014), received almost €500,000.

Middlebrow films

The remaining two-fifths of successful NNE films (66 out of 174 titles) were ‘middlebrow’ films (table 4). These are mainly period dramas, comedy-dramas and other types of ‘quality’ films that occupy the “middle-ground between serious, critical art films and stylish, generally consensual mainstream productions”.³⁴ Such films appeal to both mainstream audiences, who watch films primarily for entertainment, and more niche arthouse audiences, who prefer films with more cultural or artistic value. However, though the YouGov survey suggests these films appeal to Italians of all ages, educational backgrounds and geographical regions, certain

³² Female, 45-54, degree.

³³ Female, 55-64, no degree.

³⁴ M. Liz, *Euro-Visions: Europe in Contemporary Cinema*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 32.

titles, notably the French biopic *Coco Before Chanel/Coco Avant Chanel - L'Amore Prima Del Mito* (Fontaine, 2009), were more popular with women than men.

Industrially, the films in this category had medium-sized budgets (\$24 million on average) and were mainly produced in Britain (e.g. *The King's Speech/ Il discorso del re*, *The Iron Lady*, *The Queen/La regina*) or, to a lesser extent, France (e.g. *Coco Before Chanel*, *La Vie En Rose*, *Sarah's Key/La Chiave Di Sara*). Like most successful arthouse films, they were generally produced by independent companies, though often with significant financial support from major European broadcasters. However, they were less likely to receive support from major national or European film funds (e.g. Eurimages) and more likely to receive the financial backing of major US studios. A small number even benefit from US studio distribution. *Coco Before Chanel*, for example, was distributed by Warner Bros. in Italy, reaching 164 theatres at its widest point of release.³⁵

In terms of their cultural content, these films are more dialogue-heavy than commercial NNE films, but less open-ended and challenging than arthouse films. They can be culturally specific, yet also tend to feature stories and characters Italian audiences are often familiar with. Many are adaptations of classical works of literature (e.g. *Oliver Twist*) or more recent bestselling novels (e.g. *Cloud Atlas*). Others are based on the lives of well-known historical figure or events. *Coco Before Chanel*, for example, focuses on the early life of the iconic French fashion designer Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, a figure well-known to most of my focus group participants. The film also starred actress Audrey Tatou, who was fairly well-recognised and admired for her previous performances in films such as *Amélie/Il favoloso mondo di Amélie*. (Jeunet, 2001). As one female participant put it, "I really liked the whole story of Coco Chanel before watching the film. Then I loved the performance of the actors, especially the main actress. Everything was perfect".³⁶

5. CONCLUSION

This article has sought to explain why some NNE films are more successful at the Italian box office than others. My analysis – which is based on large datasets, close textual analysis, focus groups and audience surveys – reveals that some successful NNE films in Italy do

³⁵ "Coco Before Chanel: Italy Weekend Box Office," *Box Office Mojo*, last updated April 13, 2016. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&country=IT&id=angelsshare.htm>.

³⁶ Female, 45-54, no degree.

possess characteristics we would expect to find in films that travel well. In particular, they have high budgets, US studio distribution, and stories based on universal mythotypes. However, more interestingly, most successful NNE films in Italy do not fit this model. Two-thirds are middlebrow or arthouse films that have low budgets, an independent distributor and stories that could be described, to various degrees, as dialogue-heavy, complex, ambiguous and culturally-specific. These films succeeded at the Italian box office because they possess other characteristics that distinguish them from the majority of NNE film releases. Most have won major film awards, received positive reviews and involve Hollywood stars, a European auteur or 'pre-sold' material (e.g. a best-selling book or well-known historical figure). They also tend to have distribution support from the EU's MEDIA programme. To be sure, these characteristics are not necessarily what Italian audiences look for in films. According to the European Commission survey, the most important criterion for Italians when it comes to choosing a film is the film's genre (56% of Italians say this is 'very important') or story (55%), not the whether the film was based on a book they enjoyed (19%) or the name of the director (14%) or the awards it has won (8%).³⁷ But these elements do ensure such films secure distribution and funding in Italy. As one Italian arthouse distributor puts it, "You need a movie that has won a prize".³⁸ This in turn leads to greater publicity and ticket sales.

