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A 'space to imagine': Frenchness and the pleasures and labours of art cinema in the English regions

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ABSTRACT

This article explores focus group responses to Mia Hansen-Løve's *Things to Come* (2016). The focus groups were conducted across four English regions in Autumn 2018, and drew participants from a range of social, cultural and economic backgrounds. The responses reveal some of the ways in which audiences in the English regions form and make meaning around particular kinds of textual and contextual experiences of cinemagoing and consumption. In particular, the article aims to develop our understanding of contemporary art cinema to take account of the ways in which audiences identify and respond to a film clip which captures the particular textual characteristics associated with the mode. Our research finds that for many, the pleasures of art cinema are contingent on participation within related, elite social and cultural practices, whereas for others, art cinema conventions operate as sites of labour and exclusion. The responses also reveal some of the ways in which narratives of nationhood are constructed in relation to art cinema. The methodological approach of the research, drawing on film elicitation, indicates ways in which traditional models of textual analysis might be enriched by more pluralised accounts of the relationships between form and meaning.

KEYWORDS

Art Cinema; Mia hansen-løve; Focus Groups; 'Cinematic Frenchness'

Introduction

This article emerges from a three-year investigation into the way audiences of specialised film in four regions in England (The North East, The North West, Yorkshire and The Humber, and the South West) form and operate.¹ The project has analysed multiple datasets, including those drawn from policy documents, focus groups with audience members, interviews, and large-scale surveys, to investigate multiple patterns of consumption of and engagement with films outside of the mainstream. Our work here is centered around the findings from a particular strand of the project, which draws on interactions with focus groups to understand how individuals from a range of backgrounds interpret the kinds of films that are shown in independent cinemas. The methods we deployed in these groups drew on and developed approaches to photo elicitation (e.g. Harper 2002; Kolb 2008) and film elicitation (Kolb 2008), with clips used as stimulus for participants' discussion of the interpretive resources that they drew

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upon to engage with the films. Frequently, participants deployed analytical insights from their own particular contexts, reflecting on their working lives, memories of emotionally significant moments, and reminiscences of encounters with people and places, in the process providing rich accounts of how the nuances of lived experience shape, give meaning to and interact with the consumption of particular filmic narratives.

We ran 16 focus groups across the regions, with around six members per group. We showed eight film clips spread across the two sets of groups, with the groups split into two blocks – thus eight groups saw one set of four clips, and eight groups saw a different set. We selected a mixture of foreign language and British films that had been screened at independent cinemas in the two years preceding the focus groups, with many of the titles being selected because they had been explicitly referenced in our other datasets.² Groups were shown the clips and asked in broad terms for their general thoughts and feelings on the films, before the facilitator followed up with more specific questions relating to their responses. The groups that will be the concern of this article took place in a range of locations: a farmhouse in the rural South West, a cinema in an art gallery in the urban North East, a community arts venue in the urban North West, an independent cinema in a Yorkshire city, an independent cinema in the urban South West, and a community arts venue in the rural North East. Our participants came from a range of backgrounds: a mixture of ages, graduates and non-graduates, a mixture of ethnic and national backgrounds, and an even gender split. They had differing levels of engagement with specialised cinema, with a spectrum ranging from those who were regular visitors to independent cinemas and actively engaged with film culture, to those who rarely if ever attended the cinema. The participants were recruited using snowball sampling, and via a range of informal and formal networks, and were given a £20 voucher for attending the two hour focus group.

As a mode of audience research, film elicitation privileges the participants as active social subjects, who offer interpretations that draw on their own biographies, experiences, education, political views and emotions (Livingstone 2019). Such research can be positioned within the wider field of empirical media audience and reception studies (see for example, Barker and Mathijs 2007; Di Giovanni and Gambier 2018). As a method, film-elicitation builds on a focus group format, where five or six participants discuss a specific topic guided by a facilitator. Rather than following a structured set of questions or focusing on a single topic, film-elicitation asks participants to discuss their responses to different elements of a film clip immediately after watching. The film clips are the central focal point for the group's collective discussion, but this builds on their individual interpretations of the clip. For group film-elicitation, drawing out the subjectivities of each participant's account is central, consensus is not the goal of the discussions, divergent responses are treated as equally valid to provide insights into participants' different interpretative resources. The focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and coded thematically to develop a set of frequent and significant themes within the responses that we have drawn upon here (Forrest et al. 2020). In this article, we have provided each focus group participant, where quoted, with a pseudonym to retain their anonymity. The four films in the focus groups this article is based on were (in the order in which they were shown to participants): *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016), *Things to Come* (Mia Hansen-Løve, 2016), *Call Me By Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017) and *Dark River* (Clio Barnard, 2018). Prior to screening each clip

the facilitator gave a synopsis to contextualise the scene. While we draw centrally on the focus groups' engagement with the extract from *Things to Come* in this article, this was screened following the discussion of the *I, Daniel Blake* extract and therefore some participants drew on the first film as a comparator in their discussion of the *Things to Come* extract.

