Euro Wide Shot 1999
An overview of European production

by Benjamin B

According to the European Observatory, there are over six hundred films produced in Europe each year. The most prolific producers are France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and Germany. There is a big gap between European budgets and American ones. A significant number of French films, for instance, are shot in Super 16 mm and blown up to 35 mm, while a major feature in Eastern Europe has the budget of a small American independent film.

Another key difference between Europe and the United States is the active role that European governments play in cinema. In almost every country, government funding is an integral part of putting together the monies for movies. Several years ago, the world-wide GATT trade talks was the occasion for European governments, and notably France and Spain, to defend what is sometimes called the " cultural exception " to a laissez-faire global economy. Europe argued successfully that government cinema subsidies should be allowed in order to give European films a better chance to compete with American ones.

American movies dominate the box office in Europe, as they do in the rest of the world. Europeans go to see dubbed American films rather than films made in their own or neighboring countries. In many regions national features account for less than ten percent of the box office. France is the exception, but even there, French films average a third of theatrical admissions.

Developing an audience is the central problem for the European film industry. While subtitled European films get marginal play in the US (less than two percent in 98), foreign distribution of dubbed American films accounts for half their revenues. Unable to pierce the American market, European films have had to rely on their own markets to survive. This is especially difficult for smaller countries, like the Benelux nations, whose national box office cannot support more than a handful of features. Like Ireland, Luxembourg has developed a system of tax shelters to lure foreign productions, like *Wing Commander* directed by Chris Roberts and shot by Thierry Arbogast.

In the long term, the survival of European cinema may well hinge on the emergence of a single European audience, rather than the appeal to the American one. To foster cross-pollination, the European Union allocates funds under the Eurimages Program which requires that a film have co-producers from three European countries. Whilst this clause has encouraged cross-border collaborations between European crews and service providers of different nationalities, it has sometimes led to " euro-pudding " productions that are forced to shoot in different countries to satisfy budgetary, rather than story, needs.

Is there such a thing as a Euro film? Not yet. There's far more difference between a Spanish film and a Swedish one, than there is, say, between a film shot in New Orleans and one made in Seattle. Manuel Pereira's*Between Your Legs* is a showcase for the new brash style of Spanish comedy. Asterix *and Obelix versus Cesar* was shot by English cinematographer Tony Pierce-Roberts, but it remains intrinsically Gallic. Roberto Benigni's brilliant fable, *Life is Beautiful*, is nothing if not Italian, while Thomas Vinterberg's powerful *The Celebration* has a Nordic chill to it. Indeed the key to European successes may well lie in continued cultural specificity. Or, as the French say, " Vive la différence ".

There are a few exceptions to this specificity, usually shot in English with a view to the American market, notably director Luc Besson's *Fifth Element* shot by Thierry Arbogast, which was a box office hit in American and Europe. Shot in English in England, and starring Bruce Willis, the film is on a par with any American action-adventure movie. Besson and Arbogast have recently teamed again to shoot a more distinctly European story, *Joan of Arc*.

On the other end of the spectrum is Dogma 95, the cry of protest against " decadent ", " bourgeois " and " cosmetic " cinema by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. The duo penned a " Vow of Chastity " (see sidebar) that is provocatively austere, if not downright puritanical. But behind all the hype is a plea for character-driven drama, and for the introduction of digital video tools in cinema.

Von Trier's stunning *Breaking the Waves* was shot by Robby Muller in 35 mm film then transfered to digital video and back to film with the aim of degrading the imagery to give it a uniquely rough texture. *The Celebration*, the compelling family drama by fellow Dogmatic Vinterberg, was shot by Anthony Dod Mantle with a consumer DV video camera, yielding a low-grade impressionistic image that works with the film's home movie theme.

What keeps coming back like a refrain when you talk to European filmmakers is the C-word, "culture". For many Europeans the struggle to keep their traditional cinemas in the face of overwhelming American domination is a matter of cultural survival. Movies are as viewed as much a part of the cultural heritage as buildings, books and paintings. This attitude is shared throughout the industry, and underlies the different visions of the world-class festivals in Cannes, Berlin and Venice. It is telling that Europe also sponsors the only two festivals devoted exclusively to the art of cinematography: Madrid Imagen in Spain and Camera Image in Torun, Poland.

The European continent offers a solid infrastructure for visiting filmmakers. There is a tradition of film crafts among local crews that stretches back to the Twenties. Of course, many foreign films come for the scenery. Europe's historical locations are a natural for period pieces and many productions traditionally seek out the beautiful sunny charm of settings in Italy, the Riviera, Spain and Portugal.