These findings are not necessarily specific to Italy. Most of the NNE films that have performed well at the Italian box office have been successful in other European countries, too. The few exceptions are often NNE films involving Italian co-production partners (e.g. *The Hedgehog/Il Riccio*, *The Salt of the Earth/Il sale della terra*), which perhaps helped them to secure better levels of distribution in Italy. However, the market for NNE films differs from other European countries in certain ways. Arthouse NNE films, for example, generally perform better in Italian cinemas than they do in countries like Germany or the UK, while commercial NNE films often perform worse. This is partly because arthouse NNE films are dubbed into Italian, thus enabling them to reach a wider audience than the UK, where the same films are shown in their original version with subtitles. It also reflects the fact that arthouse distributors and cinemas have a larger share of the market than many other European countries. At the same time, there are signs that admissions to arthouse cinemas are declining, particularly amongst young people. This is not to say that young people are no longer watching arthouse NNE films. It is just that they may be choosing to watch such films online

³⁷ European Commission, *Audiovisual Audience*, 47.

³⁸ Chiti cited in "Cannes 2018: What Are Buyers Looking For?" *Screen Daily*, May 7, 2018. Accessed October 16, 2018. <https://www.screendaily.com/features/cannes-2018-what-are-buyers-looking-for/5128918.article>.

rather than in theatres. But in any case, NNE films continue to face many challenges in Italy as they do in the rest of Europe.

Table 1. *NNE films released in Italy 2005-15 by key cultural and industrial characteristics.*

		[A]	Type of successful NNE film			[B]	[C] %difference (A-B)
		Successful NNE films	Arthouse	Middlebrow	Commercial	Unsuccessful NNE films	
	Number of titles	174	44	66	64	889	
Primary country of origin	Germany	6%	5%	5%	9%	11%	5%
	Spain	7%	14%	0%	9%	8%	1%
	France	32%	41%	30%	27%	35%	3%
	UK	48%	27%	61%	50%	26%	22%
	Other European	7%	14%	5%	5%	20%	13%
Production category	100% national	28%	30%	26%	30%	41%	13%
	Co-production	52%	66%	53%	41%	54%	2%
	Inward investment	20%	5%	21%	30%	5%	15%
Financial support	Hollywood studio (e.g. Universal)	31%	9%	26%	52%	7%	24%
	Major TV broadcaster (e.g. BBC)	59%	77%	70%	34%	52%	6%
	Major film agency (e.g. BFI)	25%	48%	23%	13%	26%	1%
	Eurimages	5%	11%	5%	0%	9%	4%
Budget	<\$10m	20%	58%	14%	12%	47%	17%
	\$10m-\$80m	63%	42%	84%	69%	52%	11%
	>\$80m	16%	0%	2%	55%	1%	15%
Primary language	English	66%	43%	71%	77%	39%	27%
	French	23%	39%	23%	13%	28%	5%
	German	3%	5%	2%	3%	7%	4%
	Italian	1%	0%	0%	2%	2%	1%
	Spanish	4%	11%	0%	3%	7%	3%
	Other language	3%	2%	5%	3%	18%	15%
Genre	Action/adventure	30%	0%	3%	78%	12%	18%
	Animation	21%	2%	0%	55%	7%	14%
	Comedy	30%	29%	32%	30%	30%	1%
	Crime/thriller	25%	22%	29%	23%	19%	7%
	Comedy	3%	7%	0%	5%	13%	10%
	Drama	57%	82%	77%	20%	59%	2%
	Fantasy/sci-fi	13%	2%	8%	25%	6%	7%
	History/biopic	20%	18%	38%	2%	15%	5%
	Horror	2%	2%	2%	2%	4%	2%
	Romance	17%	18%	29%	3%	16%	1%
	Musical	1%	0%	2%	0%	1%	0%
Distribution	US studio distributor	25%	9%	15%	45%	9%	16%
	MEDIA distribution support	25%	50%	23%	9%	18%	7%
Reception	5 awards or more	48%	70%	50%	31%	27%	21%
	Oscar win/nomination	24%	25%	29%	19%	6%	18%
	Palme d'Or win/nomination	11%	45%	0%	0%	6%	5%
	Ave. Metacritic score	65%	72%	63%	58%	64%	1%
	Ave. IMDb User Rating	69%	72%	70%	66%	66%	3%

