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CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

Between cultural globalisation and national interpretation

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Introduction

Contemporary cinema, like other types of visual mass communication, is increasingly embedded in discourses of globalisation. However, as is the case with globalisation generally, its discrete manifestations are full of paradox and tension. They are complex, heterogeneous phenomena, caught between their national or local origin, the homogenising tendencies represented by the global village and its inroads on the particularities of the national, and the tendency for those at the receiving end of transnational cultural processes to reinterpret and reinvent extraneous cultural influences within their own field of mental vision, their own interpretive and behavioural currency. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have put it, 'Perception itself is embedded in history. The same filmic images or sounds provoke distinct reverberations for different communities' (Shohat and Stam 1996: 163).

Earlier in the same article, the two authors theorise that 'media spectatorship forms a triated plurilogue between texts, readers, and communities existing in clear discursive and social relation to one another' and that 'the culturally variegated nature of spectatorship derives from the diverse locations in which films are received, from the temporal gaps of seeing films in different historical moments to the conflictual subject-positionings and community affiliations of the spectators themselves' (ibid.: 156–7). In the context of this article it is important to stress that these 'locations', in time as well as space, to a significant degree are mediated and defined by the national: national history, national territory, bounded national imaginings, national 'meanings' and so on, and not infrequently are mediated to as well as by spectators – as part of the 'plurilogue' – in such a way as to neutralise potential 'gaps' in order perceptually to forge continuities of understanding and emotion.

Apart from wanting to discuss the push-and-pull dialectic between national identities and cultural globalisation in a general theoretical idiom, this contribution specifically aims to locate contemporary cinema within such forms of tension between its transnational forms of production, dissemination and (sometimes)

contents, and its formerly national modes of reception, decoding and interpretation, based on national identities, cultural history and aesthetic traditions, as well as on particular readings of the world informed by a given national *habitus* and certain foreign stereotypes. In particular, it wants to revisit the perennial problem of Hollywood (blockbusters)/globalisation vs national cinema (Crofts 1993; Elsaesser 1987; Higson 1989, 1995). The initial focus will be on Hollywood as the producer of a specific variant of national (i.e. American) cinema. I shall subsequently consider Hollywood as producing a form of global cinematic culture received, interpreted and 'nationalised', less by the ordinary spectator than by a specific category of national mediatic gatekeepers – i.e. reviewers, sneak previewers and 'framers' – the last category referring to authors of articles and interviews in dailies and periodicals intended to place films in historical context, to ferret out directors' underlying motives, to introduce the cast, to discuss sociological or philosophical implications of films and so on.

Empirically the analytical focus – as a case in point – will be reviews and background articles published in three countries (the USA, France and Denmark) dealing with a recent and much-acclaimed Hollywood blockbuster with worldwide dissemination, Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. The aim is to assess the role of 'the national optic' in culturally transcribing, translating and mediating this global/American text to national audiences, and in decoding it so as to 'make sense' of it within the interpretive palimpsest of specific national knowledges, cultural identities and aesthetic and philosophical traditions.

In this way the case study will also provide an indication of the extent to which – and how – 'globalisation' in the cultural cinematic arena factually spells 'homogeneity' at the receiving end, i.e. what kinds of tension, continuity and hybridity exist between national cinema as a cultural and identity-related phenomenon and the global reach of the medium from the point of view of technology, distribution and consumption. As Andrew Higson has put it well, 'the paradox is that for a cinema to be nationally popular it must also be international in scope. That is to say, it must achieve the international (Hollywood) standard' (Higson 1989: 40). This implies, of course, that Hollywood – though often derided and dismissed – in a very significant way represents the model for any (other) national cinema, whose 'film culture is implicitly "Hollywood"' (ibid.: 39, drawing on Elsaesser 1987).

This is undoubtedly a valid point, but still leaves unanswered the questions posed above: will critical reception (here among reviewers etc.) *of* Hollywood also *be* Hollywood, or in a different idiom, will American, French and Danish reviewers highlight the same points, identify the same qualities and evaluate on the basis of more or less the same criteria? Or will these reviewers differ, perhaps significantly, along national lines, about a movie that is produced by an American Jew, deals with a war in which all three countries were (very differently) involved, and very conspicuously wraps itself in the American flag (see further below)? Or differently still, and in universalised terms, is the Hollywood

of American production and (often banal) contents identical to the Hollywood global viewers and critics perceive and construct?

National culture in globalisation: frames of reference, public spaces and symbolic analysts

In general terms, relations between nationality and globality are characterised by formal symmetry, but real asymmetry. This means that in spite of the fact that the global system consists of formally equal (nation-)states as the most central units – and that therefore there is no contradiction, but rather complementarity between nationalism and globalisation (Hedetoft 1999) – the real state of affairs is much less idyllic. In the real world of politics and influence, certain nationalisms, cultures, ideas and interpretations are more transnationally powerful, assertive and successful than others. Where the less influential ones are not necessarily less self-congratulatory, they are certainly more inward-looking and always carry the label of national specificity. The more powerful ones (actually or in the making), on the other hand, tend towards a universality of meanings, impact and acceptance, as their national-cultural currency becomes transnationally adopted, mixes and mingles with more long-standing cultural legacies, syncretises with them, is explicitly welcomed as a positive admixture to the culture and identity of other nations, or is treated as an admirable (role) model for emulation. In all cases, such cultures and communicative processes tend to lose their national exceptionalism, and to be seen as more or less naturalised frames of reference at several removes (in time and space) from their national origin. They become semiotically de-nationalised, not because they do not have a national origin, but precisely because they have proved so successful as vehicles of national interests, cultures and identities. As is the case with the English language in the world today, such assertive and hegemonising cultural processes at their most successful turn into a global cultural lingua franca, a transborder space of shared assumptions, material landmarks and discursive references. In this way, 'globalisation' is a very non-symmetrical process and constitutes anything but a level playing-field.

