INTRODUCTION:

Defining the 'national' of a country's cinematographic production

A glance at the holdings of any cinema library or bookshelf of texts on a specific country's cinema will reveal a predominant tendency to address the national cinema almost exclusively as those films which have been canonised by critics and historians of film. A perusal of these texts will also reveal that the term national will have been taken for granted, taken as read. However, this term cannot be assumed as unproblematic and does require examination. How does one enunciate the 'national' of a country's cinema? When is a cinema 'national'? What does possessing a national identity imply? Equally important, what constitutes a nation's cinema? To be more specific still, what is meant by a nation? Is it defined by its geography, its history, its politics? These seemingly innocent questions raise the whole problematic of addressing the issue of a national cinema, an issue that this chapter will attempt to unravel in an endeavour to chart possible ways of writing the 'national' of national cinema.[1]

Concepts of a nation

It seems necessary to try to position current debates around what a nation is, before going on to discuss ways of writing the 'national'. Most political scientists are agreed on two fundamental issues. First, that of all the political doctrines, it is the one which lacks a founding father (*sic*) and, second, that it is notoriously difficult to define despite the fact that as a term it has such common currency.[2] It has almost tautological proportions: 'it's there because it's there'. As Hugh Seton-Watson says, 'no "scientific definition" of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists' (quoted in Anderson: 1990, 13). Furthermore, it appears teleological in purpose: the idea of nation promotes the notion of nationhood (that is, the notion of belonging to a community or a collectivity) and this national solidarity, in turn, plays a vital role in maintaining social order.[3] Already it is not difficult to perceive that the concepts of nation bring it very close to myth. Indeed, Benedict Anderson puts it quite aptly when, in offering his

definition of nation, he says 'it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (1990, 15).

To understand why it is there (even though, if it is myth, there is no 'there'), we need to understand how it got there. Both Anderson and Fredric Jameson talk of cultural artefacts as part of this process. Anderson sees 'nation-ness, as well as nationalism [as] cultural artefacts of a particular kind' (1990, 13). Jameson talks of 'cultural artefacts as socially symbolic acts' (1986, 20). The political and social cultures produce a meaning to be put where there was a lack of one. This begs the question, what caused an earlier meaning to be emptied of its signification in the first place? The way in which Anderson and Anthony Birch (1989) address this question helps us to provide an answer. The concept of nation-ness and the emergence of nationalism as an ideology, in a global sense, emerged as a consequence of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution (there were antecedents in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but those faded away; by the nineteenth century no such fading occurred). There are three major reasons why this was so. If they are viewed as icons of change, the Enlightenment and Revolution generate the following causal chain or (to keep with the metaphor) triptych of meanings: arrogance, morosity, security. This triptych makes nation-ness inevitable and makes the creation of the concept of the nation-state constitute a form of counter-iconoclasm.

Early theories of the nation-state emerged, in part, in response to how France was perceived from outside. At the forefront of these onlookers were the German theoreticians who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, felt strong resentment towards the French for both cultural and military reasons. Birch (1989, 17), in speaking about Herder (the coiner of the term *Nationalismus*), makes the point that the

> Germans were governed by a multitude of petty principalities and the German educated classes were profoundly conscious of the fact that France was the dominant power in Europe, not only in the sense that it was the most populous and powerful state but also in the sense that French intellectuals were the leaders of the Enlightenment and the French upper classes were the leaders of fashion. As a German, Herder resented the French assumption that they were the leaders and bearers of a civilization that had universal validity. In opposition to this he developed the view that humanity had its roots in and derived its values from a number of national cultures, each of which had its own virtues and no one of which could rightly lay claims to universality.

The crucial term here is universal validity, which ties into the first order of the meaning of the triptych – arrogance or optimism. The principle of universalism as espoused at this time by the French was based on the

assumption of equality (but of course equality in and on their terms). To quote Birch (1989, 13) again:

> The two great political events that embodied Enlightenment ideas were the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution, and it is no accident that the French and the Americans have been the two peoples most optimistic about the power of reason to fashion human progress and most confident that their forms of civilization and their concepts of good government were suitable for export.

Universalism, although based in equality, has inherent within it political cultural empire-building. The concept of nation and nationalism becomes, therefore, a concept mobilised in relation to, and as a counteraction against, universalism. As an oppositional concept, nation is based *in* an assumption of difference (because its different-ness is its starting point) and based *upon* the assumption of difference.

The legacy of the Enlightenment and Revolution was not just one of optimism. These two moments in history also brought in their wake a feeling of profound malaise and morosity (the second part of the triptych); malaise because the Enlightenment marked the 'dusk of religious modes of thought', and morosity because the Enlightenment and Revolution destroyed the 'legitimacy of the divinely ordained . . . dynastic realm' (Anderson: 1990, 16). Religious modes of thought were symbolically put to death in the act of executing the monarch – 'he who is chosen by God'. This left a breach that had to be filled. As Anderson (1990, 19) says:

> With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning . . . few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation.

Viewed in this light, the concept of nation-ness becomes rooted in that of continuity and not, as was the case in the first instance, in difference (difference as a motivated concept against universal validity). Nation, in this second instance, becomes a secular transformation of religion and divine monarchy into a sovereign state, hence Anderson's definition of nation as limited (because it has finite boundaries) and sovereign (because the state has replaced the former artefacts).

This brings us to the third part of the triptych – security. In Anderson's definition of nation he uses the word 'imagined'. At the beginning of this

Introduction, it was argued that the concepts of nation bring it very close to myth. The point here is that nation had to be imagined to give people a secure sense of identity. It had to be imagined as the 'other' in relation to 'rule by empire-building' cultures (many nation-states subsequently showed a pronounced proclivity to become such empire-builders themselves, but this is another aspect that I do not intend to address here). In this respect, the nation becomes an imagined collectivity whose whole *raison d'être* lies in its imagined otherness.

If problems arise in defining nation, therefore, it is surely because of its imagined status. It is that which makes 'nation' such a slippery concept. As we have seen, it is alternately based on the assumption of difference, continuity and, finally, imagined otherness.

By way of drawing this section to a close, let us return to the question of the function and value of nation-ness – a consideration of which will bring into the forum of debate a term not yet addressed, ideology. In order to understand why ideology is part, but only part, of the issue of the function and value of nation-ness, it is necessary to go back to the theoreticians of the nineteenth century. Both Herder and Fichte saw language as the basis for nationhood. Fichte was quite categorical: to each separate language a separate nation (we should not forget that this was early in the nineteenth century and Germans had no nation-state at this stage). Herder was not as limited in his conceptualisation of nationhood as was Fichte. He 'believed that languages had intrinsic value as the expression of *Volk* cultures', but he also 'emphasized the emotional importance to human beings of their membership of a distinct cultural group and the desirability of basing political authority upon such groups' (Birch: 1989, 18). In the second part of his thinking he gets close to Hegel whose 'emphasis was on the virtues of the national state as a form of political organization rather than on the importance of culture' (ibid., 21). Ideology inserts itself at the interface of these two concepts (language and political organisation). Language (culture) is mobilised to signify the new political organisations that have emerged following the breakdown of traditional societies (starting with the French Revolution but culminating in the Industrial Revolution). Ideology, then, is the discourse that invests a nation with meaning and is, therefore, no less problematic than the concept of nation-ness. Since it reflects the way in which a nation is signified, ideology is as closely aligned to myth as is nation-ness.

Louis Althusser (1984, 37) makes the point that ideology is not just a case of a controlling few imposing an interpretation of the nation upon the subjects of the state but that, in ideology, the subjects also represent to themselves 'their relation to those conditions of existence that is represented to them there'. In other words, they make ideology have meaning by colluding with and acting according to it. Why this consensuality? Because of the reassuring nature of national identity. As Birch (1989, 221)

says, the nation-state gives 'people a secure sense of identity, status and (usually) pride'. The state is *their* state, the governing body is *their* indigenous governing body, not some foreign ruler's (and so on). They look at it and see themselves in it, and it is precisely this narcissism that keeps them within it. But, as the myth of Narcissus reminds us, this mirror effect has a double edge for it implies both the individuation of the subject (within the state) and the sacrifice of the self (to the state).

It seems appropriate to end our discussion, in broad terms, of the concepts of nation here. It will be useful to retain, from this section, the essential notions of nation as myth and nation as difference and continuity as well as the notion of the enunciative role of ideology. They will serve as a useful framework and reference points in what follows.

Concepts of a national cinema

The nineteenth century was the age of nationalism. Since then, first European states and subsequently other countries have 'ideologised themselves into nations'.[4] It seems more than appropriate that cinema was born in that age of nationalism, but it must be added that it was also born at a time that was the age of the *fin-de-siècle* (because the birth was towards the end of the previous century, 1895). Two very distinct modalities and mentalities emerge, therefore, the first reflecting the rapid ascendancy in national individualism, the second the decadence and ruin mobilised by the implicit narcissism of such a nationalism. A product born at the interface of these two moments, cinema becomes inscribed (metaphorically at least) with the juxtapositional traces of ascendancy and decline on the one hand, and on the other, of nationalism and narcissism both associated with that time. This was also an age that saw the 'birth' of psychoanalysis – of concern for the psyche (with all the resonances in that word of the mirror image and individual identity which, as has already been stated, are resonances of nation-ness as well). It is significant too that in France, almost as soon as cinema was born, books were being written entitled *L'Histoire du cinéma*. By the early 1900s, film theory was already an arena of debate (as the sixth art and then the seventh) and, by the 1920s, calls were being made for a truly national cinema as a defence against American hegemony, all of which (in the implicit concern for the well-being of cinema) points to a historicism and narcissism of sorts. We have just entered a new millennium, but we are still affected by our own twentieth-century *fin-de-siècle* in that a whole series of questions in relation to national identity are being raised, especially in Europe and in post-colonialist countries – countries that are seeking a nationalism, something other than that which prevailed before.

In the writing of a national cinema there are two fundamental yet crucial axes of reflection to be considered. First, how is the national enunciated?

In other words, what are the texts and what meanings do they mobilise? And, second, how to enunciate the national? That is, what typologies must be traced into a cartography of the national? Or, expressed more simply, what is there, what does it mean and how do we write its meaning?

Let us start with the first axis of reflection. Essentially, with regard to the cinema as a 'national' institution, there are three modes of enunciation; the films themselves, the written discourses that surround them and, finally, the archival institutes in which they are housed (cinémathèques and distributors' vaults) and displayed (cinémathèques, ciné-clubs and cinema theatres). This triad in turn generates the question of which cinema we are addressing, for there is not just one cinema, but several. Here the concern is not simply with art and popular cinemas' cultural production, but with mainstream and peripheral cinemas, with *the* cinema and the cinemas – that is – with regard to *the* cinema, that which is at the centre of the nation. This shifts according to which particular nation is being referred to because the concept of a nation's cinema will change according to a nation's ideology. Thus, it could be capital culture or official culture that is at the centre of the hegemony (for example, in America it is capital/Hollywood culture that is at the centre; in the former Communist countries it was the official culture). Furthermore this cinema of the centre changes in its identity depending on who is canonising it as central. Mainstream, popular cinema is one that is canonised in distribution catalogues, fanzines, the press, on television etc. Non-mainstream and avant-garde is canonised in the annals of film institutes or in critical writings. There are, of course, other cinemas still (be they censured, proscribed or cult cinemas) and also the cinema of others (the voices from the margins).

Thus, in relation to the films themselves, the first line of enquiry becomes: which films should constitute the corpus of a 'national' cinema? French cinema, with an average official production of 100-plus feature films per year since the advent of sound (prior to that time there were very many more), could seem a daunting prospect for examination. However, co-productions have had an impact on this figure, a factor that will be explored more fully in Chapter 1. Clearly, popular cinema production – in its true proportion to the other cinemas – informs the corpus to be researched as do consumption practices. This assertion already raises an initial problematic. Since much of the early popular cinema is inaccessible (it has disappeared either literally through nitrate dissolution or figuratively into impenetrable archives) and no detailed statistics were kept in France until the mid 1930s, other sources (such as contemporaneous accounts, scholarly researched texts on audience venues and exhibition practices, etc.) have to serve as partial guidelines for establishing what constituted France's national cinema in the first third of its history. Already we are at one remove from the text itself and into a secondary, at times tertiary enunciation of the original document. It is at this juncture that imprecision risks slipping in.

This point brings us to the second mode of enunciation, that of the written discourses. Many discourses surround a nation's cinema. But which cinemas do they mobilise and which do they leave unspoken? Where France is concerned, and in very general terms, there are three discursive modalities that re-present the cinema as institution – a triumvirate composed of historical, critical and state discourses. Historical documentation includes histories of the indigenous cinema, pamphlets published by unions and other sectors representing the industry and memoirs of industrialists (such as Pathé). The critical discourses range from film criticism to film theory. Finally, state discourses include such texts as ministerial decrees, documentation on state intervention, publications emanating from the *Centre national de la cinématographie* (CNC) and official statistics on all aspects of cinematic praxis. Although state discourses might appear to be a closed text and of little interpretative value, in that they record legislative measures and provide figures, their impact on cinematic production and style has been and still is quite considerable.

All three written discourse modalities, therefore, have served to shape the nation's cinema history and to cause things to happen to films (e.g., critical discourses can elevate the popular to the high art or, alternatively, to cult status). It would seem likely that the first two categories of discourses would be most instrumental in identifying the nature of the national cinema. But in privileging a certain type of cinema, these discourses have not been spared the problematics of historicism. Thus, in its concentration either on directors (following the auteurist approach) or on specific movements (e.g., the New Wave), so far the representation of France's national cinema has suffered from too narrow a focus and inconsistencies in terms of the approaches adopted. Invariably, too, this representation has overwhelmingly been the province of high art rather than popular culture.[5] Yet, France has produced a substantial body of films of both social and aesthetic value and high audience appeal that has been largely overlooked and inadequately represented by existing works. Whereas the emphasis on auteurs or movements is often justified in terms of the excellence of the works concerned, what is lacking is their proper historical contextualisation within wider cultural considerations.

The third mode of enunciation of a national cinema, archival institutions (in the form of national archival institutes) create, albeit differently, similar problems since in their role as conservators of the culture, they also act as monuments to cinema. More crucially still, unlike the more mainstream distribution companies for whom films can have a critically and cynically short shelf-life, they serve to inform and preserve the perception of the nation's cinema. Although it is clear that they perform a vital function in keeping the cultural heritage 'alive' (i.e., it is there, preserved), nonetheless they simultaneously act as agents of petrification of that heritage (i.e., this is it, this *is* the heritage). This then generates a further set of problems

because the question now becomes, which films are in a fit state to be screened? Which ones have been privileged over others that are 'waiting to be restored'? Preservation of the culture means, therefore, that a mausoleumification takes place that mobilises a specified construction of the cultural. As Sean Cubitt (1989, 3) points out, when discussing the function of museums in general, they 'ossify history into tradition' and 'mobilise the myth of the fixity of cultural capital'.

Already, with this first axis of reflection on how the national is enunciated, it is clear that the three modes of representation, as outlined above, articulate at the denotative (i.e., this is it) and connotative (i.e., these are the various readings/cultural reflections 'it' gives of the nation) levels of the sign to the point where national cinema becomes myth. Turning now to the second axis of reflection, how to enunciate the national, I shall consider how cinema itself contributes to the construction of the concept of the nation and, thereby, to the myth of the 'national' in national cinema.

Traditionally the 'national' of a cinema is defined in terms of its difference from other cinemas of other nations, primarily in terms of its difference from the cinema of the United States (i.e., Hollywood). This juxtapositional way of establishing the 'national' of a cinema runs the risk of being too reductionist, but that does not mean that it is a definition that should be rejected, for it must be recognised that every national cinema, especially in the West, will be defined in relation to that very specific other, Hollywood cinema, given the latter's dominance in the field from 1914 onwards. However, there are other forces that push a country towards a definition of its cinema as different and distinct. It is often the case that appeals for a 'real national cinema' are launched in reaction to international pressures (political and economic), as will be illustrated in later chapters.

Difference, then, is a first way of enunciating the national but, because of its limitations, it has to be seen in the light of other equally important considerations. One way of resolving how to enunciate the 'national' would be to talk about national cinema in terms of typologies or in terms of what Dick Hebdige might call a cartography of the national.[6]

Notionally, but without being exhaustive, there are seven discernible typologies that will assist in the enunciation of the 'national' of a cinema. Although the way in which the 'national' can be enunciated (i.e., through using these typologies) may remain constant, clearly what the term national signifies will change according to social, economic and political mutations and pressures. Since they will thread their way through the overall text and thereby receive further elucidation, these typologies will be elaborated upon here only briefly by way of explanation and definition. It is, however, important to make the point that, while these typologies will work, by and large, for some national cinemas, they will not for others. The seven typologies are as follows:

1 narratives;
2 genres;
3 codes and conventions;
4 gesturality and morphology;
5 the star as sign;
6 cinema of the centre and cinema of the periphery;
7 cinema as the mobiliser of the nation's myths and of the myth of the nation.

Narratives

In a very useful study on national fictions, Graeme Turner, basing his approach in part on the work of Propp and Lévi-Strauss, makes the point that a country's narratives are produced by the indigenous culture and that these narratives serve a reflexive role in that a culture uses them in order to understand its own signification – in other words, 'narrative [is] a culture's way of making sense of itself' (1986, 18).[7] Summarising Lévi-Strauss's line of argument, he goes on to state that the narrative form probably serves the same function in all cultures, but that the specificity of its articulation is determined by the particular culture.

It is in its specificity, therefore, that a filmic narrative can be perceived as a reflection of the nation. This reflexivity can occur in two ways (at least), neither one of which excludes the other. First, the filmic narrative can be based on a literary adaptation of an indigenous text. In this respect, reflexivity operates by virtue of a reinscription of one existing cultural artefact into a filmic text. In this mode, the film, in transposing an indigenous text, offers up a double nation-narration, the text it refers to and its own filmic text. Literature (narration one) is on screen (narration two) confirming the natural heritage (the nation). This would explain why some literary adaptations simply do not work when removed from their indigenous culture – the narrative's specificity is too strong. The filmic text, therefore, offers (albeit in a different medium) a reflection of that nation. In France's case, this is a particularly crucial point since, in the history of its cinema, literary adaptation has been its mainstay to the degree that it is perceived as the major tradition of its classical-narrative cinema (one thinks immediately of the numerous adaptations of Zola's novels, but there are countless others).

In the second instance, the film can confront the spectator with an explicit or implicit textual construction of the nation.[8] Explicit films are those which set out to signify the nation, however problematic that notion is (because they appear to reinforce dominant myths). For example, Gance's *Napoléon* is less about the military campaigner than it is Gance's own vision of Napoleon, *Napoléon, vu par Abel Gance*. Similarly, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* seems to address the birth of America, yet it is, in fact, more about the stretching of studio and cinematic practices than it is about a

'truthful' rendition of how America was born. Nonetheless, these films construct moments in a nation's history and become (intentionally or not) propagandist in their narratives. Implicit films are closer to a myth-construction of a nation (as opposed to myth-reinforcement) since their narratives function on a more connotative level. The nation is implicitly present and in this respect this category of films can be either propagandist in their narrative or subversive (two films made during the Occupation period, Stelli's *Le Voile bleu* and Grémillon's *Le Ciel est à vous* are good illustrations of the former and Godard's films of the 1960s, *Weekend* or *La Chinoise*, of the latter). I shall return to this question of narrative and the construction of a nation in the last section of this Introduction, but it is clear that the two types of reflexivity described above will mobilise, within a national cinema, certain genres and formalistic tendencies and privilege certain codes and conventions and modes of production over others.

Genres

Grand epics, with one or two big exceptions (e.g., Gance's *Napoléon*), are not France's style. There are filmic modalities which are specific to a particular nation and in France's case the first dominant generic mode in the history of its cinema (with the exception of the the First World War period and the Occupation) is the comedy film which goes back to its earliest cinema and often makes up half of the industry's output. After that certainty, genres are less reliable in their popularity and staying power. Thus the very popular melodrama – also known as the psychological drama film – of the silent cinema and the 1930s has dropped from its second place and equally dropped its more melodramatic connotations. Now its form is a psychological/intimist film which is less perceivable as a genre because it slips over so many (i.e., thrillers, adventure, historical reconstruction, etc.). At present the second most popular genre is the *polar* (the cop and/or thriller genre), which has many antecedents (French and American). What is least evident, apart from epics, is the adventure film, to say nothing of the western. These three genres having been relinquished to the Americans. It is also true that there are universal genres that become specified, amplified, even subverted, within a particular culture. A prime example for France is the *polar* film which, in the 1950s, quite radically changed its look and more readily referred to (but not necessarily imitated) the American genre. What mobilises this specificity is, of course, indigenous praxis, that is to say the codes and conventions of cinematic production in its widest sense and the gesturality and morphology of the nation's acting class.

Codes and conventions

It is important here to think in terms of both the mode of production and the iconography of the image. A product, emanating from the French film

industry, will remain 'intrinsically' French from the point of view of labour and production practices. Legislation and union practices will affect the product just as much as the traditions of production. On this last point, what springs immediately to mind are the French production traditions of artisanal films, films made by working as a team (on the theatre principle), and small- and medium-budget films. However, these are not the only traditions. There are periods when big-budget films are in favour, usually to counter American dominance, as was the case in the mid 1920s with the modern studio spectacular. Again, in the 1980s, this tendency was once more in vogue, albeit on a more moderate scale, but only in terms of actual output, not in terms of cost. Production practices tended to favour one or two 'blockbuster' films per year to draw in not just the regular consumers but also the once- or twice-a-year cinema-goers (top French films of the mid 1980s onwards make instructive reading, starting in 1986 with Berri's *Jean de Florette*, Rappeneau's *L'Ours*, in 1988, Besson's *Le Grand bleu*, in 1989 – only one medium-budget production made it during this period, *Le Grand chemin*, in 1987, and ended up in third place). This tendency re-surfaced again in the mid 1990s with films like *Germinal* (Berri, 1993), *Lucie Aubrac* (Berri, 1997) and of course Besson's spectacular *Le Cinquième élément* (1997). Then there is the thorny problem of co-productions, which raises, more fulsomely than any other type of production, questions of ownership (if it is more than 50 per cent financed by the French, if the film-maker is French, if the cast is mostly French, etc., is it a French product?). This difficult issue will be addressed in Chapter 1. However, because co-productions have figured heavily at times in France's output (the 1920s, mid to late 1950s and early 1970s especially) and because nowadays co-productions are not just limited to the international field but can receive direct investment from television channels (French and otherwise), it is unlikely that the issue of how to address them will be resolved. For the moment it is useful to bear in mind, first, that a nation does have several production practices and, second, that modes of production do raise questions of ownership.

With regard to the iconography of the image, there are two questions to be addressed. How does the representation of the nation (through the image) carve up and/or construct the nation? And what problematics does this representation engender? In other words, what is represented and what is left out? Who or what remains un-visible? As can be seen, the iconography of the image generates a series of binary paradigms of which the very first is absence/presence. The effect of this precise duopoly is to make possible a homogenised and conciliatory myth of the national context. Thus, for example, in the 1930s French cinema, the working class is represented in specific locations, many of which, however, by this time would no longer have existed (or would have been very peripheral). The music-hall, the café concert and even the *guinguette* were all part of the working-class's topos that had their heyday at the turn of the century but which, ironically, by the

1930s were dying out thanks to the new attractions of silent cinema and, later, of sound cinema (Ory: 1989, 22). But the conciliatory myth is in place: 'that is where the working class goes for entertainment [play].' All national cinemas, therefore, are affected by this same problematic of hegemonic transparence, but in each instance the iconographic codes and conventions remain specific to the cultural patrimony.

Gesturality and morphology

Maurice Chevalier, Fernandel and Jean Gabin have more in common than Jean Gabin and John Wayne. Such a statement could affront. A rephrasing might make the point less brutally. What separates Arletty, Simone Signoret and Brigitte Bardot on the one hand from Bette Davis, Joan Crawford or Susan Hayward on the other? The answer? The gesturality and the morphology of the body. Gestures, words, intonations, attitudes, postures – all of these separate them, thus affirming the plurality of the cultures. Indeed, it could be argued that the gestural codes, even more so than the narrative codes, are deeply rooted in a nation's culture.[9] Thus, when analysing the nation's cinema, traditions of performance must also be brought into consideration as a further marker of this differentiation and specificity.[10]

The star as sign

Sign of the indigenous cultural codes, institutional metonymy and site of the class war in its national specificity, the signification of the star 'naturally' changes according to the social, economic and political environment. Thus the Gabin of the 1930s will become, first, the Belmondo of the 1960s and, then, the Depardieu of the 1980s – three very different types of 'proletarian' heroes. In addition, the spectators impose on the stars their own expectations: the stars are the mediators between the real and the imaginary. If one just considers the area of female sexuality over the last 50 years, one can perceive how there is transference and mutation. Thus the femino-masculine eroticism of the 1930s (e.g., Arletty) is replaced by the female-in-her-own right eroticism of the 1950s (e.g., Simone Signoret). This positive image is first supplanted by the 'naturalistic, almost primal' infantillo-innocent eroticism of the late 1950s and early 1960s (e.g., Brigitte Bardot), but then is later complemented by the independent, sophisticated and sexually free woman of the New Wave (e.g., Jeanne Moreau). The image changes yet again to become the unruly sexuality of the 1970s (e.g., Miou-Miou) and then evolves into the cool, reserved, almost inopportune eroticism of the 1980s (e.g., Sandrine Bonnaire). Finally, it turns into the perturbed and unstable sexuality of the 1990s and the present time (e.g., Béatrice Dalle). These seven moments correspond, first, to the different stages in the representation/reification of the French woman's sexuality and, second, to

1 The star as a national signifier

Jean Gabin

Fernandel

John Wayne

Arletty

Simone Signoret

Bardot

Joan Crawford

Susan Hayward

the social, political and economic conditions that prevailed in each of those epochs (it is noteworthy that the so-called sexual liberty of the French youth in the 1960s and 1970s – in evidence in the cinema of that time – no longer has the same resonances of joy and innocence today).

Cinema of the centre and cinema of the periphery

Guy Gauthier has written very helpfully about this issue, which is the sixth typology on this cartography of the 'national'.[11] In his analysis he sets up a hierarchy of these two cinemas, which are not always necessarily antagonistic, but between which there is considerable slippage. There are three main antagons within this hierarchy that cannot be fixed entirely in a decreasing order. These antagons are as follows:

- the centre Hollywood/United States and the indigenous cinema that is peripheral in relation to the epicentre *par excellence* that Hollywood/United States represents;
- the homogeneity of equipment and, conversely, the heterodoxy of the production which is peripheral by virtue of its gestural and narrational specificities;
- the central indigenous cinema and the artisanal cinema and auteur cinema which is peripheral.

These antagons require further explanation. The first is an evident one. America/Hollywood is the epicentre because it is the leading exporter of films and because all other cinemas define their difference in relation to this dominant cinematic culture against which they cannot compete either on the economic or on the production level. The curious thing is that as one progresses 'down' the ladder, that which was on the periphery eventually becomes central. On the first rung, Hollywood is the centre, and all other national cinemas are peripheral. On the second, standardised equipment and its homogenising effect on cinema represent the centre – the global effect of uniformalised technology causing cinema to normalise its production. This first happened in the late 1920s with the advent of sound and then again, more specifically, in the 1950s with a greater standardisation of the cinematic technology. However, cinema does not just standardise. Cinema also particularises. The technology may be uniform, but national specificities will emerge, through editing style for example, or in the way a narrative is narrated. The peripheral production practices, therefore, operate outside of technology. On the third rung, what was originally peripheral (indigenous cinema) now becomes central for the following reasons. Since the indigenous industry, in this instance the French cinema industry, cannot compete with that in the United States, it tends (with the exception of periods when it participated heavily in co-productions, i.e., the

1920s and the mid 1950s to the early 1970s) to invest in what constitutes, in relation to Hollywood, the periphery. The peripheral (i.e., the home product) becomes central thanks to this investment. However, because the industry knows how difficult it is to export (especially to the United States), it produces films for the indigenous market only. This immobilism in production practices (producing for a safe home market), which the Hollywood ascendancy imposes, leads to an unwitting complicity on the part of the industry in the construction of a national cinema. This cinema is made by those who are at the centre of the culture starting with the major production and distribution companies.

These are not the only bodies that currently control the 'look' of France's cinema. This centre now includes television channels, which, although they invest in films, nonetheless perceive these films' ultimate destination as the television screen. This particular cinema of the centre has a textual formation that is inevitably homogeneous (e.g., safety in repeating the same formula, using the same director etc.). In this respect, cinema normalises and functions very similarly to the centre on the second rung (i.e., the homogenisation of the product through standardised equipment). Nor, by this logic, does the peripheral cinema on this third rung escape the centre. This cinema, which is financed by independent producers or by the film-makers themselves, is made by those who are outside the culture of the centre. However, this cinema's praxis, be it avant-garde, artisanal or auteur, can be co-opted, normalised by the cinema of the centre, as the case of films by Beineix, Besson and Carax demonstrates. Indeed, were we to continue with this hierarchy, the next antagon would probably place this cinema of the periphery in the centre and at the periphery would lie regional cinema. This antagon would in turn generate a further one where regional cinema would become the centre and Beur and Black cinemas the periphery, and so on.

This typology helps to make the point that there is no single cinema that is *the* national cinema, but several. It thereby puts an end to the dangers of historicism that identify a national cinema with specific movements or directors and suggests, rather, that there is flux, slippage even, between the various cinemas which constitute the nation's cinema. This typology also suggests that discourses around a national cinema no longer need address cinema in an exclusive way such as, for example, defining it as the work of pioneers alone or as an ideological institution. These are some of the discourses, but they are just some among others.

Cinema as the mobiliser of the nation's myths and the myth of the nation

It was stated at the beginning of this Introduction that the nineteenth century was the age of nationalism and that as a product born at the interface of these two moments, cinema was inscribed with the juxtapositional traces

of ascendancy and decline, nationalism and narcissism associated with that time. Similarities were identified between the moment of its birth and our own moment of *fin-de-siècle* with its forging of new national identities.

Since the history of cinema coincides with this hundred-year span, it invites the following question: to what extent and how does cinema reflect the texture of society on a national level? It follows from the previous section that the cinemas that make up a national cinema will reflect both from within and from without (centre and periphery). Reflecting from within the centre of the culture, cinema becomes auto-reflexive, revealing the narcissistic trace of its heritage. Reflecting from without, cinema becomes individuated – an individuated reflection of, and even upon, the nation. In the first instance, cinema normalises, in the latter it particularises. In its normalising process it shows its state of decline, in its particularising it reveals its ascendant role. Filmic narration, calls upon the available discourses and myths of its own culture. It is evident that these cultural, nationalistic myths are not pure and simple reflections of history, but a transformation of history. Thus, they work to construct a specific way of perceiving the nation. Cinema, whether it is of the centre or the periphery, is no exception to this nation-construction (both address the nation, however distinctly) and the question becomes, what myths does a national cinema put in place and what are the consequences?

Without being too reductionist, the first point to be made is that the cinemas of the centre and the periphery will re-present the myths in radically opposite ways. The former in its reconstruction will provide, in the main, hegemonic transparence. The latter will challenge, even deconstruct, that transparence and hegemony. In any event, given that cinema is an industry and therefore an affair of capital, it is obvious that the cinema of the centre will dominate the other in its myth-making practices (if only from the point of view of the pure volume of production) and there is little to suggest that this dynamic will change. However, although there will always be a preponderance of the centre over the periphery, nonetheless, there is within that dynamic a degree of unfixity. Take, for example, moments in a nation's history when the nationalistic character of a society is valorised and, as a result, the more nationalistic discourses become areas occupied by motivated interests that are seeking to centre themselves within the culture. In these periods it is evident that the peripheral will be forced out beyond the peripheral margins themselves (if not censored completely). In this respect, the prime, though not unique, example for France would be the cinema during the Vichy period. Film scenarios that were consonant with the new triumvirate of the National Revolution of '*famille, patrie, travail*', which Pétain, as leader of the *Etat Français* (as Vichy France was then known), insisted upon to create national unity in a new moral order – or at least scenarios that appeared not to challenge these values – were easily allowed through censorship and were produced and distributed.

A national cinema, then, is historically fluctuating.[12] But it is simultaneously constructing a historicity of the nation in that it is reconstructing myths already mobilised by the nation as they are inscribed in the indigenous culture. Thus, although this textualisation of the nation reinforces the popular myth of cultural specificity (and, thereby, of difference), that specificity will necessarily change over the course of history. It will change because the signification of the term 'national' changes according to political, social and economic pressures and mutations, just as the state of the nation changes in time according to its position in the world.

The intention behind this outline of the seven typologies was to chart possible ways of enunciating the national of a cinema. Before embarking on the actual journey of writing it, the relationship between the French state and culture must be addressed. Ever since the Revolution, the French state has had a cultural policy that has evolved along three essential lines: the state as protector of the national heritage (e.g., putting it in museums), the state as its patron (e.g., providing aid and passing laws to protect the indigenous culture) and the state as facilitator of equal access to that heritage (through education and dissemination of the cultural product). Protector and patron of its culture, the French state perceives the role of culture as a unifying one, as being the buttress of the nation's moral unity. For the state, the products of its culture are both a sign of the health of the nation and an exportable commodity that serves the renown of the nation. Within the French nation, therefore, there is a mutuality between state and culture of long standing.[13] It is for this reason that cinema, when in crisis, turns to the state and demands support. After all, President de Gaulle consecrated cinema when he created the Ministry of Culture (with André Malraux as its first minister) and placed cinema alongside the fine arts. The advantages of this support notwithstanding, this reliance upon the state is not without its drawbacks, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.