Source: MeCETES Film Database (2018) based on raw data from European Audiovisual Observatory Lumiere Pro World (European Territories)/IMDb/MEDIA.

Table 2. Italian audience for NNE films by social demographics.

NNE film title	All Italians	Gender		Age					Education		Region				
		Male [A]	Female [B]	18 - 24 [A]	25 - 34 [B]	35 - 44 [C]	45 - 54 [D]	55+ [E]	No degree [A]	Degree [B]	North West [A]	North East [C]	Centre [D]	South [E]	Islands [F]
A Royal Affair (2012)	13.2%	12.9%	13.5%	8.4%	13.7%	16.4%	11.7%	13.4%	12.4%	16.7%	14.3%	12.6%	10.2%	13.8%	16.1%
Blue Is the Warmest Colour (2013)	22.3%	23.4%	21.3%	27.9%	22.3%	23.8%	18.9%	22.1%	20.3%	31.0%A	20.0%	21.9%	25.7%	22.1%	22.3%
Coco Before Chanel (2009)	25.5%	20.0%	30.5%A	30.1%	22.3%	29.3%	23.5%	25.0%	24.8%	28.6%	25.9%	25.1%	22.1%	25.6%	31.2%
Let The Right One In (2008)	13.3%	14.2%	12.6%	9.7%	15.1%	18.7%	11.8%	12.0%	13.4%	13.0%	12.4%	12.5%	12.8%	13.4%	17.8%
Taken (2008)	26.1%	29.2%B	23.2%	29.0%	32.4%	26.5%	25.0%	23.7%	25.7%	27.5%	27.7%	20.9%	24.6%	28.5%	28.6%
Love Is All You Need (2012)	15.7%	14.2%	17.1%	15.7%	22.2%E	22.7%E	15.9%	10.6%	15.1%	18.3%	14.1%	15.6%	14.4%	16.8%	19.6%
Son of Saul (2015)	12.8%	14.5%	11.2%	15.5%	14.4%	11.8%	14.8%	11.2%	12.5%	14.0%	15.7%	13.1%	11.8%	11.2%	10.7%
The Hunt (2013)	26.1%	29.3%B	23.3%	15.6%	20.0%	25.9%	25.6%	30.6%	24.6%	33.0%A	27.7%	22.1%	22.6%	27.8%	32.2%
The Orphanage (2007)	13.3%	14.7%	12.0%	20.4%E	24.4%D E	18.7%D E	8.8%	8.0%	13.1%	14.0%	13.0%	12.0%	11.7%	16.0%	13.4%
Two Days, One Night (2014)	7.5%	7.8%	7.3%	2.4%	5.7%	9.7%	7.7%	8.1%	6.9%	10.3%	4.0%	9.9%	7.7%	8.7%	9.0%
The Intouchables (2012)	46.9%	46.4%	47.4%	60.2%E	61.7%E	48.2%	48.7%	38.1%	46.0%	51.2%	50.2%	40.7%	46.6%	48.8%	46.4%
Julieta (2016)	14.4%	11.9%	16.8%A	13.2%	13.6%	13.0%	16.9%	14.4%	13.2%	19.9%A	16.1%	14.6%	9.3%	15.1%	18.0%