In the past ten years, many European sound stages have been renovated to suit the requirements of modern filmmaking, and there is an expertise in digital post-production that is on a par with the US. Sound stages that have recently housed major foreign features include the legendary Cine Citta in Rome, the Eclair and Arpajon studios in Paris, the Bavarian Studios in Munich, Babelsberg in Berlin, Barandov in Prague and Mafilm in Budapest.

Eastern Europe is the Wild East of European cinema. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are rapidly re-structuring industries that were held prisonner for forty years by Soviet bureaucracy and censorship. Farther to the east, contemporary Russia is sometimes downright dangerous. There are persistent rumors of productions subject to Mafia pay-offs, and one American cinematographer told us of witnessing a real-life machine-gun spraying in an elegant hotel restaurant in Saint-Petersburg; fortunately reality isn't like the movies: the gunmen quickly ran out of ammunition and fled.

Prague is perhaps the best example of Eastern Europe's comeback. The vast Barrandov studios have welcomed big films like *Mission Impossible ,The Barber of Siberia* by and, more recently, Besson's *Joan of Arc* (which also shot in the Eclair Studios in Paris). Foreign producers of features and commercials seek out Prague for its beautiful locations and its cheap labor -- increasingly offset by expensive accomodations.

Obviously, a detailed look at the variegated richness of European production is beyond the scope of this article -- it would require at least an entire issue of the *American Cinematographer* to do justice to the fifteen countries in the European Union. However to get a taste of the possible evolution of cinema in Europe, we looked at two contrasting production models in Germany and France.

Germany is the biggest television producer in Europe, while France produces the most features. Germany is highly decentralized with regional centers for production, while France has centralized production in Paris. It may well be that Germany's regional approach to filmmaking is the true model for the future of European production, and such a regionalization may evolve along production specialities. In Spain, Madrid is the traditional center for features, while many commercials are shot in Barcelona. In Italy, films have long been made in Rome, while Milan has emerged as the commercials city. Perhaps even in France, the Southern cities of Marseille and Nice may one day provide an alternative to Paris. Is Europe destined to be a nation of regions? Only time will tell.

Close-up on Germany

Germany production reflects the federal structure of its government, which breaks the country into a dozen " Laenders ", states with a great deal of autonomy in political, economic and cultural matters. Traditionally, film production has been

based in the Laender's centered around Munich, Berlin and Hamburg, which have both an established infrastructure and generous subsidies to attract film projects. Due to a recent increase in film subsidies, Cologne's Laender is the up and comer.

Wolfgang Treu is the president of the BVK, the German equivalent to the ASC. Unlike the ASC, the BVK includes camera assistants, and has an impressive membership of four hundred people, reflecting the breadth of German crews. Treu notes that many German cinematographers have gone to greener pastures in America, citing Jost Vacano, Robby Muller, Michael Ballhaus, and more recently, Walter Lindenlaub.

According to Treu, there are some fifty German features produced every year. However the small budgets mean that there is often a thin boundary between German features and television movies. "Our film industry, he adds, is amphibious, neither fish nor fowl, it's not really pure cinema, but rather half television and half film. We strive for the Hollywood look, and everyone asks us to do produce a Hollywood look. Well, go ahead and do that with one gaffer, three electricians and one grip. That's what we're up against." Despite these daunting conditions, German cinematography is distinguished by its consistently high quality.

Treu explains that most German cinematographers light and operate. He recalls a story told by fellow director of photography Jost Vacano. " Jost said that when he asked for an operator in Germany, the production answered him 'I can't afford one more person'. Then he went to America and wanted to operate as he was used to doing in Germany, but the producer told him 'I can't afford that, it will go faster if you're not doing two things at once. "

Germany may well be the biggest producer of television fiction on the continent. As in the rest of Europe, most German television is shot in Super 16mm. Treu proudly credits the BVK's lobbying with television stations for the widespread aadoption of letterboxing by German broadcasters.In addition to the Laender subsidies, television stations are also key to feature funding in Germany, as is the case in much of Europe. Indeed many television stations contribute funds to the Laender subsidies, and sit on the regional committees that green-light projects.

Treu notes that Hamburg is the center for commercials production in Germany. In addition Studio Hamburg hosts many television productions, and a few features. Letterbox, a small production company based in Hamburg illustrates the " amphibious " nature of German production, and also its newfound dynamism. Four years ago, they produced a TV movie with director Rainer Kaufman, *Talk of the Town*, that against all odds, went on to become the number one theatrical movie. The company now has a distribution deal with Warner Brothers and is releasing three features this year, including Kaufman's latest offering, a film noir entitled *The Long Hello and Short Goodbye* shot by Klaus Eichhammer.