On the other hand, nor is globalisation limited to the cultural effects of American power and the processes often referred to as 'McDonaldisation' (Ritzer 1993), even though American cultural hegemony is undoubtedly a telling case in point. World history contains numerous examples of similar processes (though rarely with the same global reach as today), and in the modern era of national states cases of cultural imperialism and/or dominance come to mind (British, French, Chinese, Russian, Habsburg, Spanish and so on) that in different ways fit the bill described above. Even today, 'Americanisation' is neither a linear, one-way process nor the only dominant player in the contested domain of cultural 'soft power'. Concepts like 'cultural hybridity', 'creolisation', 'clashes of cultures' and 'ethnic diversity'; actors like a host of different national institutes set up to promote the global spread of national cultures (the British

Council, Alliance Française, the Goethe Institutes, even the Danish Cultural Institutes and so on); and political processes like the ongoing struggle between the EU and the US to curb American influence on the European audio-visual market for mass communication – all indicate that cultural globalisation processes at the intersection between national exceptionalism and universal influence cannot be reduced to a series of simplistic relations between one assertive 'sender' and a (number of) passive 'receivers'. National cultures do assimilate outside influences, but for one thing the primary sender (the US) itself constitutes a diverse, assimilationist cultural rag-bag, and second, receivers both react, interact and proact *vis-à-vis* American influences, in the process reforging and reinterpreting them in the context of national history, culture and perceptual optics.

This is by no means to deny the overwhelming impact of American culture on current globalising processes, but rather to place it in the appropriate perspective. If we try to apply this perspective to the film arena, it throws a new slant on the concept of national cinema and the relations between Hollywood blockbusters and 'foreign film' (or 'art film', as it is sometimes labelled, to suggest that other national cinemas can offset the quantitative impact of Hollywood through high quality film-making).

First of all, this perspective reminds us that also 'Hollywood', as a rule, produces national cinema, if by this concept we understand film whose thematic 'aboutness' (Hjort 2000), interpretive framing and sets of ideas and values are rooted in American perceptions of man, nature, society and the world – movies in other words whose taken-for-granted assumptions and common-sense understandings (and occasionally explicit ideological or philosophical loyalties) are of a US origin, no matter how strongly they might parade as global plots, themes or ideas, or how effectively 'American' problems are frequently given an all-human, universalistic spin (by producers or consumers of Hollywood movies).

Second, however, this perspective also calls for a rethinking of the perimeters of 'national cinema'. In most cases, this concept has been linked to notions like 'locus and ownership of production', 'the national character of distributive networks' or films' 'themes and contents'. Others, having recognised the importance of reception and consumption, do stress that, for example, 'imported mass culture can also be indigenized, put to local use, given a local accent' (Shohat and Stam 1996: 149), while pointing out that 'specific communities both incorporate and transform foreign influence' (ibid.). However, such insights are rarely taken to their logical conclusion, which is that such indigenisation processes tend to remould one form of national cinema into another. 'Foreign audiences', that is, other national optics through which American-global cinema is reinterpreted, on the one hand stamp their own national/local vision, common-sense assumptions and locally inspired worldviews on the cinematic products they actively engage with; on the other, the raw material they mentally rework (more or less dramatically, depending on their cultural background and transnational orientation) is still forged in the cauldron of

Hollywood themes and values and both frames and constrains the 'new nationality' of the movies in question. In short, two national contexts meet within the public communicative space of the movie theatre, producing a new national text framed by a more universalised 'transnational imaginary' of American origin. 'National cinema' in the context of globalisation thus reappears as a changeable and non-permanent notion, as a transboundary process rather than a set of fixed attributes. 'Hollywood' (as well as all other national cinemas of international reach) is constantly undergoing a (re)nationalisation process, temporally and spatially, a process which does not stamp out the US flavour of these cinematic products, but which negotiates their transition into and assimilation by 'foreign' mental visions and normative understandings.

This should not, *per se*, be understood as the production of so-called 'third cultures', defined by Mike Featherstone as 'sets of practices, bodies of knowledge, conventions, and lifestyles which have developed in ways which have become increasingly independent of nation-states' (1996: 60). The results might well be 'a third' as compared both with the 'sending' Americanness of the texts and the 'receiving' indigenous frame of national reference, but this third is not – or only rarely – a transnational, cosmopolitan intermediary, floating freely in a contracted global time-space. It is more appropriately captured in terms of a 'third' national/local dimension, a new cultural hybrid integrating, at the level of national specificity, two national cultures (one of global proportions, the other more local) through a process of mental bricolage. This process, it should be noted, is not 'unconscious', but reflexive. Cinema-goers – and reviewers and critics too, of course – are well aware that they are watching a Hollywood blockbuster, and most have a clear hunch that Hollywood products are chock-full of Americanisms. This means that they engage with these movies *as American*, and will tend to bring their pre-understanding of the US (admiring, exotic, sceptical, dismissive, hostile and so on) to bear, more or less directly, on their interpretation of what they are watching. At the same time, at the level where a cognitive and emotional engagement with a film's unfolding plot, represented characters, and constitutive themes takes place, national audiences will apply the optic of their history, identity and values in a process involving a decoding and reframing of the film's content and 'message'.

This reframing process – a constant interaction between acknowledging the 'foreignness' (here: the American nature) of the film and relating to it through reinterpretation – can entail more or less radical reactions to and departures from the 'original' set of meanings and messages embedded in the text. In other words, the hybrid third can be more or less alienated from the original product. The degree of alienation will depend partly on the aesthetic design of the movie, its cognitive message, and the extent to which the receiving culture has generally been inundated by US culture and has assimilated the values, contents and assumptions underlying specific movies, and, finally, will depend on the ways in which the critical film establishment (reviewers, critics and 'framers') wishes to

mediate movies to the general public, that is, fulfils its advisory and interpretive gatekeeper functions: national symbolic analysts negotiating between the product and the consumers, between the national origin of the former and the national *habitus* of the latter (more about this below). On the other hand, it is difficult to identify pre-given, universal patterns related to the proximity or distance of parent national cultures and identities. A brief digression – unrelated to the American impact on global cinema – will exemplify this point.

In the article '"I Have a Plan!' The Olsen Gang Captures Denmark and Norway: Negotiating the Culture Gap', Bjørn Sørensen (1994) demonstrates the vast differences of popular as well as critical reception in Denmark and Norway of a series of Danish movies commonly known as the 'Olsen Gang Movies', thirteen films in all produced between 1968 and 1981 (recently, in 1998, a final 14th was added to the series). The tribulations of the movies are interesting in light of the great degree of similarity between the cultures, languages and social structures of these two neighbouring Scandinavian countries. Throughout, the series has enjoyed popular as well as critical acclaim in Denmark. However, the original Danish version fell on deaf ears in Norway. It was subsequently reworked and reproduced ('versionised'), with Norwegian actors, certain changes of plot, locale and titles, a different type of humour, and, not insignificantly, Norwegian rather than Danish national markers – for example, using the Norwegian flag rather than the Danish flag in a number of central episodes. In this new form, the series turned into a major box-office success in Norway, whereas 'the reception by the critical establishment was completely different for each of the two countries' (ibid.: 77). Loved by Danish reviewers, most contemporary Norwegian critics – particularly the Oslo establishment – saw the movies 'as a yearly affront to Norwegian film production' (ibid.), pandering to a common stereotype of rural, unsophisticated and jollicose Norwegianness which Oslo elites were eager to distance themselves from – partly because it is a commonly accepted notion of Norway in Denmark. And interestingly, as Sørensen points out, critical reception was more favourable in the provinces of Norway, 'something that allows a discussion of these films in a broader context of Scandinavian national stereotypes' (ibid.).[1]

The point of this digression is not to enter into a discussion of the details of the discrepancies between the contexts of original national production/reception and the subsequent Norwegian national scenario, but, first, to illustrate the significance of national perception and reception for reframing and, in this case, reproducing a series of movies for a new, culturally similar, national audience, and, second, to exemplify the different (nationally conditioned) roles that film critics and film reviewers can have when trying to mediate between product and audience. The striking thing in this instance is the different types of nationally based responses in Norway. Where mass audiences reacted negatively to the original Danish version, they embraced the indigenised version spontaneously because the series had now been laced with a number of markers of 'Norwegianness' (or put differently, a number of 'Danish' markers had been

removed from the movies), which had the effect of Norwegianising the film's context, actors, symbolism and themes. Critics, on the other hand, reacted against the movies on account of these changes, interpreting the indigenisation process as too crude, shallow and stereotypical, and the films as still too much of an import from the former core of the Danish-Norwegian Union. At the back of most critics' minds, then – and reflexively rooted in these symbolic analysts' historical knowledge and cognitive interpretations – lurked an image of more subtle, more authentic and more 'sovereign' Norwegian film – i.e. an alternative, nationally informed scenario, with movies clearly belonging to the category of 'art films' or 'high culture', carrying a national quality stamp that might help Norwegian film production enter the international stage and thus work as leverage toward international acclaim.

Only in this sense did the critics turn out to be less 'national' and more 'global' in their response to the series than the popular masses. Without trying to extrapolate unduly, I would like on the basis of this contrast to provide a few general remarks about the role of critics and the usefulness of studying reviews and framing commentaries, before proceeding to look at our specific case study. The most important variables to keep in mind are the following.

First, reviewers are symbolic analysts (Reich 1992) and as such part of an apparent transnational ecumene within what Castells (1997: 354) terms 'global networks of wealth, power and information'. Their commonality relates to a variety of factors: their international mindset, their knowledge of film and film history, their international travel and encounters at various film festivals, and often their educational backgrounds. More specifically, their common orientation toward the standards and values set by 'Hollywood' constitutes a significant parameter of common identification and professional self-image. To the extent that Hollywood standards are adopted and treated as such a trans-boundary reference point (enthusiastically or perhaps more critically), they significantly contribute toward a font of shared assumptions and historical landmarks that critics draw on and which justifies thinking of these individuals as one group sharing a common professional identity. Hollywood becomes, if not an organic part of their selves, at the very least a very significant other. In this way it does make sense to talk of film critics as part of the same transnational community of identity, passing critical judgement on the basis of universal (i.e. non-national) values, knowledges and assumptions. This cosmopolitan dimension would seem to be strengthened by the fact that critics frequently view films together during festivals and that even on their own national home ground they are presented with movies in previewing sessions, i.e. in spaces separated from the viewing situations of the general public. As Louis Menand has succinctly put this point:

> Reviewers see most movies in screening rooms. It's like seeing them in church. Everyone is quiet and attentive; no one is getting up for popcorn or rummaging around for a Life Saver. People in screening rooms do not talk back to the movie.
>
> (Menand 1998: 7)

Whereas 'people in movie theaters do. I saw *Saving Private Ryan* in a large theater in midtown Manhattan on a Saturday night. … It was not an audience in idle search of cheap thrills. They had read the reviews; they were prepared to be affected' (ibid.). Louis Menand then proceeds to give examples of the way in which members of the audience interacted with the movie's characters and commented on the unfolding plot. When, for instance, one of the American soldiers in the movie is confronted with the chance to do away with a German, a 'woman down front' cries out 'Shoot him!'. 'She was clearly', so comments Menand, 'expressing the sentiment of the house'.