Number of NNE film titles	All Italians	Gender		Age					Education		Region				
		Male [A]	Female [B]	18 - 24 [A]	25 - 34 [B]	35 - 44 [C]	45 - 54 [D]	55+ [E]	No degree [A]	Degree [B]	North West [A]	North East [C]	Centre [D]	South [E]	Islands [F]
None	20.7%	20.3%	21.1%	13.3%	11.6%	14.6%	20.5%	27.9%B C	21.7%	16.3%	20.6%	26.8%	19.5%	19.6%	15.2%
1 title	20.4%	20.4%	20.4%	20.5%	21.6%	21.5%	21.0%	19.3%	20.3%	21.1%	21.9%	18.9%	22.6%	16.8%	23.2%
2-3 titles	31.4%	31.3%	31.5%	42.2%	31.6%	36.2%	31.9%	26.9%	31.9%	29.2%	29.5%	27.2%	34.3%	35.0%	30.4%
4 or more titles	27.5%	27.9%	27.1%	24.0%	35.2%	27.7%	26.6%	25.9%	26.1%	33.5%A	28.1%	27.2%	23.6%	28.6%	31.2%

Results are based on two-sided tests. For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion.
Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C): .051,2

Source: MeCETES/YouGov (2017).

Table 3. *Top 20 commercial NNE films released in Italy, 2005-15.*

Title	Year	Country(s)-of-origin	Director(s)	Distributor	Admissions	MEDIA (€)	Awards
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	2005	GB[Inc] / US	Mike Newell	Warner Bros. (IT)	3,730,112	€ -	Nominated for 1 Oscar. Another 13 wins & 42 nominations.
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	2007	GB[Inc] / US	David Yates	Warner Bros. (IT)	3,203,733	€ -	Nominated for 2 BAFTA Film Awards. Another 14 wins & 40 nominations.
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	2008	GB[Inc] / US	David Yates	Warner Bros. (IT)	2,995,236	€ -	Nominated for 1 Oscar. Another 8 wins & 34 nominations.
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1	2010	GB[Inc] / US	David Yates	Warner Bros. (IT)	2,722,643	€ -	Nominated for 2 Oscars. Another 16 wins & 52 nominations.
Skyfall	2012	GB[Inc] / US	Sam Mendes	Warner Bros. (IT)	1,900,284	€ -	Won 2 Oscars. Another 65 wins & 119 nominations.
Spectre	2015	GB[Inc] / US	Sam Mendes	Warner Bros. (IT)	1,812,154	€ -	Won 1 Oscar. Another 7 wins & 30 nominations.
Robin Hood	2010	GB[Inc] / US	Ridley Scott	Universal (IT)	1,776,237	€ -	1 win & 14 nominations.
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2	2011	GB[Inc] / US	David Yates	Warner Bros. (IT)	1,625,731	€ -	Nominated for 3 Oscars. Another 45 wins & 92 nominations.
The Little Prince	2015	FR / IT	Mark Osborne	Lucky Red	1,521,909	€ -	2 wins & 9 nominations.
Belle & Sebastian	2013	FR	Nicolas Vanier	Notorious Pictures	1,335,591	€ -	3 wins & 2 nominations.
Casino Royale	2006	GB[Inc] / US / DE / CZ	Martin Campbell	Sony Pictures (IT)	1,287,835	€ -	Won 1 BAFTA Film Award. Another 26 wins & 43 nominations.
Kingdom of Heaven	2005	GB[Inc] / DE / ES / US	Ridley Scott	Medusa Film	1,259,355	€ -	5 wins & 14 nominations.
The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus	2009	GB / CA	Terry Gilliam	Moviemax	1,169,233	€ -	Nominated for 2 Oscars. Another 5 wins & 21 nominations.
Quantum of Solace	2008	GB[Inc] / US	Marc Forster	Sony Pictures (IT)	1,134,975	€ -	Nominated for 2 BAFTA Film Awards. Another 4 wins & 30 nominations.
Lucy	2014	FR	Luc Besson	Universal (IT)	1,133,099	€ -	1 win & 8 nominations.
Flushed Away	2006	GB[Inc] / US	David Bowers, Sam Fell	UIP (IT)	1,106,281	€ -	Nominated for 1 BAFTA Film Award. Another 6 wins & 13 nominations.
Mr. Bean's Holiday	2007	GB / FR / DE / US	Steve Bendelack	Universal (IT)	872,897	€ -	2 nominations.
Paddington	2014	GB / FR	Paul King	Eagle Pictures	828,275	€ -	Nominated for 1 BAFTA Film Award. Another 2 wins & 4 nominations.
March of the Penguins	2004	FR	Luc Jacquet	Lucky Red	701,199	€ -	Won 1 Oscar. Another 21 wins & 15 nominations.
The Impossible	2012	ES	Juan Antonio Bayona	Eagle Pictures	607,407	€ -	Nominated for 1 Oscar. Another 27 wins & 65 nominations.