In the case of *Things to Come* the majority of participants had not seen the full film, nor were they familiar with it or Mia Hansen-Løve and her other work, this was in contrast to *I, Daniel Blake*, a film that a number of participants had an existing relationship with. *Things to Come* was released in the UK with public funding support (from a BFI distribution fund) by Curzon Artificial Eye simultaneously in UK cinemas and online in September 2016 (BBFC 2020). It played for two weeks in regional independent cinemas in our areas of study such as Watershed in Bristol (in the South West), HOME in Manchester (in the North West) and Showroom in Sheffield (in Yorkshire and The Humber). In total, UK admissions were 32,931, and it was the 184th ranked UK box office title of 2016 (European Audiovisual Observatory 2020; Box Office Mojo 2020). Relative to population size, UK admissions were the sixth lowest in Europe (only higher than the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Turkey), like many French and non-English language films, *Things to Come* did not reach a large audience in the UK (European Audiovisual Observatory 2020).

The dialogue in *Things to Come* is predominantly in French, although small parts of the dialogue in the clip shown were also in German and English and the clip was subtitled. French language films in general do not receive large audiences in the UK where almost all non-English language films are screened with subtitles rather than being dubbed as may be the case in the other European countries. Despite the number of non-English language films released in the UK, subtitles are not always something UK audiences are comfortable or familiar with (see Kilborn 1993; Dwyer 2017). The perception that UK audiences do not like subtitled non-English language films, and the dominance of US films in the UK market, has historically limited UK audiences' access to and engagement with non-English language films (Kilborn 1993; BFI 2011). As we will see, engaging with subtitles, both positively and negatively, is a defining element of art cinema experience for UK audiences, something that also relates to the limited opportunity many have to see such films. In 2016, the same year *Things to Come* was released, on average, non-English language films were released across only 21 different cinema sites nationally. There were still a significant number of non-English language films released that year, (368) making up 45% of all films released, but these contributed to only 2.4% of the UK box office. 40 of these releases were French language films, but they accounted for only 0.1% of total UK box office, although French was by far the most common European language film released in the UK in 2016 (BFI 2017). The small UK box office for French language film reflects the status of non-English language film in the UK more generally and points to a number of possible social, cultural and distribution issues in addition to subtitles that mean such films reach only a relatively exclusive audience. One aspect we look at in particular is how audience expectations - in terms of levels of interpretation and enjoyment that French film and art cinema more generally are perceived to offer - shape their engagement with such films.

Things to Come concerns Nathalie Chazeaux (Isabelle Huppert), a middle-aged Philosophy Professor who is at a crossroads in life – her marriage has ended, her mother

has died, and her professional life is increasingly unfulfilled. Shorn of her familial responsibilities, she takes a break from her life in Paris to stay with a former student, Fabien (Roman Kolinka) who is living with a group of friends in a commune. Our clip begins with Nathalie being picked up by Fabien at the train station, they drive to the commune through a spectacular landscape while Fabien smokes and listens to Woody Guthrie's 'Ship in the Sky', once there the pair have dinner with Fabien's friends, there are philosophical discussions conducted in multiple languages, and Nathalie loses and then finds her cat, Pandora (brought to the commune in a box). The clip ends with Natalie walking through some woods to the top of the hill, with a wide shot of her surveying the landscape. The clip is, therefore, a distillation of the film's key thematic concerns and its formal qualities: its causally loose foregrounding of quotidian processes and practices, its conspicuous assertion of external space as enabling symbolic reflection, its representation of a protagonist who is undergoing a change in her life, and its deployment of philosophy as a resource with which to negotiate and contextualise Nathalie's predicament. It also operates as a self-contained narrative within the wider film, beginning with Nathalie's arrival, her journey to the commune, the dinner, the loss of Pandora, the discovery of Pandora, and a concluding moment of reflection on the hill. Rather than being presented as a decontextualized fragment, the clip was therefore carefully selected to enable our participants to discern an authentic sense of the director's style and the film's particular qualities. Analysing audience responses to the clip, therefore, helps us to build a more polyphonous understanding of the affective impacts of Hansen-Løve's filmmaking, as these signature features are interpreted and engaged with by our participants in the course of the discussion.

More broadly, given the particular textual and thematic features of *Things to Come* and the contexts in which it circulates and is understood, this mode of analysis also opens up rich possibilities for deepening our understanding of the ways in which perceptions of film art and by extension 'Frenchness' – as a byword for particular kinds of mutually reinforcing narratives of nationhood and cinematic culture – are constructed by a range of audiences. The film itself, like many of Hansen-Løve's works, might be seen to consciously provoke a range of interpretive responses in its audience without offering conclusive and satisfying conclusions – as we will see, this willful ambiguity was both a form of intense frustration and pleasure for our diverse participants, depending on a range of factors. These textual features, however, were frequently marked as specific to French cinema and more broadly an 'other', art cinema distinct from mainstream cinematic practices, with our audiences' interpretive resources being deployed in response to and framed by their own particular and preconceived relationships with France and Europe. In analysing these narratives, then, we can make some claims about the ways in which particular textual features operate to reflect and in some cases enable audiences' understandings of their own and other national cultures in and through cinema.