Second, however, this way of conceptualising the critical community (and its differences as compared with the more spontaneous, often national(ist) reaction of the ordinary cinema-going public) simultaneously entails the danger of seeing its 'internationality' as running counter to, by-passing (Castells' word again) its basis of national belonging and identification and of overlooking the half-grudging nature of many critics' acceptance of global (= Hollywood) standards. The point is that while their cultural-educational baggage and mental horizons might well be transnational to a significant (though nationally different) degree, 'transnational' need not mean non-national, and culture cannot readily be translated into terms of identification, let alone identity. Two points should be highlighted here: the question of communicative spaces within which reviewers operate, and the determining constituents/frames of their identity. Although both are ambiguous, they do bring the national question back into the picture.

Film critics operate within communicative spaces that are primarily nationally bounded: the papers/journals that they write for (or television stations their commentaries are broadcast on) more often than not define themselves as national, the primary audience targeted is the national citizenry of their respective nation-states, the premiering of movies that their reviews or framing commentaries relate to is usually organised so as to occur simultaneously within specific national circumferences, their reviews are phrased in the national language, and so on. In other words, the entire space-time loop in these instances is subjected to the primacy of the national, and critics/reviewers/framers both explicitly and more covertly need to take account of the cultural, historical, communicative, aesthetic and political assumptions, knowledges and expectations prevalent among members of their target audience. The ambiguity indicated stems from the fact that they also need to convey the 'other-nationality' or the 'globality' of the specific film under review, and that in most cases this matches their self-understanding as belonging to a cosmopolitan ecumene. This makes for a variety of different communicative, 'hybrid' strategies and meaning contents, and also for a lot of similarities in the mediation

(particularly the background framing) of movies, but does not eliminate the fundamentally national framework of the critics' gatekeeper function.

Nor, of course, does it eliminate their national allegiances and *habitus*, their belonging to a national community and their application of the 'national optic' to the movie being reviewed. Having a global outlook is no impediment to the maintenance of a national core of allegiance and identification – as previously argued, in the contemporary world global and national attitudes seem to complement each other. The case of the Olsen Gang demonstrated one of the modes in which this complementarity can play itself out: as the rejection of a particular kind of crude (and Danish-inspired) nationalism in favour of more sophisticated and more internationally acceptable/understandable forms of Norwegian cinema, which would base themselves firmly in high rather than popular culture and from which the Norwegian film establishment might hope to attract international kudos. One form of 'inward-looking' Norwegianness is here pitted against a more cosmopolitan, culturally open version. Both, however, are national and cast in the mould of fulfilling certain national-cultural needs.

Naturally the interaction between globality/otherness and nationality on the production-mediation-consumption continuum which movies negotiate in the process of crossing borders can play itself out in a host of other ways. The national rootedness of reviewers can be more or less in evidence, and the syncretic 'third' can therefore manifest itself in a variety of ways. Hollywood blockbusters here present us with a particularly challenging case, because on the one hand they have, as set out above, somehow lost their 'nationality' in the course of the global expansion of American cinema (in the minds of viewers, including many professional film critics), and on the other they also tend to provoke very anti-American, nationally or regionally steeped responses that are informed by the fear of being inundated by American popular culture and losing one's national culture in the process. In this light, let us now look more closely at the critical reception of *Saving Private Ryan* in two EU countries, Denmark and France, and, by contrast, also in its national country of origin, the US.

National thirds, or 'I wonder how the reaction in Europe will be to this film'

This heading is a quote from an amateur review posted on 26 July 1998, by a certain Peter Tong, on the *Washington Post* website, having invited reactions to the movie. The question of course is both interesting and relevant, addressing as it does the core issue of this chapter and showing sensitivity to the problem of European reactions to an American movie thematising an important historical moment of transatlantic interaction. However, seen in context the question is less objective/exploratory and more (nationally) normative than might appear at first blush, for the review goes on to state that 'every drop of American blood shed there was priceless and irreplaceable'. What this spectator (in a manner quite unrepresentative of the general critical reception in the US – see below) is therefore asking is whether Europeans, in the way they react to the movie, will acknowledge the American sacrifice during the Second World War towards the liberation of Europe from Nazi aggression.

The responses to the question by reviewers and 'framers' in Denmark and France, in spite of similarities, evince a number of interesting differences. Before addressing these 'European' reactions to an unmistakably 'American' movie (no matter how 'Hollywood' and therefore global it may be), a few words on the film itself and the reasons for selecting it as this chapter's 'case' are in place.

The major part of the film is in the nature of a flashback to the invasion of Normandy (described in gruelling and realistic detail during an early, twenty-two-minute long scene) and the story unfolding therefrom, in which a small detail of soldiers are given the special task of locating and rescuing Private Ryan, the only surviving brother of four (the other three having been killed in combat), in order to return him to his family home in Idaho. When they eventually find him, Private Ryan refuses to be saved and instead insists on fighting on and trying to hold a strategically important bridge. Nevertheless, unlike the entire rescue unit, he finally comes out of the showdown with the German forces alive. The opening and closing scenes are set in 'the present', in the cemetery off Omaha Beach to which James Ryan returns fifty years later. Framed by the American flag, which in full-screen format is the first and last image confronting the audience, we see him abjectly kneeling before the grave of Captain John Miller, the head of the rescue unit. In the closing scene he asks his wife, who has accompanied him to the cemetery along with his children and grand-children, whether he has been a 'good man', in this way seeking confirmation of having lived up to Captain Miller's final words to him before dying: 'Earn it!' – an injunction to become worthy of the sacrifices the unit paid to save his life.

Thus, on different levels of thematisation and explicitness, this is both a film about fighting for liberty and against tyranny in Europe, about fighting for the disengagement of one man from this war in the name of moral decency, and about American values and the greatness of patriotic sacrifice. In other words, it is a special cocktail of *American national pride*, the uncomfortable but necessary burden of international engagement and sacrifice that the US has to face and indeed faced in the Second World War (*international idealism*), and (at least on the surface) questions of *universal morality*, the good life that the former two components are meant to secure, the human qualities underlying it and so on.

The film stands out as relatively uncharacteristic for the run-of-the-mill Hollywood movie by the explicitness of its national origin and its patriotic 'message' – a fact not lost on critics in any of the three countries, but nevertheless providing the background for different interpretations, meanings and normative values. For that reason, the point made above about critics and audiences generally engaging with Hollywood movies in a reflexive mode, conscious of their American origin and bringing their knowledge, stereotypes and

sentiments regarding the US to bear on the interpretive process, is obviously true in this case, since the movie is not just based on American values and identity, but makes a point of highlighting these in thematic terms. On the other hand, it also tries to construct a narrative of universal human morality, decency and courage, and it is this constellation between processes of marking and unmarking the movie's nationalism in the thematic context of a major war fought on European soil that makes it such an appropriate testing ground for European reviewers' handling of their gatekeeper function between nationality and globality.

Both in Denmark and France press coverage of the movie was extensive, prior to as well as following the release of the movie in late September (Denmark) and early October (France), 1998, approximately two months after its US release.[2] In both countries this coverage consisted of background articles dealing with Spielberg, his life, family and movies, with the history of American Second World War movies and *Saving Private Ryan*'s relationship with them, and with the movie's unashamedly patriotic tone and message. Reviews also focused on the movie itself and on different types of comment to which its Americanisms, morality, realism, romanticism, topicality and cinematic qualities (technique, casting, artistry, direction, etc.) give rise. Naturally, as far as mundane levels of description, paraphrase and historical cinematic parallels are concerned, similarities between the national coverages abound. These national responses are also similar in that they accord to this movie (simply by virtue of being yet another Spielberg film) ample textual space and a significant amount of attention. Finally, certain judgements are shared, particularly that the movie is not quite so special and unique as it would appear on a first viewing and certainly is not Spielberg's best film. However, though quite some common ground exists and the movie in many ways is recognisably the same whether viewed through a Danish or a French set of lenses, nevertheless emphases vary and normative judgements differ markedly on a national basis (rarely foregrounded in its own right) as regards the triangular configuration around which the movie pivots: nationalism/international idealism/universal morality and the three different kinds of 'us' (national, transatlantic or global) that each of these is linked with and transmits within the communicative context of the movie.

Let me start by reverting to the question: Do these two national critical communities react to the movie by suitably acknowledging the legitimacy of US patriotism and the extent of American sacrifices for Europe during the Second World War, particularly during D-Day? Phrased in slightly more critical terms, do they buy into the didactic part of Spielberg's self-avowed and widely publicised intent and message in this film: to erect a monument to veterans of D-Day and commemorate their sacrifices? While we need to note that there are certain differences within the national communities on this count, still the overall pattern indicates the existence of two nationally different approaches to this crucial question, as regards explicit mention, tone and mediatory strategy.

In this respect, coverage in *France* hovers between extensive mention of the

movie's patriotic thrust and a certain US-sceptical dismissiveness of both its crude 'flaggism' and its attempts to situate itself on the moral high ground. The formal means of mediating between the former – which implicitly recognises the legitimacy and interest of Spielberg's patriotic assertiveness for a French public traditionally riven by forces of attraction as well as repulsion in relation to American values – and the latter which tends towards deflating this legitimacy, is extended use of *interviews* with Steven Spielberg himself (e.g. in *Le Figaro*, 26–27 September, and *Le Monde*, 1 October 1998), juxtaposed with critical commentaries in review articles or debate articles. The interviews allow Spielberg ample scope for voicing his own views on the film and its patriotic qualities in an apparently neutral form. Thus, for example, he emphasises that his acceptance of its release in China was conditioned on refusing the Chinese the right to cut out the initial and the final shots of the American flag. At the same time, however, he claimed that although he wanted to use the movie to pay homage to the American war veterans, to reinstate patriotic values and oppose the national 'cynicism' that he sees spreading – still, 'it is not a patriotic film' (*Le Figaro*, 27 September 1998). In the context of the caustically critical comments surrounding the interviews (particularly in *Le Monde*, 1 October 1998), such interviews acquire the function of allowing Spielberg to *expose* a somewhat misplaced and certainly exaggerated nationalism, which is in turn *analysed* in the accompanying pieces. Thus the form and the sheer length of the interviews would seem to recognise his national message and its global importance, but in fact conceal a mostly disapproving subtext. This subtext comprises both outspoken evaluations of the patriotic tenor of the film (such as 'la crétinerie de l'épilogue et du prologue du film', the assessment of Samuel Blumenfeld in his review in *Le Monde* – the very same critic who conducts the interview with Spielberg located next to the review article!), but also other types of evaluations scornfully dismissive of the alleged global megalomania of Spielberg's project and its cultural superficiality (e.g. in the form of comparing it to a Disneyesque theme park – 'The memory of the century as theme park'):[3]

> Spielberg is the greatest Hollywood producer in an era where Hollywood is no longer the geographical epicenter of American cinema, but an industrial international image factory wanting to perfect globalisation in the domains of collective representations. … [Spielberg] can do nothing but recycle traditional mythologies while covering up the vanity of the operation.
>
> (Jean-Michel Froudon , *Le Monde*, 1 October 1998)[4]