Source: MeCETES Film Database (2018) based on raw data from European Audiovisual Observatory Lumiere Pro World (European Territories)/IMDb/MEDIA.

Table 4. *Top 20 arthouse NNE films released in Italy, 2005-15.*

Title	Year	Country(s)-of-origin	Director(s)	Distributor	Admissions	MEDIA (€)	Awards
Match Point	2005	GB[Inc] / US / LU	Woody Allen	Medusa Film	1,698,539	€ -	Nominated for 1 Oscar. Another 11 wins & 30 nominations.
Volver	2006	ES	Pedro Almodóvar	Warner Bros. (IT)	1,177,944	€ -	Nominated for 1 Oscar. Another 60 wins & 90 nominations.
Scoop	2006	GB[Inc] / US	Woody Allen	Medusa Film	708,733	€ -	1 nomination.
Carnage	2011	FR / DE / PL / ES	Roman Polanski	Medusa Film	672,836	€ -	Nominated for 2 Golden Globes. Another 7 wins & 19 nominations.
Broken Embraces	2009	ES	Pedro Almodóvar	Warner Bros. (IT)	626,442	€ -	Nominated for 1 Golden Globe. Another 9 wins & 40 nominations.
The Artist	2011	FR / BE	Michel Hazanavicius	Bim Distribuzione	626,024	€ -	Won 5 Oscars. Another 146 wins & 189 nominations.
The Wind That Shakes the Barley	2006	IE / GB / DE / ES / IT	Ken Loach	Bim Distribuzione	425,408	€ -	6 wins & 23 nominations.
The Class	2008	FR	Laurent Cantet	Mikado Film	418,875	€ 197,461	Nominated for 1 Oscar. Another 10 wins & 27 nominations.
The Hedgehog	2009	FR / IT	Mona Achache	Eagle Pictures	414,095	€ -	9 wins & 4 nominations.
The Secret of the Grain	2007	FR	Abdel Kechiche	Lucky Red	409,704	€ 32,000	19 wins & 7 nominations.
Soul Kitchen	2009	DE	Fatih Akin	Bim Distribuzione	394,935	€ 100,000	4 wins & 9 nominations.
Carol	2015	GB / US	Todd Haynes	Lucky Red	363,157	€ -	Nominated for 6 Oscars. Another 73 wins & 239 nominations.
Irina Palm	2007	BE / DE / GB / LU / FR	Sam Gabarski	Teodora Film	355,397	€ 198,000	5 wins & 6 nominations.
The Salt of the Earth	2014	FR / BR / IT	Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, Wim Wenders	Officine UBU	345,390	€ -	Nominated for 1 Oscar. Another 12 wins & 10 nominations.
Of Gods and Men	2010	FR	Xavier Beauvois	Lucky Red	330,786	€ 180,000	Nominated for 1 BAFTA Film Award. Another 18 wins & 27 nominations.
Macbeth	2015	GB / FR	Justin Kurzel	Video-CDE	323,180	€ -	2 wins & 19 nominations.
Le Havre	2011	FI / FR / DE	Aki Kaurismäki	Bim Distribuzione	319,187	€ 90,000	15 wins & 32 nominations.
I'm So Excited!	2013	ES	Pedro Almodóvar	Warner Bros. (IT)	310,003	€ -	3 wins & 9 nominations.
The Skin I Live In	2011	ES	Pedro Almodóvar	Warner Bros. (IT)	302,840	€ -	Nominated for 1 Golden Globe. Another 27 wins & 66 nominations.
The Angels' Share	2012	GB / FR / BE / IT	Ken Loach	Bim Distribuzione	292,131	€ 135,000	7 wins & 9 nominations.