Hansen-Løve's films can be united by their attention to a foregrounding of quotidian routine and a concurrent emphasis on moments of existential doubt, reflection and transition, most commonly centred on female protagonists, negotiating what Handyside (2019, 6) calls 'the problem of female freedom in a society in which women are legal, social and economic equals to men, but still framed within gendered terms' – *Things to Come* is no exception. In both her formal and thematic preoccupations,

Hansen-Løve can be seen to consciously deny the instrumentalism of more conventional film narratives and to encourage in her audiences experiences of doubt, contemplation, and in some cases frustration and boredom, as she puts it: ‘making films is about questions, not about the answers. Most of the time, there is no happy end to my films [...]’ (Hansen-Løve in Poglajen 2016). The emphasis on ambiguity as an invitation to question is married to the aforementioned focus on everyday detail, in that Hansen-Løve’s films take time to foreground the routines and daily experiences of their characters in ways which actively loosen and detract from the deployment of significant narrative information, as Handyside (2015, 5) argues: ‘Considerable attention is paid to dead time: the films are marked by everyday events (food preparation, reading, hanging out, walking), ellipsis, dedramatisation and stillness.’ Our own clip exemplifies these elements; while it closes with a spectacular shot of Nathalie surveying the landscape in a manner which suggests a symbolic articulation of her transitional life stage, the scenes before are filled with directionless conversation and the depiction of domestic tasks. Thus, the clip distills Hansen-Løve’s thematic emphasis on ‘rupture and autonomy’ (Wilson 2012, 277) in its depiction of Nathalie, while maintaining an overarching sense of ‘realism’ born from a ‘muted’ focus on the ‘everyday’ – what Handyside (2019, 7) calls an approach to ‘showing, not telling’.

In sharing the clip with our participants, then, we are in a position to gain some understanding of how Hansen-Løve’s methods are received by a range of audiences, and yet we wish to argue that this method – used in conjunction with this particular film and filmmaker – might also generate insights into how audiences engage with a broader ‘type’ of filmmaking and cultural activity. As Handyside (2015, 2) argues, Hansen-Løve’s films need to be understood as ‘contemporary auteur cinema outside of the Anglophone mainstream, where the pressures to contain contradiction via narrative are attenuated through a cultural form more associated with narrative ambiguity and authorial expressivity’, thus her films can be seen as reflective of contemporary art cinema, both in terms of the audiences they attract and through their textual features. Although basing his analysis on films directed by men in the post-war period, David Bordwell’s (1979) work on art cinema is useful here in that it points to the recurring formal and narrative features that might be seen to connect Hansen-Løve’s films to an established and widely understood tradition, associated with an attendant set of reading strategies. Bordwell (1979, 57) notes the art film’s emphasis on ‘realism and authorial expressivity’, its thematic preoccupation with ‘contemporary alienation’, the ways in which characters ‘lack defined desires and goals’, features which we have already noted as central to Hansen-Løve’s style and particularly to our extract from *Things to Come*. Bordwell’s arguments about art cinema centre its status as the inverse of classical Hollywood narration and, as we will see, a similar positioning of *Things to Come* (and films like it) as operating in opposition to mainstream cinematic conventions was conspicuously identified by many of our participants. While the rigidity of Bordwell’s convention has been thoughtfully critiqued by scholars such as Andrews (2013) and Galt and Schoonover (2010), Hoyle and Newland’s recent work (2019:12) has continued to assert that despite its evident malleability, art cinema is still understood as possessing discernible stylistic qualities, noting a ‘modernist, drifting, episodic approach to storytelling’, while Angela Ndalians (2007, 83) similarly emphasises its ‘aimless protagonists’ and ‘open-ended structure’. As Bordwell (1979, 58) puts it, the ‘drifting, episodic quality’ to the art film’s narrative’ places it in opposition to

more commercially oriented text, where '[t]he Hollywood protagonist speeds directly toward the target' while 'lacking a goal, the art-film character slides passively from one situation to another', suggesting that '[t]he art cinema is less concerned with action than reaction; it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their cause.' So, when Hansen-Løve notes that 'making films is about questions, not about the answers', she speaks not only *of* her work but *for* the art cinema (Hansen-Løve in Poglajen 2016).

The art cinema then operates as a means of denoting and correlating trends between a range of textual features, but also as a means of understanding the contextual position of particular kinds of films with national and transnational cultures and economic systems. As Steve Neale (1981, 35) argues, historically art films' conscious distanciation from Hollywood modes of representation and storytelling see them 'participate actively and systematically in the construction and reconstruction of particular national identities'. As a filmic product the art film, therefore, asserts its difference in apparently culturally specific ways which might be distinguished from the globalising homogeneity of more mainstream fare. This is not to ignore the existence of more French films that operate within popular genres and attract large audiences – indeed, in Britain in the last decade there have been some commercially successful 'mainstream' subtitled French films – but to acknowledge that the circulation of European films within British markets continues to be largely defined by a mainstream-arthouse binary (see Jones 2016). This mode of differentiation can also be seen to operate at the level of branding and commerce, whereby national products circulate porously within transnational markets and within the festival circuit 'achieving exposure and artistic validation through their status as "Art"', a status which 'is confirmed and re-stated through the existence of prizes and awards, themselves neatly balancing the criteria of artistic merit and commercial potential' (Neale 1981, 35). Art cinema thus operates as a textual convention, as a mechanism for hierarchization, circulation, and consecration (Heise and Tudor 2007), as we will see, as a kind of lifestyle brand, which enables the performance of a particular mode of cultural capital, and as a means of marking a national culture, particularly for foreign audiences. To return to *Things to Come*, thinking of the film *as* art cinema can be here seen to function as a marker of the film's global status as other to Hollywood, as a platform for venerating the auteur credentials and signatures of its director, and as a means for inscribing a particular set of narratives about nationhood, in this case, a sense of 'cinematic frenchness'. As Ginette Vincendeau (2011, 340) argues, despite the 'geopolitical drive towards globalization', this 'resides in a multitude of criteria:

the auteur, the stars, iconic individuals (Chanel), the deployment of landscapes and in particular the city of Paris. More intangibly cinematic Frenchness is also located in links with history ('French revolutions') and in vague notions of French ways of life ('all things French') and of the French character ('Gallic swagger'), notably associated with romantic seduction and intellectualism. [...] these parameters are repeatedly used by critics, producing a potent sense of familiarity. More concretely, cinematic Frenchness is also located in types and sources of narratives and modes of narration ('lack of action'), in formal patterns and in sets of genres or sub-genres ('films of bourgeois life').

Almost all of these criteria were deployed by our participants to frame their positive, negative, and ambivalent positions on the film, indicating the pervasiveness of a particular narrative of French cinema. In analysing our responses, then, we might uncover new ways of both reading the film and of understanding how and why particular

audiences engage with the kinds of French films that circulate in Britain (and art films, more broadly), and more specifically how they respond to and themselves construct narratives of Frenchness in and through these cinematic experiences.

Art cinema and the ‘invitation to think’

In one of our groups in the urban North West it became clear that the film’s textual qualities were being conceptualised through the interrelated layers of nationhood and genre that we have already sketched out. For example, for Mark, the viewing of the clip prompted the reflection that a French film makes us ‘work harder to get involved in the film and to get the most out of it; you generally have to sort of think about it a lot more’, thus French films here are associated with the expectation of a particular kind of interpretative labour. Mark’s comments point to the features we have already discussed around the film’s ambiguities and its drifting episode qualities, features which, shorn of immediate narrative value, work to provoke more active modes of engagement. In the same group Maria, went further:

I liked the slowness, I liked to see, I can go with films where there’s not a lot being said but there’s just imagery and I love subtitles. They just make me engage so much, you know,

Maria’s point about subtitles positions them both as a marker of national (and cinematic) differentiation and as a defining element of the art cinema experience in that they are bound up in a discourse of interpretative labour which demands and then sustains a more concerted mode of engagement and a particular kind of cinematic pleasure. For Maria, this extends to the interpretative space generated by the ‘landscapes’ whereby ambiguity is more empowering than the typically instrumental devices of mainstream cinema. As Nancy put it in the same group, the non-prescriptive and sustained nature of the ‘imagery’ signalled an ‘invitation to think’.

What emerges in many of the responses, then, is a fulsome awareness of the kinds of reading strategies that art cinema films invite, with frequent references to the agency enabled by more opaque elements of form and style. Thus, Hansen-Løve’s desire to provoke questions and her willingness to foreground quotidian practices without recourse to the delivery of narrative were elements that many participants actively identified and embraced, as Catrina in a Yorkshire city made clear:

I really liked it, because I quite like those sort of films that are just about one person’s life which may seem almost mundane but actually you’re just following one character’s development. I’m not so much into big action films, it’s more of like a character study, isn’t it? So I really liked that element of it and how I felt like it wasn’t necessarily – not everything she was doing had to have a purpose and not everything she was saying had to be fundamental to the plot.

Catrina’s response is illuminating not only for its illustration of the pleasures of art cinema and realism in distinction to more directional modes of storytelling, but also for the ways in which she connects the film’s ‘cinematic Frenchness’ to her own life experiences. The use of interpretive resources drawn from a direct experience of French culture is something we will return to, but for now it is worth noting that Catrina indicates the ways in which the engagement with such narratives is apparently

heightened and authenticated by a first-hand knowledge of and therefore complicity in the world depicted on screen.

In the urban North East, we saw an even more pronounced identification of and willing participation within the affective strategies of art cinema. Here, Kevin conveys both the mode's generic traits and its marks of distinction from Hollywood cinema:

Yeah, in an arthouse film, this will sound a bit clichéd and it's a big generalisation, there's always lots of scenery, there's always lots of moments where you don't think that that actually has any relevance to the plot, they're all stopping saying something that will maybe come together or will have a meaning at the end. [...] it makes you think, you have to work at it rather than a sort of American film that almost spoon-feeds you the plot and you've already got it before, and then they have to repeat it again because you might be too thick to have not got it in the first place!

[...]

Yeah, there's more work involved in watching the film, with your brain!

The non-instrumental and purposefully opaque emphasis on landscape in *Things to Come* prompts Kevin to reflect on the way such features are common in their prior experience of the art film and that such features provide further evidence of the ways in which these films demand of their viewers a kind of labour which is *not* required in the seemingly vapid experience of Hollywood cinema. The emphasis on 'work' and the invitation to thought are again common features of our participants' analysis of the text and of the broader cultural activity and attendant consumption strategies of a particular kind of cinematic experience. In the same focus group, Kieran remarked on a similar invitation to interpret and work through meaning as a consequence of the film's loose aesthetic strategies, noting that 'Foreign films' give 'more time to read [...] and take in literal foreign concepts'. What was emerging here, then, was a sense in which the multiple possible interpretations enabled by looser and more ambiguous characteristics were liberating for many of our participants. In the same group Luke described how it was 'nice to have the space' to ask questions within the film, and that the seemingly directionless nature of the dialogue enabled his 'mind to go off in a certain way ... I enjoy that kind of thinking'. Once more, then, the art film is framed in terms of providing its viewers with the *freedom* to think. Tellingly, Stefano in the urban South West contrasted *Things to Come* favourably against *I, Daniel Blake* because unlike the British film, he found a sense of interpretive agency in and through the film's form:

And I think for instance this kind of thing, movie, makes me more relaxed, more feeling than the movie before because it creates for me the situation where I can imagine my idea. Before it was a very block in the expectation. This gives me a new way to think.

'I used to work in mountains like that, nobody around you': The Poetics of Landscape

Given the clip's conspicuous presentation of an arresting and symbolically loaded landscape – visible particularly at its opening and closing and clearly intended to provide a means of reflecting on Nathalie's place in the world – it was clear that for many of our participants, this 'space to imagine' was enabled by the film's assertive but never prescriptive sense of place. In urban Yorkshire, Annie described what she saw as the film's emphasis on Nathalie's 'newfound sense of freedom' which for her 'seemed to be reflected in the landscapes and in the other characters that are in the place, the other students but also, from a personal point of view', she then paused, 'how do I mean this?'

The facilitator then interjected, referring back to an earlier point where Annie had expressed an empathetic affinity with Nathalie, that she felt like she ‘would enjoy making this journey with this woman who’s had so many changes in her life’: ‘you’re admiring the characters’ freedom but also there’s something which is evoked in yourself as well, a kind of sensibility and idea of feeling it?’, Annie, almost overwhelmed, replied: ‘That, yes!’

The film’s indeterminacy – a feature we have noted already as being consciously understood as intrinsic to its generic and national cultural conventions – is presented here as offering a space to inhabit and enter into a relationship of exchange with one’s own narratives.

In the urban Northwest, this sense of the landscape as a porous entity was felt keenly by Luka:

I’m originally from Slovenia which is Central Europe and the film reminded me of the landscape and the places that I used to visit when I was younger, when I still lived there. So it kind of brought back loads of memories but then on the other hand, I think her life is changing quite a lot and I think my life at the moment is going through some changes and I would enjoy to go somewhere and just live with some strangers and enjoy the warm weather and just get drunk. So for me it was like I was reflecting on things but also thinking what I can do to change my life I guess.

As we will go on to see, a number of our participants interpreted the landscape as a marker of nationhood which in turn provided a platform to interrogate or perform narratives of Frenchness in relation to their own national identities, but Luka, as a Slovenian living in Northern England, is unencumbered by such binary associations, as he articulates a more fluid, interactive and empathetic relationship with the location and the character. In a similar fashion, in the urban South West, Ahmet, like Luka felt ‘closer’ to *Things to Come* than to the avowedly British *I, Daniel Blake*:

I find it more relaxed. I find it closer to me as well. I’m from Turkey, I’m not English, and seen that I have lived in similar environments, [...] in those days she’s not putting seat belts on, we used to do that same like nobody has to wear seatbelts and we used to smoke and they keep sharing cigarette Marlborough, this was very popular. But I never had a chance to be in that environment where she’s going in, sort of hippy or they are trying to achieve something by themselves. I’ve been in that scenario, like when I used to work in construction I used to work in mountains like that, nobody around you, you just sit and eat but you turn somewhere, middle of nowhere, and it’s your workplace. So those type of things I found it quite relaxing and I enjoyed watching it.

The landscapes of France unlock for Ahmet a reflection on his own experience of similar landscapes at home – here the representation, generation and reception of place narratives are again porous – the film’s looseness and Ahmet’s own separation from reductive narratives of nation and genre, creates the conditions for a foray into personal memory. Neither Ahmet nor Luka were asked directly about the depiction of place in the film – it was the element that they, like so many of our participants, identified as a primary point of engagement; the subject they wanted to talk about and to position as a platform for their own reflections.³ This interactive exchange of place narratives from text to viewer, viewer to text makes concrete the film’s qualities as a resource for empathy – which in turn enables both men to reflect on their own lives. Thus, these narratives of place do not simply stir nostalgic or purely retrospective responses; they instead draw upon memory

and experience to create the conditions for more progressive, imaginative, and nuanced responses in the present tense.

'Somewhere different, that is real': Engaged Escapism

What was becoming apparent, then, was that for a number of our participants, engagement with *Things to Come* was deepened by a prior experience of locations and scenarios which were analogous to those depicted in the film. With this in mind, while David described the film in terms of its offering of an escape, it is one that is understood as tangible and therefore conditional on prior experience:

I like watching any film that's anywhere, especially abroad because it makes me think, oh I'd like to go there, and I imagine the smells and there was a lot of sound in that, at the end I don't know if it was flies or bees or lots of buzzing going on, so it feels like I'm in there.

[...]

even starting at the beginning when they were in the car and smoking in the car, not that I like cigarette smoke but you know, imagining that and it felt relaxed and then I guess it was a sense of the air moving and all the different colours and eating outside, all those things that you sort of think, oh that sounds very nice to be doing that.

This sensory and immersive engagement with the film is predicated by its realist aesthetic but more broadly by a sense that the fictional world that is portrayed on the screen is plausible for the viewer; that they can imagine themselves in the situation that is depicted.

In urban Yorkshire, this concept was developed by Catrina, who bridged her awareness of the film's status as art cinema – in line with our previous discussion of the concept – alongside her own, lived experience of the milieu represented on screen:

It made me feel really nostalgic, because I used to live in France and I think, although it can come across quite clichéd, in my experience it wasn't really clichéd, the whole smoking as you're driving along the road, sitting outside for dinner, drinking a bottle of wine. I really liked it.

The film's sense of 'cinematic Frenchness' is thus connected to the authenticating framework of Catrina's lived experience of Frenchness, with no distinction offered between these two entities – again, then, art cinema form was facilitating a rich appeal to its audience's own narratives of place.

In the same city, Craig's reaction to the scenario was similarly understood through his own sense of its viability in relation to his own life experience:

I thought I'd never find myself saying that. But yeah, in terms of when I read a book or I listen to a podcast or watch cycling or something like that it's because I want to have that kind of imagery about somewhere different, that is real.

[...]

Yeah, yeah. I could drive that Peugeot or whatever it was. I could smoke a cigarette, I could stay in a villa like that. Yeah, it's something that I'd probably like to do, but I wouldn't want to sit around – I was going to say a big table discussing things!

Craig's desire to seek out forms of imagery in his cultural experiences that are 'different but real' seems to summarise the ways in which the films might be seen as offering imagined forms of travel whereby the everyday lives, interests, and experiences of audiences are actively engaged as interpretive resources as they process and engage

with these texts. This is a mode of escapism that is here – considering our participants’ geographical contexts – particularly discernible in the contemporary European film, and one which is conditional to and situated within the plausible parameters many of our European viewers’ own imaginations and lived experiences. Such interpretations suggest that experiences of travel and of cultural mobility are forms of capital which enable engagement with the art cinema experience. For example, in the urban North East, in response to some negative and dismissive readings from his fellow focus group participants, Luke defended the film on the basis of its proximity to his own life: ‘It’s interesting, being last, listening to everyone else’s views because it makes me think about, [the fact that] I myself am looking for kind of communal living, that’s something that I’m interested in, outside of the UK in Europe, so I actually liked that, I noticed people from all over, French, Germany, and they were speaking together.’ Luke’s appetite for the kind of communal experience and attendant intercultural, transnational politics represented in the film is reinforced by the tangible memory of a recent trip abroad:

[...] I’ve had a similar experience. Actually I was thinking, when I saw her pulling up in the train, I feel like I recognised the train station because I was in France this year and it looks like it’s on the borders of Switzerland, I don’t know where they filmed it, and I was in a commune-type situation myself and a lot of people were from different backgrounds and they’re looking at coming to live outside of a city, in more of a communal space.

‘I think you’d have to be a particular person to want to watch a film like this’: Art cinema as a site of exclusion

What seems remote and unrealistic to some is deeply familiar to others, and underlines the extent to which engagement with such texts is necessarily dependent on interpretive resources drawn from lived experience – when largely British audiences respond to European films, then, divergences in life experience become more conspicuous. For example, Ray, in the rural North East, a retired man with experience of film and travel, is able to use the film as a site to assert a particular kind of cultural capital:

[...] on the conversation round the table I thought it was strikingly European, well in France when you have France Culture on the radio, you have the [...], the intellectuals talking to each other in this very stylised manner. Academics are half-crazed, a lot of them, so that sitting round a table banging on in three different languages, and especially when it got onto philosophy turning to German! I thought that was all very well done, and also it wasn’t in real time so a thought would start and then somebody would interrupt and I thought that all seemed very real. We spend quite a lot of time in the Pyrenees, so there’s holiday houses and that sort of atmosphere, it’s sort of half-built ruins, very familiar. The other thing I’ve noticed quite a bit in French films recently, because when we’re in France we try to go to the cinema and pathetically attempt to understand the films without any subtitles, which my wife gets a lot more of them than I do, but it’s been noticeable in a number of French films I’ve listened to recently that they like to use English language songs in the musical soundtrack, whether that’s a sort of fad or something I don’t know, but there’s a lot of that. It’s somewhere in the Midi because the accents are very Southern French and the landscape’s great.

Ray’s praise for the film is based on his positive opinion of its realism, a quality which is authenticated through repeated narratives that reveal the layers of his own cultural capital: his knowledge of French cinema, his experience of travel to the country, and his awareness of its intellectual cultures and traditions. Ray actively takes pleasure in the

film's 'cinematic Frenchness' (2011, 340), to return to Vincendeau's phrase, and underlines the extent to which investment in this cultural brand is dependent on inescapably exclusive interpretive resources: the freedom to travel, the freedom to immerse oneself in cultures separate from one's own, familiarity with the codes and tropes of French cinema.

Films such as *Things to Come* can therefore unknowingly be co-opted into the performance of a particular kind of privilege. Similarly, In the urban North West, Robert identified the film as indicative of other French films that he had seen and thus his reading of the film invites an acknowledgment of his own cultural literacy:

so many French films seem to have this scene where everybody sits around the table having lunch or dinner and starts talking and philosophising about whatever the film's talking about. I would say 90% of French films have that in, from experience. [...] That scene alone would certainly make me want to go and see the film, yes.

Robert's pleasure in the film is thus at least partially derived from his awareness of the text's generic codes – which gives him an opportunity to qualify his assertion with reference to this knowledge – and their accompanying cultural cachets. The perceived markers of the film's status as French art cinema – in this case the willingness to find space for seemingly aimless philosophical discussion – are enough to convince Robert that the film is for him. And yet, as we found in a rural area of the South West with limited access to independent cinema, such features were sites of exclusion. For example, Margaret, referring to the same scene, was immediately put off:

It's not something I would be interested to go and see. Just the storyline doesn't appeal to me at all, it's not the subtitles, I can handle the subtitles, that's fine. It's just I didn't find it interesting! [laughs]"

Facilitator: Can you give me some examples of what was boring about it?

Margaret: I think some of the stuff they were discussing, because it comes up on the subtitles it's hard to grasp that quickly what they're talking about and then, if you don't grasp what they're talking about, you kind of lose interest!

While Margaret found the storyline unappealing, she was not put off by the subtitles, although she acknowledges the potential of these to be a barrier to engaging with the subject matter. Remember that Maria in the urban North West specifically cited subtitles as an appealing feature of the film and of films like this, and Ray described how he and his wife would try to watch French films *without* subtitles as a challenge to improve their language skills – clearly, then, this immediate marker of a film's foreignness and of its status as art cinema is a key dividing line in audiences' relationships with films of this nature, as Vincendeau argues: 'whether one watches a foreign film in subtitled or dubbed form is a highly significant indicator of cultural capital' (2011, 351) and thus the very appearance of the text on the screen carries significant weight, signifying both a practical barrier to engagement, and acting as a more insidious symbol of cultural gatekeeping suggestive of other markers of exclusion, as Sarah in the same group continues:

'Again, the story's not fast enough.'

Facilitator: 'Let's talk about the slowness of it then. Give us some examples of when it's just dragging?'

Sarah: 'It just feels a bit pedestrian and a bit ... I go to the cinema or watch films to just switch off and be somewhere else for an hour and a half, and this just feels a bit too real, really.'

Facilitator: 'Do you feel like there's a point to the slowness, or is the director just slowing it down because that's what they do or that's trying to help them tell the story?'

Sarah: 'Possibly, but I think you'd have to be a particular person to want to watch a film like this.'

There is much to reflect on here. Firstly, there is a powerful assertion that the kind of interpretative labour demanded by art cinema – the 'invitation to think' lauded by some of our other participants – is simply not desirable for many audiences. Realism, the feeling of proximity to and familiarity with the depicted narrative, is positioned here as a barrier rather than an enabler to engagement – the cinema should be a site of escape from everyday life, not an extension of it. Moreover, Sarah identifies what Bordwell terms the art film's 'drifting' quality – its conscious slowness – as not only a point of exclusion but as a generic marker which is associated with a particular kind of person (or audience). These cultural dividing lines between people who like one form of cinema and *others* are felt deeply throughout responses to the film and operate at the level of national (French and British) and cultural (people who like these films, and people who don't) differentiation. Mary continues the point, describing *Things to Come* as 'a very narrow appeal film', a level of narrowness which is, for her, a conscious element of the film's Frenchness:

it's almost like a general sort of French thing that I'm not sure they want to build the characters, I don't think they care whether there's a character there or not, I think it's just a ... I'm not saying trying to be alternative, but I think it's just that, I'm not sure the director is trying to achieve anything with the characters,

[...]

I think it's just like there's a group of characters there and it's a kind of story but it's sort of very loose, very slow, typical almost like a French thing that ponders along.

The pronoun 'they' is a further indication of the ways in which the film's textual features are bound up in a narrative of national identity which is understood and ascribed through difference, as 'the narratives and modes of narration ("lack of action")' and 'formal patterns' and 'sets of genres or sub-genres ("films of bourgeois life")', that Vincendeau identifies as markers of cinematic Frenchness are here revealed to more comprehensively account for totalising narratives of French otherness. As Mary goes on:

Yeah, I think French films tend to be like that, don't they? They tend to be a bit oddball like that, they tend to enjoy that kind of film, don't they? Because most of the French films I've ever seen are kind of like that sort of style, aren't they?

Here, film style and genre, audience, and national character are presented as indistinguishable components of a closed narrative of Frenchness. Nationhood is understood through the opaque genre codes of the art film – Teresa calls *Things to Come* 'a typical French film', where one 'could admire all the scenery and everything but there was no plot and no real story, so it was very difficult to make anything that was meaningful out of it.' What is evident here is the ways in which art cinema texts such as *Things to Come* can

be seen clearly to operate as mechanisms for making sense of and reinforcing particular conceptions of national identity – both one's own and those of a perceived other.

While these responses stand in marked contrast to the more positive narratives of the film that we have already discussed, it is unfair to suggest that the film was dismissed on account of the social and geographical composition of the group, specifically their lack of access to physical spaces of independent cinema consumption and their collective preference for more commercially oriented narratives. For many participants in urban locations the film was dismissed through the similarly intertwined accounts of 'Frenchness', with *I, Daniel Blake* – the film we discussed directly before the clip – evoked in contrast and, therefore, as a symbol of Britishness fortified by its difference to *Things to Come*. Realism is shown here to be fiercely relational, as Charlotte, suggests:

I don't feel like I'm so connected like with the characters in 'Daniel Blake'. I don't know whether that's just because of the situations that they're in? It feels like she's not having such a terrible time whereas in 'Daniel Blake' it feels so unjust that you just feel quite impassioned about it, whereas for her it's like, okay she's had this all happening, which many people can, but she's just rolling with it and it doesn't seem too bad, so you think, mm, see what happens. [laughs]

She has little time for the bourgeois troubles of Nathalie, because of the severity of Daniel's plight, one which is much closer to home (both geographically and politically) – this is a narrative to which Charlotte is 'connected' through bonds of 'familiarity and recognition' (Hallam and Marshment 2000, 125) which are harder to identify in *Things to Come*. In the same group, Peter, is similarly nonplussed – 'does it ever rain there?' he asks, revealing an implicit comparison with the Britain represented by Loach; and a more real, and more worthy use of cinema:

Beautiful countryside, beautiful people and when they were having their philosophical discussion I thought, it must be nice to have the time and money to do that, because most people don't. So again, I'm not relating to life in the city where I am.

These responses also point to the nuances and malleability of art cinema. While Ken Loach and British realist traditions can and should be seen as operating as institutionally and textually within art cinema discourses (see Hoyle and Newland 2019), it is clear that for some of our participants, these culturally proximate and politically unambiguous forms of realism offered a more palatable strain.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to show the way audiences in regional England engage with French cinema by constructing narratives of 'Frenchness' through their interrelation of conceptions of national identity and the genre of art cinema. We have argued that, as an illustrative art cinema text, Hansen-Løve's, *Things to Come* operated for our audiences as a means of relating to and reinforcing their conceptions of French cultural identity.

The audiences' interpretive engagement with the film was shaped by their own particular and preconceived relationships with the landscape, culture and identity of France and Europe more generally. This was mirrored in the interpretive resources that audiences drew upon in terms of their knowledge and experience of European and French cinema – qualified as a similarly preconceived set of distinctions from the

mainstream cinematic conventions that British audiences are familiar with in terms of the textual qualities of narrative, structure, style, pace and language. In analysing these elements, we have shown how particular textual features operate to facilitate audiences' understandings of different national cultures through cinema, including relational conceptions of their own national cinema.

Hansen-Løve's film actively counters conventional directional modes of film narrative by privileging symbolic and non-prescriptive elements, offered for audiences to contemplate in often indeterminate ways. The opacity of her approach was viewed in opposition by our audiences as either providing a valuable space to think – as giving a pleasurable sense of interpretive agency to the viewer – or a source of irritation and disengagement with the text. The sense of a subtle and potentially ambiguous narrative in *Things to Come* was also highlighted by participants as attributable to art cinema more generally, an approach that was liberating for some, while alienating to others. Hansen-Løve's willful performance of art cinema convention was universally identified by our participants for its difference in both cultural and sensory terms to the homogeneity and familiarity of mainstream film.

Notes

1. Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project: AH/P005780/1 – 'Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised films in English regions'. The term 'specialised film' is used by the British Film Institute (BFI) to define non-mainstream films including documentaries, foreign language films and re-releases of archive and classic film (see BFI 2018).
2. Ethical approval granted to the project by the Newcastle University Research Ethics Review in 2017 under reference: BH161701
3. While it could be argued that the engagement with location was a consequence of viewers' unfamiliarity with the film, it should be noted the particular scene has been noted for its conspicuous and arresting use of landscape (see Stables 2016) and that stills from the sequence were used extensively in press materials to accompany the film's release.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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