Similar views are expressed in *Cahiers du cinéma* (no. 528, 1998) and *Libération* (30 September 1999). What these reviewers focus on is not just the patriotic message of the movie, but its failure to combine moral didacticism with aesthetic detail and enjoyment, and crude realism with romantic heroism in a way that in any substantial way makes the movie stand out from the

conventional war movies. Spielberg is represented as a director who in fact produces little more than a second-order simulacrum 'à la manière de' although he both lectures his audience and exploits their sentiments in an attempt to design the ultimate war movie that will capture war as it really is, the universal truth about war and man. The movie wants to be unique, definitive and eye-opening, but lapses into sentimentality, patriotic affirmation and the utilisation of character portrayals and enemy images that are the stock-in-trade of traditional war movies. This discrepancy between the stated aims of the film – to reinvent patriotic American values, to recognise those who sacrificed their lives for 'our' liberty, and to address a fundamental moral dilemma – and its factual character as yet another tale of heroism, bravery and moral virtue that piggybacks on a long history of American war films, makes the majority of the French reviewers dismiss Spielberg as a professional manipulator of images and emotions, as a megalomaniac when it comes to visualising and giving cinematic credence to ideas, thoughts and sentiments. In this area he comes across as naive, simplistic and almost childlike, in spite – or maybe because – of his ambitions to create the definitive war narrative, 'to be *all of* film, to capture the totality of History in the global reach of one work' (*Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 528).[5] This review ends on a representative note by pointing out that the film 'is a movie that wants to live on in the injured memory of humanity but which is killed by its details'.

The basic tenor of the critical coverage in France is, therefore, that the patriotism of the film is slightly ludicrous, the universal moralism misguided, trivial or poorly represented, and its international idealism superficial and/or pompous and at bottom mostly identifiable as global, image-making ambitions of Disneyesque proportions. For these reasons – and although more measured and cautious reviews are also in evidence – there is little recognition of the movie's national, or moral message. The movie *grosso modo* comes across to the readership as a partially failed, though in many ways well-intentioned and technically admirable project of a Hollywood producer entrapped by self-aggrandisement and peddling his own homegrown morality in the shape of a rather traditional war film. Without French culture, history, morality or identity being once mentioned in these reviews, the mediated product nevertheless bears the unmistakable imprint both of 'art cinema' as applied yardstick and of negative French US images among the cultural intelligentsia; and in spite of the contribution of US forces during the Second World War towards the liberation of France, the reader is hard put to it to find any utterances of gratitude or acknowledgement for this achievement in the way French reviewers and framers have chosen to handle this Spielberg movie.

For that reason, the French variant of national thirdness in this instance is a peculiar mix on the one hand, of grudging recognition and admiration – primarily manifested in the sheer extent of media coverage of the film and in letting Spielberg have so much of an independent say, but also in the occasional acknowledgement of the legitimacy of patriotism *eo ipso* – and on the other

hand a sneering and distanced tone of dismissiveness and occasionally outright sarcasm at the pretentiousness of a movie seemingly trapped between its *American* patriotic ardour and its global ambitions in the vein of a (Disneyised) *universal* morality.

The general tenor of critical reception in *Denmark* on most of these counts is quite different. Not that the American pride and patriotism of the movie is overshadowed by its moral philosophy, but it is accorded quite a different value and recognition. In a commentary in the conservative daily *Berlingske Tidende* (24 October 1998), for example, headlined 'Spielberg viser flaget' ('Spielberg waves the flag'), the paper's editor-in-chief Peter Wivel seemingly sarcastically remarks that the movie 'has the nerve to wrap itself in the American flag'. A read of the article shows, however, that the sarcasm is directed at the imaginary reader who might object to the patriotism of the film. In fact, the article argues in enthusiastic and pro-American terms for the legitimacy of this type of national ardour and emphasises the gratitude European peoples should harbour *vis-à-vis* American sacrifices during the Second World War, for 'we became free human beings thanks to American help'. Hence, Spielberg's project is a laudable work of commemoration for the war veterans and instructive for the younger generations who have no memory of the war. On this analysis, Spielberg wants to generate a mood of acknowledgement in his audience 'for having saved Western civilisation'. Rather than the movie's cinematic qualities, it is here its instructional message and emotional lessons that are at the centre of attention.

Such undiluted gratitude and enthusiasm, verging on apologetics, are not totally representative of the comments and reviews in the Danish media as a whole, but nevertheless do reflect a spirit of acceptance and recognition of the moral legitimacy of this particular manifestation of patriotism, because it is prompted by an international selflessness and has positive consequences for Denmark/Europe/the free world. For some, this legitimacy is underpinned by the anti-heroic 'realism' of the movie, its truthfulness, and its intention 'not to please' or 'entertain'. With the starkness of the war's realities in mind, 'it is hardly shameful to admire [the soldiers] for it [i.e. their sacrifices for Europe's freedom]' (*Kristeligt Dagblad*, 23 October 1998). Other reviewers do emphasise the 'sentimentality' and 'pathos' framing the beginning and end of the film, and quite a few criticise it for its celebration of heroism and for lapsing into the mould of traditional Second World War movies, with nuanced portrayals of Allied soldiers and stereotypical depictions of Germans (*Jyllands-Posten and Information*, both 23 October 1998). However, even these reviews (and framing articles in the same papers) applaud the film for its moral purpose and superior craftsmanship. *Weekendavisen* (23–29 October 1998) thinks Spielberg has performed a major feat by successfully celebrating old-fashioned virtues though this really should not be possible any longer, and finds the strength of the film to lie in its balance between 'realism' and 'heroism'. The reviewer, Bo Green Jensen,

claims that American reviewers rejected the film due to its pandering to emotions rather than reason, but he nonetheless 'recommends the movie without serious reservations'.

In most papers, these types of (more or less subdued) accolades are framed by articles about the history of the Second World War movies, Spielberg's career and personality, and background stories on the history of the film. This is consistently done in the third-person format, that is, in a narrative that represents Spielberg's views, rather than allowing them to be presented directly in the context of an interview, as was the case in France. This approach is more in accordance with a basically more positive and admiring position *vis-à-vis* Spielberg, the film and Hollywood generally (information and assessment merge), whereas the French form allows for a disjunction of presentation and evaluation.

The other main feature of the Danish press' reception of the movie that is worth mentioning is that it is consistently compared – and not always as favourably as one might have imagined – with other Hollywood productions featuring the Second World War. Quite a few of the comments tend to downplay the film in that respect, assessing it to be a more ordinary, run-of-the-mill war movie than it would like to be (*Information*, 23 October 1998), or to be inferior to other movies of the same kind (*Jyllands-Posten*, 23 October 1998). However, unlike France, there is no tendency to see it as a Disneyised, copycat war film, nor to criticise it for its ambition of being the war movie that ends all war movies; rather, the reactions in Denmark are common-sensical, cautious of too much enthusiasm, and call for moderation along the lines of 'this is a great movie, but not *that* great'. Basically the movie's premises and self-understanding are accepted, and comments are embedded in a context bounded by the critics' belonging to a transnational universe of knowledge and values, politically, culturally and cinematically. The existence of a transatlantic, Hollywood-dominated ecumene is clearly in evidence, propped up by numerous references to the reception of the movie in the US context. For this reason, US-denigrating or US-sceptical stereotypes are hardly brought into play, in either of the two categories of critical commentary.

Thus, the 'third' produced in the Danish context is rooted in an affirmative appraisal of the movie's moral dogmaticism and (putative) celebration of the values of freedom and sacrifice; in other words, its transatlantic internationalism is both accepted and applauded, occasionally by explicitly referring to the historical benefits of American sacrifices for the Danish community. On the other hand, there is also widespread acceptance of Spielberg's American patriotism as legitimate and understandable. Finally, the universalising 'human' dimension and dilemma of the film are admiringly assessed as striking a sensible balance between heroism and anti-heroism. Altogether, the Danish reception is 'globalising', in the sense that it accepts Spielberg as a dignified representative of Hollywood film-making, and US values and contributions to Western civilisation as laudable; the 'us' of the commentaries is one therefore which comprises both producer and receiver/consumer. The American other is one which is

(almost) part of ourselves in this case, unlike France, where French cultural nationalism draws a clear-cut boundary between the sophistication of 'us' and the crudeness and pretentiousness of 'them'. Before going on to draw a few conclusions and to fit these analytical remarks into the larger framework of the theoretical reflections set out above, a brief side-glance – as counterpoint – at the critical reception of the movie (two months earlier) on its own home ground, the US, is appropriate. Apart from the fact that commentaries in the US press, true to a general trend in US entertainment culture, are more concerned with actor personalities (like Tom Hanks and Matt Damon), with questions of stardom and possible Oscar nominations following the release of the film than is the case in Europe, three points are worth foregrounding that distinguish the US reception from the two European ones already discussed.

First, the US media are clearly more focused on the stark realism, historical honesty and alleged anti-war message of the movie than either the French or Danish commentators, and they devote quite a lot of space and emotive verbiage to describing the historical realities of D-Day (see e.g. *People*, 3 August 1998). Second, although the patriotic component of the film is mentioned, particularly in connection with Spielberg wanting to erect a monument to the war veterans, much more attention is given to the potentially counter-patriotic, nationally divisive effects of depicting the Second World War in such brutally honest terms; as one headline goes, 'Can America handle "Private Ryan"?' (MSNBC, *Hollywood Voyeur*, 30 June 1998); or as Spielberg remarked to Associated Press on 19 July 1998: 'I don't want to turn Americans away from the patriotism many of us feel, but in the process of the chaos of combat, these were some of the things men were driven to do' (cited from *Yahoo News*). And third, in logical extension of this optic, the major part of both the critical and affirmative commentary concentrates on the movie's universal, moral questions: Why risk eight men's lives to save one? What kind of humanitarian ethic is at work here? What's the place and the worth of dignity, decency and human affections in the midst of the slaughterhouse of war? How do soldiers preserve their humanity, and how do those who are fortunate enough to come out of the war alive make themselves worthy of it?

Interestingly, thus, whereas the two European critical communities both, in various ways, tend to focus their spotlight on the explicit US patriotism of the movie and, as regards Denmark, on the international, transatlantic historical mission of the US, domestic US attention is concerned with the film's potential for negatively impacting patriotic sentiments and stirring up uncomfortable memories among the public at large as well as among war veterans, and furthermore with eagerly debating its universal, timeless and globally valid moral questions and the cinematic effects usurped by Spielberg to bring home his message, particularly his appeal to emotional reactions rather than the rational mind. Positive as well as negative reactions in the US media centrally hinge on assessing Spielberg's degree of success in aestheticising this universalist kind of *problématique* while on the one hand condemning the realities of war and on

the other celebrating the quiet heroics and solid humanity of people like Captain Miller, 'a decent man of the sort that America was theoretically meant to produce, and perhaps did during the generation in question' (*Variety*, 26 July 1998). This does not, as the quote demonstrates, imply that the patriotism of the movie is absent from reviews. Rather than being explicitly thematised as an important element of the movie's storyline and message, the patriotism is taken for granted as the cultural-historical frame within which Spielberg produced the movie and within which it needs to be received. Thus, Spielberg's own preference for seeing this as 'not a patriotic film' (see previously cited statement to *Le Figaro*) is by and large taken at face value by the American critical community (unlike France, and, differently, Denmark). For the same reason, the international idealism (politically or morally understood, according value to the Western, transatlantic brotherhood) so pronounced in Denmark is subdued, almost non-existent in the US reception. After all, the beneficiary of the anti-heroic heroism of the platoon is Private Ryan (American and everyman in one), not 'Europe' or 'democratic liberties'.