To many Germans, Tom Tykwer's inventive and kinetic *Run, Lola, Run* photographed by Frank Griebe represents the upcoming German cinema. While previous box office successes were limited to comedy, *Lola* is an intelligent thriller, representing a new direction that has international appeal. Andreas Dresen's original episodic journey through Berlin, *Night Shapes* , shot by Andreas Hoffer was the toast this year's Berlin Film Festival. It too shows a promise of a renewal of German movies.

We asked Henrik Meyer, the young President of Letterbox, to explain the complex rules for Laender funding. "We call it the Laender effect, you have to spend 150% of the money you get in the region to support the local economy. Sometimes we have a bigger effect and we have to document that. Each subsidy is negotiated on a film by film basis. We currently have sixteen applications for subsidies, and it's a lot paper work. "

" You have three hundred page proposals, Meyer elaborates, that are xeroxed sixteen times. When we do get a subsidy, it requires very strict accounting controls. When we get money from the box office or distribution deals, we have to give the Laenders back the money pro rata at certain points in time." The new German Arts Minister, Michael Naumann, is trying to loosen the restrictions of the Laender system. He is quoted as critizing " the grotesque prerequisites " for Laender " effects ", and has called for a national forum to consider reforms.

Meyer is more matter of fact, and underlines the importance of public monies in a country whose industry needs to be self-sufficient. "The German language film market is not that big. You need a certain amount of money to finance movies that have a chance to look as good as foreign movies. At present there's no other way to finance movies than subsidies. "

To help attract foreign productions many Laenders have set up American-style film commissions. Roland Schmidt, the Film Commissioner for the Berlin-Brandenburg region states that they will sometimes go so far as to do some initial location scouting for faraway productions. Schmidt estimates between ten and fifteen features shot locally. " Here in Berlin, he adds, we have the feeling of a boom in production."

Berlin has many sound stages, including the vast Babelsburg complex, outside the city. In addition, Schmidt notes that Studio Hamburg has recently moved in to the area, buying and renovating the Adlershof stages in Berlin. " Their facility is already almost completely booked, and they are thinking of expanding. I expect them to grow quickly. " Schmidt feels that the competition between Babelsberg and Studio Hamburg will be healthy for production in the region.

The Bavarian Studios in Munich have traditionally been the center for German feature productions, and have also undergone renovations. In keeping with the increasing European nature of production, the biggest recent production at Bavaria

was the French film *Asterix and Obelix versus Cesar*. Producer Meyer explains that "most of the production companies are based in Munich and most of the directors and actors live in Munich. But recently many actors are moving to Berlin, because it's an exciting place. I think that Berlin will become a cultural center, but it will never be like Paris is in France because we have this federal system."

Schmidt explains that the Laender subsidies are set up for cultural diversity as much as for economic development. " If you sum up all the money available for movies in Germany, you could only service a handful of big American budgets. From my point of view, making big pictures is not what public money is for. It's not just a question of getting your investment back, it's also a question of cultural identity. On the one hand Laenders want to develop their own media industries. But on the other hand it's also a question of producing something for your heritage. This requires diversity and a lot of experimentation which also means cheap production. The next generation has to train with low budgets to become good filmmakers."

Will Germans make European films? Producer Meyer answers " I think there is a European film, but it has different nationalities. I don't know how or why that should change. There's a reason to admire French movies. Germans have a strange humor, so do the British but they're different also. So it's really a matter of different cultural backgrounds. "

Adds Commissioner Schmidt, " In my heart I'm a European, and I think that there is a growing awareness of European films in the German audience. People are willing to go see an Italian film once a year, a French film once a year, a British one six times a year. If this continues... "

Close-up on France

Although the United Kingdom welcomes more American productions than any other European country, France has had its share of US features. Recent American-produced films include *The Man with the Iron Mask*, directed by Randall Wallace and shot by Peter Suschitzky, John Frankenheimer's *Ronin* lit by Robert Fraisse, Roman Polanski's *The Ninth Gate* photographed by Darius Khondji and Alain Berliner's *Passion of Mind* with cinematographer Eduardo Serra.

French productions are increasingly willing to produce big budget English-language films aimed at the American audience. French major Gaumont has lead the way by bankrolling the box-office hit *The Fifth Element* and the upcoming *Joan of Arc*, both directed by Luc Besson and lit by Thierry Arbogast. This year Gaumont is producing the period piece*Vatel* directed by Roland Joffe, and starring Gerard Depardieu, Uma Therman and Tim Roth.

