

**Crossing Borders:  
Investigating the International Appeal of European  
Films**

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## Definitions

**Distribution** – a sub-sector of the film industry devoted to acquiring the commercial rights to release a film within a particular territory, then choosing its release strategy. The latter involves deciding when, how and in what format a film should be released (e.g. a ‘platform’ release involves screening a film in a few key cities to build up hype, before rolling it out to cinemas nationwide), as well as its promotional material (e.g. trailers, posters, social media activity).

**Independent film** – a film produced without the financial or creative input of one of the major Hollywood studio companies (i.e. Fox, NBC Universal, Paramount, Sony, Walt Disney, and Warner Bros). Some independent films may be distributed by the major Hollywood studios. Equally, some Hollywood studio productions may be released by an independent distributor.

**Non-national European (NNE) film** – a feature film produced or primarily co-produced in one European country, but released in another (e.g. a French film released in Germany). The film’s country-of-origin refers to the country where the film’s main producer is legally based, rather than the country where the film is set. Thus a film produced by a French-registered company in coproduction with a German partner and set in Britain is designated ‘French’.

## Main section

Each February, photographers, reporters and film fans descend on Marlene-Dietrich-Platz in central Berlin, to glimpse the stars parading the red carpet at the Berlinale Palast, the main venue of the Berlin International Film Festival. But a few streets away, in the Martin-Gropius-Bau, a former museum located on the old East-West border, lies the real nerve centre of European cinema. Here, at the European Film Market, filmmakers meet distributors from across Europe in the hope of securing international distribution for their latest productions. For some, a successful deal could make the difference between global stardom and financial ruin.

Around half of all films produced in Europe (defined here as the EU28 member states plus Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein) secure international distribution in another European country, according to the MeCETES Film Database (which combines data from the European Audiovisual Observatory's Lumiere Pro World database, the Internet Movie Database and other official industry statistics).<sup>1</sup> Over a quarter are released in three or more European territories. However, the audience for these non-national European (NNE) films – that is, a film produced in one European country, but released in another (e.g. a French film released in Germany) – is often tiny. According to the MeCETES database, NNE films sell on average around 185,000 cinema tickets in Europe per year. Indeed, the median number of tickets sold – often a better measure of averageness than the mean, which tends to be skewed upwards by a small number of high grossing films – is less than 8,000 tickets. By comparison, American films (both Hollywood studio productions and independent films) sell on average 1.9 million tickets in Europe per year (a median of 100,000 tickets). Altogether, NNE films represent only 12% of cinema admissions in Europe, ranging from 29% in Switzerland to 3% in the UK. American films account for 65% of admissions, while 'national' European films (e.g. a French film consumed in France) take 21% of admissions. Films from the rest of the world (i.e. neither American nor European) make up the remaining 2% market share.

Viewership of NNE films is not much higher on TV, DVD or Video-On-Demand (VOD). According to a 2014 survey for the European Commission (2014: 152), only 14% of EU citizens regularly watch NNE films across all media platforms. By comparison, 58% regularly watch American films, while 20% regularly watch films from their own country. The proportion of avid NNE film viewers ranges from 31% in Poland to 3% in Croatia. But regardless of nationality, these so-called 'Europhiles' 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" (European Commission 2014: 109). They also tend to be more cosmopolitan in outlook. A similar survey by the MeCETES project, for example, found that Europhiles are more likely to identify themselves as 'European' and/or 'citizens of the world' than the EU population as a whole (MeCETES/YouGov 2017).

Yet some NNE films do reach a larger audience. In the period 2005-15, there were 219 NNE films – about 20 per year – which secured 1 million cinema admissions or more in Europe outside their designated country-of-origin, according to the MeCETES database. These 'successful' NNE films accounted for only 2% of European productions, but 70% of the total admissions for NNE films.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is twofold. The first section explains why so few Europeans watch NNE films compared to American films or films from their own country. The second section explains why certain NNE films have successfully travelled within Europe. This analysis draws on key theories of international media flow. However, by testing these theories against empirical data on the production, distribution, cultural content and

audience reception of NNE films, it also demonstrates that some NNE films successfully travel within Europe despite having few of the qualities associated with films with international appeal. Most successful NNE films, for example, are low-budget independent arthouse or middlebrow films with stories that are dialogue-heavy, complex and culturally-specific. Nevertheless, they also possess certain characteristics that ensure they receive widespread distribution and thus higher audiences. These characteristics include major film awards, and the involvement of international stars or a critically-acclaimed director, and/or pre-sold material (e.g. based on a bestselling book). The final section examines in more detail one particularly successful NNE film which defies many of the principles of international media flow – the French comedy-drama *Untouchable* (2011) – to see what other factors enable European films to travel across European borders.

## Why so few watch NNE films

### Cultural factors

Cultural factors go a long way to explaining why so few Europeans watch NNE films. Straubhaar (2003: 85), for example, argues audiences tend to “prefer media products from [their] own culture or the most similar possible culture”. Language is one of the main cultural barriers NNE films face: few watch films in languages they do not speak or comprehend. Subtitles help audiences in many European countries understand ‘foreign-language’ NNE films. But these can be difficult to follow, do not always convey the full meaning of the story, and require considerable concentration (Kilborn 1993). In the UK, where most non-English language NNE films are screened with subtitles, only 14% of the population say they like subtitled films (BFI 2011: 27). But even NNE films expertly dubbed into local languages – the case with most ‘foreign-language’ films released in French, German, Italian and Spanish-speaking territories – still face diminished appeal if they feature “dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music traditions, [and] religious elements” audiences are unfamiliar with (La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005: 274). Comedies can be particularly difficult to export abroad, as jokes often rely on local reference points. *Spanish Affair* (2014), a romantic-comedy about a Sevillian man struggling to woo a Basque woman, for example, sold over 9 million cinema tickets in Spain, but little more than 100,000 in the rest of Europe.

Of course, American films face the same linguistic and cultural barriers when released in Europe. However, these are less of an issue, partly because English is Europe’s second language, but also because Europeans have become so accustomed with American culture after decades of exposure to US films, television shows and other media products (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2015). In any case, the major Hollywood studios responsible for the most commercially successful American films released in Europe and elsewhere have developed strategies to make their films more appealing to international audiences. Many successful Hollywood films, for example, are action/adventure blockbusters which place more emphasis on visual action and special effects than dialogue, making them easier to understand. They also tend to downplay cultural specificity (e.g. they are set in a fantasy world) or blend elements from different cultures and nationalities (Crane 2014). Even when they are culturally distinctive or dialogue-heavy, successful Hollywood films are often based on universally-recognised ‘mythotypes’ (Olson 1999). 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). Finally, the most successful Hollywood films often feature ‘A-list’ stars who have established an international profile and fan base (De Vany and Walls 1999). Many also belong to well-established franchises (e.g. *Star Wars*),

featuring reoccurring characters and scenarios international audiences have become familiar with over time.

While some NNE films possess similar characteristics, most are less action-orientated and more culturally-specific than Hollywood films. Less than one in ten NNE film releases are action/adventure films, compared with one in five US films, according to the MeCETES database. Many NNE films also conform to an ‘arthouse’ style, in which stories tend to be complex, ambiguous and open-ended (Bordwell 1979). While this can enhance their appeal amongst certain audiences (particularly those with higher levels of education), such characteristics can also make NNE films hard to follow. The European Commission (2014: 164) survey, for example, found that, while around three-quarters of EU citizens thought NNE films “feature diverse and complex characters”, “are original and thought-provoking” and “are less stereotypical than US films”, only about half thought they “feature clear plots”.

### *Industrial factors*

Cultural factors only partly explain why so few watch NNE films. There are also important industrial factors to consider. Hoskins and Mirus (1988), for example, note that Hollywood studios have more money to invest in stars, special effects and other attributes likely to attract international audiences because they can draw on the resources of a large home market. Most European producers, by contrast, operate in small countries, which lack the capacity to finance big-budget productions (Henning and Alpar 2005). Even in a relatively large European country like France, the average film budget is less than \$7 million, compared with over \$250 million for some Hollywood blockbusters (European Audiovisual Observatory 2018, The Numbers 2018). The major Hollywood studios are also ‘vertically integrated’, which means they control both the production and the distribution of their own films (Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn 1997: 45). This provides their films with a direct route to market and makes it easier to coordinate global promotional campaigns. Most European producers, by contrast, rely on smaller independent distributors, which often only operate in specific national territories. Consequently, NNE films often struggle to gain adequate publicity or access to screen space. According to the European Commission (2014: 164) survey, only a third of Europeans agree NNE films are “sufficiently available on screens in [their local] area” or “well promoted in [their local] area”.

Policymakers have tried to address the industrial weaknesses of the European film sector. In 1991, the EU established the MEDIA programme to “increase the circulation and viewership of European audiovisual works inside and outside the European Union” (European Union 2006: Article 1, para.2). During its 2007-13 funding cycle, MEDIA provided €228 million to support the theatrical distribution of 1,651 NNE films, €33 million for VOD distribution, and €17 million for the Europa Cinema Network, a chain of 1,100 cinemas which prioritise (national and non-national) European films (EACEA 2014). The Council of Europe, a cultural and human rights body separate from the EU, has likewise sought to strengthen the European film industries. In 1992, it introduced the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-productions, which made it easier for producers in different European countries to pool financial resources and produce bigger budget productions. It also created the Eurimages fund, which subsidises European co-productions. Since its establishment in 1988, Eurimages has supported 1,962 co-productions for a total amount of approximately €574 million (Council of Europe 2018).

However, these measures have had little success. Over the period 2005-15, total admissions for NNE films actually declined, from 128.5 million to 103.0 million, while their market share fell from 15% to 11%, according to the MeCETES database. While the absolute number of European films securing distribution in another European country increased, from

472 films in 2005 to 634 films in 2015, the (mean) average admissions for these films slumped from 200,000 admissions to 33,000 admissions.

There are several reasons why cinema ticket sales for NNE films have declined in recent years. Firstly, NNE films are facing more competition than ever. This is partly because digital filmmaking equipment has made it cheaper and easier to produce films, but also because new digital cinema screens allow “more opportunity to take films off and on” (Roberts cited in Clark 2014). According to the MeCETES database, France saw a 29% rise in the number of films released each year between 2005 and 2015; Britain a 53% increase; Italy a 54% increase; and Germany a 60% increase. This constant churn of new releases makes it harder for all but the most heavily marketed films to stand out and build an audience through positive word-of-mouth. As one German independent distributor puts it, “There are too many movies released theatrically.... This makes it much more difficult to find, buy and market the right films, especially in [the] case of small films” (Baumann cited in Heidsiek 2015).

Secondly, young people – traditionally the most frequent cinemagoers – are visiting cinemas less often. In the UK, the proportion of cinemagoers aged 15-24 has declined from 35% in 2011 to 29% in 2016 (BFI 2017: 172). In France, the proportion of admissions generated by under 25-year olds has likewise fallen from 40% in 2007 to 30% in 2015 (CNC 2016: 54). Arthouse and independent cinemas – the traditional champions of NNE films – have been hardest hit. As one Italian arthouse distributor puts it, “It takes one look to a 22:30hrs screening, going always half empty while it used to be the most popular one, to realise young people are deserting cinemas”(Chiti cited in Weber 2016).

One reason why young people are going to cinemas less often is because they can watch films for free or very cheaply online. This points to a third reason why NNE admissions are declining: the rise of VOD platforms. In 2016, over half of Europeans aged 15-24 watched at least one film or television show online per week, compared with only one-in-ten a decade earlier (European Commission 2016: 17). One consultancy predicts that by 2020 Netflix will have 38 million subscribers in Europe and will be available in a third of European households (Tretbar 2014). So far this has not reduced the overall number of cinemagoers. Indeed, admissions in Europe rose from 892 million in 2005 to 977 million in 2015, according to the MeCETES database. However, with a cinema ticket costing almost twice as much as a month’s Netflix subscription, most cinemagoers only seem willing to pay to see spectacular Hollywood blockbusters that necessitate the big screen experience.

## Why some NNE films travel

Despite the challenges they face, some NNE films still successfully travel within Europe. Each year, about 20 NNE films secure one million admissions or more in Europe outside their designated country-of-origin. These ‘successful’ NNE films can be broadly subdivided – based on their stylistic conventions and target audience – into three further subcategories: commercial films (about eight per year), middlebrow films (another eight per year), and arthouse films (about four per year).

To explain why certain NNE films travel well within Europe, this section draws on two key sources of data extracted from the MeCETES Film Database. The first (see Table 11.1) is an indicative list of successful NNE films released in 2012, while the second (see Table 11.2) is a table summarising the key characteristics (e.g. country-of-origin, budget, language, genre, awards, etc.) of all NNE films released in the period 2005-15. This makes it possible to compare the cultural and industrial characteristics of ‘successful’ NNE films (column A) – i.e. those which secured one million admissions or more in Europe outside their country-of-origin – with ‘unsuccessful’ NNE films (column B) to identify which particular characteristics (as indicated by a high percentage value in column C) may have enabled them to travel across national borders. Of course, some cultural characteristics (e.g. narrative

structure) cannot be easily quantified. Thus, the analysis also examines in more detail the textual qualities of the most successful NNE films released in 2012 and how these have been received by audiences across Europe, drawing on focus groups conducted with NNE film viewers in Germany, Poland, Italy, Bulgaria and the UK. Combining these different methodological approaches makes it possible to develop a comprehensive understanding of why certain NNE films travel.

Table.11.1. Successful NNE films released in Europe in 2012.

[Insert Table.11.1.]

***(Source: MeCETES Film Database (2018) based on raw data from LUMIERE/European Audiovisual Observatory (European Territories) and IMDb.)***

Table.11.2. Key cultural and industrial characteristics of NNE films by category of film.

[Insert Table.11.2]

***(Source: MeCETES Film Database (2018) based on raw data from LUMIERE/European Audiovisual Observatory (European Territories), IMDb, Eurimages, and MEDIA.)***

### ***Commercial films***

About eight successful NNE films per year are ‘commercial’ films. These include Hollywood-style action-adventure blockbusters (e.g. *Skyfall*, *Taken 2*) and family films and animations (e.g. *Pirates! Band of Misfits*, *A Turtle's Tale 2*, *Astérix and Obélix: God Save Britannia*) likely to appeal to a mainstream audience, who primarily watch films for entertainment, rather than their cultural or educational value.

Commercial NNE films possess many of the attributes associated with films which travel well. Industrially, they have high budgets (\$71 million on average) and are mainly produced in large European countries, notably the UK, which makes the *James Bond* franchise, but also to a lesser extent France, where Luc Besson’s EuropaCorp has established a strong reputation for English-language Hollywood-style action films, such as the *Taken* film series. Though officially ‘European’, two-fifths involve the financial backing of a major Hollywood studio. The Bond film *Skyfall* (2012), for example, was made with inward investment from Sony and MGM. A high proportion are also distributed in Europe by major Hollywood studios – meaning they benefit from wide distribution and heavy marketing. When it was released in early November 2012, *Skyfall*, for example, was screened in 825 theatres in France, 632 theatres in Italy, and 1,265 theatres in Germany (Box Office Mojo 2018).

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 Raoul Silva, a villain 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 on the roof of a speeding train between Bond and the mercenary Patrice, who has stolen a hard drive containing details of the MI6 agents. It ends, in line with the

conventions of a circular story, with Bond killing his nemesis Silva, 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 which may explain their international appeal. The discourse surrounding these films suggests that many are seen as ‘American’ 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 national symbolism – the film ends with Bond stood defiantly on the roof of the MI6 headquarters watching a Union flag flying against the backdrop of the Houses of Parliament, the seat of British democracy and symbol of the British nation-state (see Fig.11.1) – it was not necessarily seen as a ‘culturally British’ film by European audiences, particularly in territories where it was dubbed into local languages. One German focus group participant, for example, said *Skyfall* “looks very American with all the action”. Another Italian focus group participant said he “totally forgot” that Bond was British, despite seeing *Skyfall*, his “favourite film ever”, “at least fifteen times”. Many commercial NNE films also feature stories or characters that European audiences are well-acquainted with, either because they are sequels to earlier box office hits (e.g. *Niko 2*, *A Turtles Tale 2*, *Taken 2*, *Street Dance 2*) or because they belong to well-established franchises (e.g. *James Bond*, *Asterix*). One German focus group participant, for example, described *Skyfall* as “classic Bond”, while another Italian focus group participant praised the film for going “back to [the] origins” of the Bond franchise.

[Insert Fig.11.1 here]

### *Arthouse films*

Around four or five successful NNE films each year are ‘arthouse’ films. These are generally serious dramas aimed at university-educated audiences, who watch films for their cultural or artistic value, rather than purely for entertainment. This is a much more niche audience. According to the British Film Institute (BFI 2011), only 14% of Britons say they like arthouse films. The European Commission (2014: 147) survey likewise suggests only a quarter of Europeans watch films “to discover and learn about people and cultures”. Nevertheless, through combining the small numbers of arthouse fans in different European countries, some arthouse NNE films can reach a quite significant international audience.

Significantly, the films in this category have few of the characteristics associated with films which travel well. Industrially, they are generally low budget productions (\$9 million on average) made by small, independent companies, albeit with the financial support of major national and European film funds, such as the BFI or Eurimages. Though most are produced in large European countries, a relatively high proportion come from smaller European nations, such as Denmark (e.g. *The Hunt*) and Belgium (which co-produced *Rust and Bone*). Few receive the financial support of major Hollywood studios, and most are released by small, independent distributors (e.g. Curzon Artificial Eye in the UK).

In terms of their cultural content, arthouse NNE films typically feature stories that are dialogue-heavy, episodic and open-ended, often touching on controversial or socially relevant subject matter. In *The Hunt* (2012), for example, a kindergarten teacher is ostracised from a small-town community after being accused of sexually abusing his best friend’s daughter. Though the allegation is eventually proven false, it remains ambiguous whether his life has returned to normal. In the final scene, he appears to be shot at during a hunting expedition with friends, leaving viewers wondering whether he has really been exonerated by the local community. Arthouse NNE films are also more culturally specific than most films with international appeal. *The Angels’ Share* (2012), for example, features characters with heavy

Glaswegian accents and dialogue, as well as 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 empty Irn Bru bottles, a cheap, sugary fizzy-drink popular with working-class Scots. Or alternatively a scene towards the end of the film where one of the gang, Albert, holding a bottle of Irn Bru and dressed in a tartan kilt and hooded Lonsdale tracksuit top, identifying him as both a Scot and a 'ned' (or delinquent working-class youth), makes a defiant speech against the police who have just stopped and searched him, in which he shouts out the names of various Scottish cultural icons – Billy Connolly, Robert the Bruce, Braveheart, Alex Ferguson – whose full meaning and significance may be lost on audiences outside Scotland (see Fig 11.2).

[Insert Fig 11.2. here]

Nevertheless, the arthouse films that travel best in Europe have certain advantages over most NNE film releases. Firstly, they are often directed by well-established 'auteurs' – critically acclaimed directors who have developed a recognisable style across a significant body of work. Ken Loach, who directed *The Angels' Share*, for example, was particularly well-known amongst Italian focus group participants, with one respondent calling him "a must-see director" and another describing him as "very famous". The only other European auteur to elicit a similar response was the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar. Secondly, successful arthouse NNE films often feature actors who have established a name for themselves in both European and Hollywood films. This is particularly the case with films made by less-well known directors. *The Hunt*, for example, features Mads Mikkelsen, a Danish actor familiar to many focus group participants from his appearance as a Bond villain in *Casino Royale* (2006).

Thirdly, successful arthouse NNE films have often won major awards. *Amour* (2012), for example, won both the 2012 Palme d'Or, the top prize at the Cannes film festival, and the Oscar for best foreign language film. Likewise, *The Angels' Share* and *Rust and Bone* (2012) both played in competition for the 2012 Palme d'Or, while *The Hunt* was shortlisted for the foreign language Oscar in 2013. This sense of quality or critical acclaim is further reinforced by the fact that successful arthouse NNE films also score better reviews than most NNE films (with an average Metacritic score of 79% compared with 63%). However, positive reviews alone do not guarantee international success: *Almayer's Folly* (2012), a film with one of the highest Metacritic scores in 2012, sold only 11,000 tickets outside its native Belgium.

Fourthly, though their narratives are less predictable than successful commercial NNE films or Hollywood films, successful arthouse NNE films often feature generic conventions that broaden their audience appeal. *The Angels' Share*, for example, was marketed in mainland Europe as a comedy. Likewise, *The Hunt* follows the conventions of a thriller. Finally, the distribution of successful arthouse NNE films is often heavily subsidised by the EU's MEDIA programme. *Amour*, for example, received over €1 million to support its distribution across 23 territories; *Rust and Bone* €950,000 across 9 territories; *The Angels' Share* €700,000 across 23 territories; and *The Hunt* €600,000 across 20 territories. This compares with an average MEDIA award of around €130,000.

### ***Middlebrow films***

The remaining successful NNE films – about eight per year – could be described as 'middlebrow' films. These are generally period dramas, comedy-dramas or other types of 'quality' film that, according to Liz (2016: 32), "occupy the middle-ground between serious critical art films and stylish, generally consensual mainstream productions". As such, they have crossover appeal to both mainstream cinemagoers and a more niche arthouse audience.

The films in this category have some of the characteristics associated with films which travel well, but not others. Industrially, they have medium-sized budgets (\$24 million on average) and are mainly produced in larger European countries, notably Britain (e.g. *Les Misérables*, *Anna Karenina*) and to a lesser extent France, but also Germany (e.g. *Cloud Atlas*) and Spain (e.g. *The Impossible*), albeit as English-language productions involving international co-production partners. Some are produced by independent companies, though often with the financial support of major television broadcasters like Canal+ or the BBC, and/or the financial and distribution support of large European players like Wild Bunch, Studiocanal or eOne. Others are financed and distributed by major Hollywood studios. *Les Misérables* (2012) and *Anna Karenina* (2012), for example, were both produced by the British-based Working Title Films, a subsidiary of NBC Universal.

In terms of their cultural content, these films are more dialogue-heavy and complex than commercial films, but less open-ended and challenging than arthouse films. They can be culturally specific, yet also tend to feature so-called ‘pre-sold content’ which educated audiences in Europe are likely to be familiar with. Many, for example, are adapted from classical works of literature (e.g. *Les Misérables*, *Anna Karenina*) or more recent bestselling novels (e.g. *Cloud Atlas*, *The Woman in Black*). Others focus on well-known historical figures or events, or else centre on extraordinary ‘true-life’ stories. *The Impossible* (2012), for example, tells the story of a western family who, against the odds, survive the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Like their arthouse counterparts, successful middlebrow NNE films generally involve well-known creative personnel – though the film’s star, rather than the director, tends to be their main selling-point. Again, these are usually actors who have made a name for themselves in both Hollywood and European films, though they tend to be British rather than continental European actors, such as the star of *Trainspotting* and *Star Wars* Ewan McGregor (*The Impossible*, *Salmon Fishing on the Yemen*) or the Oscar-winning actress Dame Judy Dench (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*). Most successful middlebrow NNE films have also won major awards, though these tend to the big American prizes, such as the Oscars or Golden Globes, rather than the more specialised European awards like the Palme d’Or. Both *Les Misérables* and *Anna Karenina*, for example, won Academy Awards, while Naomi Watts was nominated for an Oscar for her role in *The Impossible*. Likewise, *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012), *Quartet* (2012), and *Salmon Fishing on the Yemen* (2012) were all nominated for Golden Globe Awards.

## Case study: *Untouchable* (2011)

Though some successful NNE film possess the cultural and industrial characteristics associated with films with international appeal (e.g. high budgets, Hollywood studio distribution, universal mythotypes, English language content, A-list film stars, and a lack of cultural specificity), the majority do not fit this model. Each year about four arthouse NNE films and eight middlebrow NNE films secure over one million admissions in Europe outside their country-of-origin, despite having relatively low budgets, independent distribution and screen content that, to a greater or lesser extent, could be construed as dialogue-heavy, narratively complex and culturally specific. At the same time, these films have other attributes that account for their international appeal. Most have won major film awards, feature a transatlantic film star, are helmed by a European auteur, or are based on ‘presold’ material (e.g. a best-selling book or well-known historical figure). To be sure, these attributes are not necessarily what audiences look for in NNE films – as one focus group respondent put it, “I choose the film for the story, not the awards”. But they do ensure such films secure international distribution – buyers often “prioritise well-known directors” (Borgonon cited in Jones 2016) or believe “You need a movie that has won a prize” (Chiti cited in Anon 2018) – which in turn leads to greater publicity and audience recognition.

That said, not all successful arthouse or middlebrow NNE films possess major awards, famous stars, a well-known director or presold material. This final section looks at one particularly successful NNE film that defies many of the principles of international media flow to see what further lessons can be learnt about why some NNE films travel well within Europe.

*Untouchable* is a French comedy-drama about the unlikely friendship between a white disabled millionaire (‘Philippe’ played by François Cluzet) and his black streetwise ex-con carer (‘Driss’ played by Omar Sy). The film premiered at the Donostia-San Sebastian International Film Festival in September 2011, then went on general release in France in November 2011, before showing elsewhere in Europe and the rest of the world throughout 2012. It was a smash hit in its native France, selling 21 million cinema tickets, but also performed surprisingly well in the rest of Europe, too. According to the MeCETES database, the film sold 9.5 million tickets in Germany, 2.8 million in Italy and 2.6 million in Spain. In Switzerland it was seen by 19% of the population, in Denmark by 13%, and in the Netherlands by 9%. Indeed, the only major European territory where the film failed to make an impact at the box office was the UK. The film continued to draw viewers when it was later released on DVD and VOD. According to the European Commission (2014, 167) survey, 38% of Europeans have seen the film, of which 95% said they like it.

On the face of it, *Untouchables* seems an unlikely international success story. The film not only touches on serious issues to do with race, disability and social exclusion, but could also be construed as culturally distinct and dialogue-heavy. In most European territories, the film was screened in French with local language subtitles, but even in countries where it was dubbed, the film would have faced cultural barriers in relation to its jokes and local reference points. For example, the film requires some knowledge of the discourse surrounding the *banlieue*, the low-income housing projects of the Parisian suburbs in which mainly immigrants and French of foreign descent reside.

The film stars Omar Sy and François Cluzet – two actors largely unknown outside France at the time of the film’s release in 2011-12 – and was written and directed by Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, filmmakers with few previous credits to their name. The film itself was inspired by the true-life story of Philippe Pozzo di Borgo and his French-Algerian caregiver Abdel Sellou, which the directors discovered through the television documentary film *À la vie, à la mort* (2003). Yet neither Pozzo di Borgo nor the documentary were widely known before the film’s release. The film was produced by Gaumont, a French mini-major

studio, and involved financial support from various partners, including the major French commercial broadcaster TF1. But the budget was a relatively modest \$11 million. One potentially significant partnership was the involvement of US-based The Weinstein Company (TWC), which, prior to its downfall in 2018 following the well-publicised allegations of sexual abuse made against company boss Harvey Weinstein, had built a very strong reputation for producing and distributing commercially successful independent films. However, TWC was no Hollywood major: it only had the means to distribute the film in the US. In Europe, *Untouchable* relied on a patchwork of independent distributors, ranging from relatively large companies like Senator Film Verleih (now Wild Bunch) in Germany, to more boutique outfits like Victory Productions in Belgium.

Other elements likely to increase its international appeal were also missing. In the build up to its release, the film picked up some awards, including the Tokyo Sakura Grand Prix award for the best film at the Tokyo International Film Festival. But none of these were major prizes likely to bring it worldwide attention. The film was selected as France's entry for the foreign language Oscar in 2012, but failed to make the final shortlist. Critics, meanwhile, largely scorned the film. In the UK, *The Independent* called it "a third-rate buddy movie that hardly understands its own condescension" (Quinn 2012), while *Sight and Sound* claimed the film "shamefully traffics in racist stereotypes" (Dawson 2012:, 107). Its aggregate Metacritic score was a modest 57%.

Nevertheless, *Untouchable* does have some elements which account for its international appeal. Though the film is culturally distinct, it features universally-recognised mythotypes. Driss and Philippe, for example, are archetypal characters who essentially mirror each other (black/white, poor/rich, able bodied/disabled, criminal/respectable, popular tastes/elite tastes). Indeed, the film follows in a long tradition of films which derive their humour from the 'odd-couple' or 'cultural-clash' scenario. The film also follows a conventional narrative structure, in which a disruption to the status quo (Philippe hires the unconventional Driss as his new carer) leads to a moment of realisation (Driss teaches Philippe to enjoy life again), then a second disruption (Driss returns to the *banlieue*, leaving Philippe sad and lonely again), before the narrative is eventually resolved (Driss comes back to Philippe and drives him to Dunkirk to meet Eléonore, his love). These formulaic elements may have undermined the film's appeal with critics, but made it easier for international audiences to understand.

Furthermore, according to a report for the French Film Export Association (Orchillers 2015), some of the story's more obscure cultural reference points were expunged from international versions of the film. Gaumont, for example, produced an adaptation guide for foreign distributors with advice on how jokes should be translated. So, when Driss says the line "Viens ici Patrick Juvet", the guide explained that Patrick Juvet is a has-been celebrity in France, so distributors could find a local equivalent. Gaumont also commissioned an international poster that laid less emphasis on the film's stars, as was the case with the film's original French poster, and more on its 'odd couple' scenario by picturing Driss pushing Philippe in his wheelchair. This was further emphasised by the way the film's title was translated in some European territories as 'Almost Friends' ('Quasi amici' – Italian), 'Friends Forever' ('Amigos para Siempre' – Spain) or 'An Unexpected Friendship' ('En oväntad vänskap' – Swedish).

Focus groups on the film highlight two further reasons why *Untouchable* was so popular in Europe. The first is to do with the way the film combines serious issues with comedy. According to one focus group participant, the use of humour "added positivity to a story which was potentially tragic" making the film "light and funny". As another participant put it:

The film is not only funny. It's also very moving, because it's able to make you laugh about a serious issue such as disability. When a film is able to do such things, to make you laugh about serious themes, it means that it's well done.

Combining serious themes with comedic elements meant the film could appeal to both arthouse audiences, who like films that are thought-provoking and serious, and a more mainstream audience, who prefer films that are funny and entertaining.

The other main reason why focus groups said they liked the film was the fact it is based on a true story. For one focus group participant, this meant “you appreciate it more, [because] knowing that these kind of stories do happen in real life is somehow reassuring. [It] makes you feel better”. The significance of *Untouchable* being based on a true story is not so much the fact that it portrays real people or events, but rather what the story represents: a friendship between two people from very different social and ethnic backgrounds. This not only made the bi-racial pairing of Philippe and Driss seem less contrived, but also, as a report for the European Commission (2014: 813) put it, “reaffirms our belief in life and how society works successfully when we all co-operate”. At a time of growing divisions in Europe due to the Eurozone debt crisis, the north African and Syrian refugee crisis, and the rise of nationalist and xenophobic movements, this message of social and ethnic unity had particular resonance for the liberal, cosmopolitan Europhile audience who tend to enjoy NNE films.

## Conclusion

Any European filmmaker hoping to secure an international distribution deal at the European Film Market in Berlin might feel a bit depressed having read this chapter. The lesson from the industry data and focus group discussions analysed in this chapter seems to be this: your film is unlikely to travel well in Europe unless it is: (a) a big-budget Hollywood-style action/adventure blockbuster or animation; (b) a medium-budget middlebrow quality drama based on a best-selling book and an Oscar-winning Hollywood star attached; or (c) a low-budget MEDIA-supported arthouse film made a Palme-d'Or-winning auteur. Nevertheless, NNE films like *Untouchable* do offer a glimmer of hope. They demonstrate that low budget foreign independent films can achieve international box office success. Such films achieve this by striking a balance between the conventions of commercial Hollywood cinema and European arthouse cinema – that is, between a popular cinema which downplays cultural specificity, emphasises visual action and features generic characters and stories, and a specialised cinema which is more dialogue-heavy, culturally specific and complex. European cinema may not be able to match Hollywood in terms of budgets and star-power. But it still manages to achieve occasional international successes by offering international film audiences something different – a cinema that is both serious and funny, thought-provoking and entertaining, culturally-distinct and yet universally-recognisable.

## Questions for group discussion

Examine a poster or film trailer for a recent European film release. What aspects of the film are emphasised in this publicity material (e.g. the film's stars, the story, director, awards, reviews)? What type of audience do you think the film is being targeted at?

Download the European Audiovisual Observatory's *Focus: World Film Market Trends* (2017) report (<https://rm.coe.int/focus-2017/168088dcab>). Compare the top 20 films for different European countries. What types of films have performed well across Europe, and which films have only been popular within particular European territories? How do you explain these trends?

Look at the 'Top 25 European films (including EUR inc) by admissions in the European Union: 2016' on page 20 of the *Focus* report. How many films on the list are co-productions involving two or more countries? How have these international partnerships affected (if at all) the cultural identity of the film and its box office performance?

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## Filmography

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mediating Cultural Encounters through European Screens' (MeCETES) was a three year project (2014-17) on the transnational production, distribution and reception of European film and television drama. Supported by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) Joint Programme under grant number 291827, it involved partners from the University of York, University of Copenhagen, and the Vrije Universiteit Brussels. The author was a Postdoctoral Research Associate on the 'film' strand of the project, based at the University of York. He was responsible for gathering, analysing and disseminating data on which European films travel well within Europe, how these films represent other European nations, cultures and identities, and how audiences engage with such screen fictions. He also managed the project website and blog: [www.mecetes.co.uk](http://www.mecetes.co.uk).