Conclusion

Saving Private Ryan provides a perfect example of a movie which, as I argued above, is rooted in American perceptions of man, nature, society and the world – movies in other words whose taken-for-granted assumptions and common sense understandings are of a US origin, no matter how effectively or frequently 'American' problems are given an all-human, universalistic spin. The interesting point is that it is the American critical reception of the movie which most comprehensively accepts the transformation from 'American' to 'global-universal'. In the other two cases, the US-national(ist) qualities and import of the movie are foregrounded, though they are very differently evaluated. However, both in France and Denmark, critics explicitly engage with the movie as American, as I argued above on a more theoretical note, bringing their pre-understanding of the USA to bear. And in spite of the fact that the Danish reception is by and large considerably more positive and 'globally minded' than the French, it is no closer to either the movie itself or the national receptive pattern in the US than is the French. The nationality of these commentaries is in no way short-circuited by the transnational professional attachments of the critical community, but in both countries interesting national thirds emerge, and in all three countries, critical reception obliquely reflects privileged elite images of self and other as well as period-specific concerns about war and peace, national identity and security, Western values, humanitarian ethics and transatlantic co-operation.

The French 'national third' is a faithful reflection of a national mood *vis-à-vis* the USA which on the one hand is still steeped in a kind of French cultural self-congratulation deeply suspicious of US hegemonic aspirations, dismissive of US cultural superficiality, and mindful of the need to keep French national identity

and sovereignty intact in spite of the inroads of US theme-park culture. On the other hand, the admiration for Spielberg's technical craftsmanship and the sheer extent of the commentary accorded to a film somehow thematising transatlantic war collaboration (including extensive interviews) manifest the political and military *rapprochement* between France and the USA in recent years, reflected in French abandonment of the WEU as an independent European security organisation and in the important step to rejoin NATO's military command.

The Danish national optic, in a similar manner, reflects a steadily more pro-American mood and a markedly more affirmative political as well as cultural position as regards the US over the past 6–7 years – including a much more proactive transatlantic and NATO-oriented security policy. Elite (as well as popular) awareness in Denmark regarding the positive effects of US involvement in Europe for the security of a small nation like Denmark has steadily increased and has made Denmark one of the most enthusiastic NATO members overall. Thus, the implicitly assumed transatlantic 'we' found in the reviews and framing commentaries mirrors a broad consensus among Danes, who for that reason do not see their national culture and identity as threatened by Disneyisation and McDonaldisation (much more so by Europeanisation in fact). In this context, the 'flaggism' of the movie is seen as a positive extension of the widespread use of the Danish flag to symbolise national pride, and not as a sign that interests are at work which might constitute a cultural or political threat to Denmark.

Finally, the US reception is indicative of a mood *vis-à-vis* war, international engagements and the sacrifice of American lives which on the one hand recognises the need for international commitment and takes American-cum-human values almost for granted, and on the other tends to shy away from the sacrifice of American blood for purposes that are not clearly in the US interest. On the background of high-tech warfare like the Gulf War (and later the Serbian War) and US public sensitivity to the capture or death of even a single US soldier, the battle scenes in *Saving Private Ryan* manifest a meaningless waste of human (i.e. US) lives, and the plot of the movie – extricating James Ryan from the European battlefields in order to repatriate him to the good life of Middle America – a message that makes a whole lot of patriotic sense (though this potential isolationism is counteracted by the resolve of Ryan not to be 'saved', but to see the battle through and thus save the meaning of the war and the death of his brothers for himself). On that background, the moral focus of the US critical reception reflects a new type of US patriotism, committed to sacrifices and global concerns, but within limits set by the possibility of making 'human' and 'moral' sense of interventions in the light of American interests.

This particular analysis cannot, of course, make any claims to representativeness. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the importance of paying close attention to the minutiae of the national mediation by commentators of even large-scale Hollywood blockbusters. The profile of the movie that media consumers had outlined to them in the three countries contains very important differences of

emphasis, evaluation and omission. In important respects, the expectation horizon is thus shaped by critics in three nationally distinct ways: audiences are equipped with three different kinds of pre-understanding with which to unravel and interpret the actual movie they watch unfolding – filters which in turn are locked into elite and public images of transatlanticism and national culture. The theoretical and analytical implications of this production of national 'thirds' must be pursued in another context. What can be concluded here is that if this pattern holds true for this particular Hollywood blockbuster, it will probably be found in other cases too.

Notes

1 It should be added that the series was even more radically changed in Sweden, whereas in the GDR it proved to be a resounding success in its original version.

2 The text corpus on which the analysis is based consists of pre-release commentaries, reviews and 'framing articles' in leading newspapers and periodicals in all three countries, representing different political and intellectual positions. In Denmark: *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, *Aktuelt*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *Information*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, *Politiken* and *Weekendavisen*. In France: *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *Le Monde*, *Le Progrès*. In the USA: *Associated Press* (website), *The Christian Science Monitor*, *CNN Interactive*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *MSNBC* (website), *Newsweek*, *New York Review of Books*, *People*, *Variety*, *Washington Post*.

3 'La mémoire du siècle comme parc d'attractions'.

4 'Spielberg est le plus grand réalisateur hollywoodien d'une époque où Hollywood n'est plus l'épicentre géographique du cinéma des Etats-Unis, mais une imagerie industrielle internationale destinée à accomplir la mondialisation dans les domaines des représentations collectives. ... [Spielberg] peut seulement recycler les anciennes mythologies en masquant la vanité de l'opération'.

5 '[D]'être *tout* le cinéma, de concurrencer la totalité de l'Histoire par la globalité d'une oeuvre'.

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