Source: MeCETES Film Database (2018) based on raw data from European Audiovisual Observatory Lumiere Pro World (European Territories)/IMDb/MEDIA.

Table 5. *Top 20 middlebrow NNE films released in Italy, 2005-15.*

Title	Year	Country(s)-of-origin	Director(s)	Distributor	Admissions	MEDIA (€)	Awards
The Intouchables	2011	FR	Olivier Nakache, Eric Toledano	Medusa Film	2,831,228	€ 57,291	Nominated for 1 Golden Globe. Another 35 wins & 39 nominations.
The King's Speech	2010	GB[Inc] / US	Tom Hooper	Eagle Pictures	1,435,251	€ 50,000	Won 4 Oscars. Another 103 wins & 194 nominations.
Philomena	2013	GB / US / FR	Stephen Frears	Lucky Red	1,074,508	€ 157,362	Nominated for 4 Oscars. Another 31 wins & 76 nominations.
Slumdog Millionaire	2008	GB	Danny Boyle, Loveleen Tandan	Lucky Red	1,055,356	€ 300,000	Won 8 Oscars. Another 144 wins & 125 nominations.
Olé!	2005	FR	Florence Quentin	Medusa Film	1,036,602	€ -	
Rush	2013	GB[Inc] / US / DE	Ron Howard	01 Distribution	1,035,325	€ -	Nominated for 2 Golden Globes. Another 6 wins & 62 nominations.
Hannibal Rising	2007	GB[Inc] / US / CZ / FR / IT	Peter Webber	Filmauro	955,409	€ -	2 nominations.
Oliver Twist	2005	FR / CZ / GB	Roman Polanski	Medusa Film	927,498	€ -	2 wins & 4 nominations.
Dorian Gray	2009	GB	Oliver Parker	Eagle Pictures	912,397	€ -	1 nomination.
The Theory of Everything	2014	GB[Inc] / US	James Marsh	Universal (IT)	902,975	€ -	Won 1 Oscar. Another 24 wins & 120 nominations.
The Concert	2009	FR / BE / RO / IT	Radu Mihaileanu	Bim Distribuzione	872,177	€ 100,000	Nominated for 1 Golden Globe. Another 9 wins & 13 nominations.
Beauty and the Beast	2014	FR / DE	Christophe Gans	Notorious Pictures	818,227	€ -	1 win & 3 nominations.
Elizabeth: The Golden Age	2007	GB / FR / DE	Shekhar Kapur	Universal (IT)	760,867	€ -	Won 1 Oscar. Another 5 wins & 29 nominations.
The Lives of Others	2006	DE	Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck	01 Distribution	757,175	€ -	Won 1 Oscar. Another 75 wins & 33 nominations.
Pride & Prejudice	2005	GB / FR / US	Joe Wright	UIP (IT)	727,728	€ -	Nominated for 4 Oscars. Another 13 wins & 54 nominations.
Serial (Bad) Weddings	2014	FR	Philippe de Chauveron	01 Distribution	659,072	€ -	2 wins & 2 nominations.
The Danish Girl	2015	GB / US / BE / DK / DE	Tom Hooper	Universal (IT)	647,347	€ -	Won 1 Oscar. Another 28 wins & 72 nominations.
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo	2009	SE / DK / DE	Niels Arden Oplev	Bim Distribuzione	617,502	€ 410,930	Won 1 BAFTA Film Award. Another 17 wins & 35 nominations.
The Ghost Writer	2010	FR / DE / GB	Roman Polanski	01 Distribution	616,981	€ -	34 wins & 54 nominations.
La Famille Bélier	2014	FR / BE	Eric Lartigau	Bim Distribuzione	599,672	€ -	7 wins & 11 nominations.

Source: MeCETES Film Database (2018) based on raw data from European Audiovisual Observatory Lumiere Pro World (European Territories)/IMDb/MEDIA.