Book review

Reviewed by **Eduard Cuelenaere**, Centre for Cinema and Media Studies, Ghent University/
University of Antwerp, Department of Communication Sciences, Ghent, Belgium,
E-Mail: Eduard.Cuelenaere@UGent.be.

In the last decade before the new millennium, when Europe started unifying not
only on a political but also on an economic and cultural level, we witnessed the
emergence of academic interest in European cinema. Since then, we have seen
scholarly work that has probed into the history, turning points and significant
periods, as well as the industrial facets of European cinema. Holding in mind
both Elsaesser's (2005) claim that European cinema should be considered as only
being part of world cinema, and Jones' (2018) finding that "from an audience
perspective, Hollywood is still very much at the centre of European film culture"
(p. 479), one could conclude that European cinema has seen its best days. When
reading Christopher Meir's *Mass producing European cinema*, however, one
cannot but come to the opposite conclusion. In the period from the 1990s through
the 2010s, European cinema might have become all the more fascinating and
complex, therefore necessitating more research into it. Not only does the author
fully succeed in convincing the reader of this urgent need for more scholarly work
on the subject, he does this by researching the highly under-scrutinized rise of
pan-European studios.

     More specifically, Meir places the French studio *Studiocanal* at the center
of attention, carefully analyzing its working, transformations, and output, and
employs his findings to illustrate broader changes that are happening within
European cinema, on the one hand, and the more global or international screen
context(s), on the other. Additionally, he refuses to think of European studios
as existing in a vacuum, by pointing, for instance, to their complex relationship
and significant similarities with Hollywood – think of both their independency
on well-known IPs for narrative ideas that have 'built-in' audiences and their
focus on star-driven material. What makes this book stand apart even more is
its refreshing approach to the subject. Through a conscientious analysis of trade
press articles, topped by in-depth and illustrative film and television series analy-
ses, Meir proves that a combination of both media industry studies and grounded
textual analysis is the key to more fully grasping the political economic, indus-
trial, and textual practices of today's European cinema. Besides understanding

the "dynamic interrelationships between the industrial contexts of screen production and the works that end up getting made within such contexts" (p. 2), the book also wishes to question "what these developments mean for the idea of European cinema and European television drama as art forms that may or may not be distinct from the American production that dominates global markets" (ibid.). Finally, *Mass producing European cinema* also expands on the different ways in which Europe is portrayed on screen as well as on how Europeans are represented to global audiences – instead of examining (the existence of) a European identity *per se*, it looks at how European studios assume that such an identity exists and how they represent it in their works.

Convinced that looking at phenomena from a historical distance helps in understanding today's developments and situations, the first part of the book looks at the bigger historical picture in which *Studiocanal* came about. It provides us with a non-exhaustive chronicle (spanning over one hundred years) of pan-European and vertically integrated companies (e. g. *Pathé Frères*, *UFA*, *PolyGram Filmed Entertainment*, …) that were part of the global market. Looking at the different circumstances in which some of these thrived at times and failed at others helps a lot to comprehend why *Studiocanal* is still standing today. In a next step, Meir describes a history of events that aids us to further understand the genesis and evolution of *Studiocanal* into an international player: the company started in the 1980 s "as a subscription-based operator that was charged, among other things, with investing in film production by means of prepurchasing the broadcast rights to films" (p. 50), was then the subject of an important take-over in 1999 when it began its rise in global presence before almost collapsing, and finally returned to being more modest than before – going into other, safer directions while keeping Hollywood majors at a safe distance. It should be noted that the cases that Meir uses (think of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Pianist*, or *Paddington*) to illustrate these broader developments are anything but secondary information. The book shows, for instance, how a European identity is represented in an often heavily clichéd, or indeed tourist-friendly, manner indicative of a commercial or industrial rather than an artistic or socio-cultural logic behind the evocation of Europeanness.

The second part of the book looks at the studio's works from 2006 onwards, starting with an acquisition which ensured the British as well as the international distribution for *Studiocanal,* and which spearheaded its more internationally oriented products and a further growth of the distribution network. Interesting here is that the company now realized that it could function perfectly without having direct access to the American market, as the revenues it received from other international territories started to outnumber the American revenues. Meir provides us with an overview of the whole output of *Studiocanal* and zooms in

on specific trends and directions, with a focus on remakes and re-adaptations, for instance, or its "aggressive franchise-building and cross-platform adaptation" (p. 184). The second part ends with an examination of the two most prominent strategies of the studio: its mining of middlebrow films and television series, on the one hand, and its focus on popular genre cinema and television, on the other. Unfortunately, the author could not discuss the more 'local productions' of the studio and chose to solely look at European films and series – not at the individual national screen cultures. Though, in line with recent findings (cf. this special issue), he acknowledges that *Studiocanal*'s local output does feature "proportionally more comedies than the international output" (p. 126), which, again, proves that *Studiocanal* functions as a kind of microcosm, representative of broader evolutions in European cinema and beyond.

With *Mass producing European cinema*, Meir succeeds in demonstrating convincingly that European cinema is industrial, too, and maybe more importantly, that its films are capable of becoming global hits, which might set some readers' minds at rest: Europeans can (still) influence film culture globally.

References

Elsaesser, T. (2005). *European cinema: Face to face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Jones, H. D. (2017). Remapping world cinema through audience research. In R. Stone, P. Cooke, S. Dennison & A. Marlow-Mann (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to world cinema* (pp. 467–481). Abingdon: Routledge.