France produces more films than any other European country, about a hundred and fifty features in 98. The budgets are low by American standards, about half the movies are made for less than three million dollars. France's numerous films are

fueled by national subsidies funded by a tax on box office receipts, and managed by the CNC (National Center for Cinema). As elsewhere in Europe, the other key ingredient to French financing is television, with a lion's share of funding provided by pay-TV giant Canal Plus.

Four out of ten French films last year were made by first-time directors. With so many first films there are a considerable number of box office flops. The president of the AFC (the French equivalent to the ASC), Pierre William Glenn, likens the situation to research. " I'll be the first to admit that French films can be extremely boring; I've seen thirty-five films this year that stink. But, like any leading-edge industry, cinema needs research and development. The CNC guarantees such research, by enabling young people to express themselves. They won't all be lasting filmmakers, but inventive first films are a guarantee of a cinema that is truly independent with new forms of story-telling. Cinema in France is not just a product, but part of our culture"

The French proclivity for experimentation has borne its fruits in the area of cinematography. French cinematographers like Thierry Arbogast, Robert Fraisse, Darius Khondji, Philippe Rousselot and Edouardo Serra, to name a few, are sought out world-wide. The recent Cesar (the French version of the Oscar) nominations highlight the continued creativity of French cinematography. *Those Who Love Me Will Take the Train* an anamorphic film by Patrice Chereau features stunningly poetic hand-held cinematography by Eric Gautier. The surprise hit *The Dreamlife of Angels* by director Eric Zoncka, showcases the beautiful realism of cinematographer Agnes Godard. DP Laurent Dailland provides a lush elegance to Nicole Garcia's *Place Vendome*.

The major French sound stages in the Paris region are Eclair Studios, at Epinay outside Paris, and the vast complex of Arpajon, to the south of the capital. The Eclair group also includes a world-class laboratory. Eclair and other French labs LTC and GTC have been pioneers of custom processing techniques like bleach bypass and other silver retention processes. This leading French role may be due to the possibility of experimentation on small projects that could be more difficult at American larger volume facilities.

Foreign filmmakers have traditionally sought out locations on the Riviera in the South of France. The region that spans from Marseille to Nice offers beautiful and sunny natural locations, and connotations of glamor. The major sound stage is the Studio de la Victorine near Nice. Recent surprise hits from the area have put the region back in the news. Gérard Pirès hyper-kinetic action thriller *Taxi* lit by Jean-Pierre Sauvaire was one of last year's biggest grossers, while Robert Guédiguian's warm-hearted comedy *Marius and Jeannette* shot by Bernard Cavalié drew critical and popular acclaim. The city of Marseille is studying the development of a media center to attract productions.

Pascal Bécu, Marketing Director for Arpajon Studios, states succinctly that " the biggest handicaps for American productions in France are the language barrier and high social costs." Bécu estimates that there French crews imply social costs that are slightly higher than in neighboring England. Bécu adds that the future may see increasingly integrated European crews. " *Iron Mask* had a mixed French and English crew at Arpajon. ".

Paradoxically, French crews also have more experience in shooting low-budget than most. Top French cinematographers, for example, routinely alternate between big-budget features with ultra low budget art films. " French crews are used to doing more with less, opines Glenn ". He cites maverick director Philippe Garrel as an example of high quality on a low budget. Garrel's latest lyrical offering, *Night Wind,* is beautifully photographed by Caroline Champetier. Glenn goes on to assert that the French experience with tight budgets can make for more efficient filmmaking, offsetting the social cost differential.

French digital effects maestro Pitof is well placed to compare American and European costs. Pitof and his collaborators from the Duboi effects house spent months crafting the effects for *Alien Resurrection* on at the Twentieth Century Fox studio in Los Angeles. He laughingly compares this French enclave on the studio lot to the Gallic village in *Asterix and Obelix versus Cesar*. " We created a little village of Frenchmen, complete with cigarette smoking and loud techno music. "

"My dream, Pitof confesses, is to make American films in France. The American production system is wonderful, but there is a certain heavyness to it. It would be great to get a compromise between the American way and the French way. We all use the same machines and the same software. There are certain American films which would profit from French craft. They could get better quality at a cheaper cost. "

" Although France has higher social charges than America, he continues, when you look at the over-all budget, France is cheaper. When I make a parallel between *Alien Resurrection* and *The City of Lost Children*. I realize that both films had the same director, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and were based on a similar principle of creating a world, but the American budget was almost five times higher. "

The Vow of Chastity

I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGME 95:
1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).
4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera).
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
10. The director must not be credited.Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work", as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations. Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY.

Copenhagen, Monday 13 March 1995

On behalf of DOGME 95

Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg