

Audience Engagement with Foreign to English Language Film, Othering, and Interpretative frameworks

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Abstract

Drawing on data from sixteen film elicitation focus groups and fifty interviews collected for the AHRC-funded project 'Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised film in English regions' (UKRI, 2017), this paper focuses on the interpretative frameworks employed by audiences when they engage with foreign to English films. It will argue that language constitutes a lens of interpretation which is embedded in meaning making processes. Non-English language (and specifically, Russian, French, and Italian) prompts already established assumptions in the process of sense making (Forrest & Merrington, 2021b); while invoking a sense of distance and boundaries between the self and what is being viewed. Language is embedded in processes of Othering which often precede the experience of viewing and engaging fully with a film; while content and image often contribute further to constructions of Otherness, familiarity, and difference. Yet, interpretations are embedded in an interactive nexus between the self, personal experience, and representation. They are active and reflexive processes despite carrying assumptions (Livingstone, 2007; 2013).

Keywords: Othering, language, difference, audiences, film interpretation

Introduction

This paper explores how audiences interpret world/foreign to English specialised¹ film drawing on data from sixteen Film Elicitation groups and fifty interviews collected as part of the AHRC funded Beyond the Multiplex Project (BtM)². In this paper, I build on recent research by the BtM project on the ways in which audiences participate in film culture, engage and connect with film in time (life course). Further, I focus on the interpretative resources they employ in their interaction with non-mainstream film (see also Wessels et al, 2023; Forrest and Merrington, (2021a,b). In other words, this paper is part of a wider aim of understanding audiences and how “films feature in their personal and social lives” (Wessels et al, 2023, p. 3). My analysis draws on datasets shaped by a coherent epistemology that focuses on the meaning of film, its connection to lived experience and the interpretative resources which enable audiences to form through active interpretations (Livingstone 2007;2013).

Specifically, I argue that languages other than English feature in audience interpretations of difference, in processes of Othering and distancing, which are also embedded in the knowing of the film origin through language. I demonstrate that film language informs how audience members make choices about what to watch or reject, and how subtitling can attract or discourage audiences from viewing a film. For some audience segments subtitles are a significant barrier to accessing film altogether while they are often taken to signify arthouse productions (Forrest and Merrington, 2021b). Furthermore, I argue that the language spoken, and the origin of the film become a lens through which audience members understand film content and direction, often attributing these to national cinema tropes (ibid) and signifiers of the culture of the Other. What is more, content and image become entangled in these interpretations reinforcing processes of Othering. My argument draws on approaches to audience engagement with film as an active process (Livingstone, 2007;2013). Part of that active process of sense making is anchored in the self and personal experience as well as assumptions and existing ideas about the self and the Other.

Context and challenge

There is a breadth of theoretical and empirical work discussing the role of media representations of the Other and its consequences on audience perception and attitudes towards different cultures and peoples. The aforementioned work points to the issue of stereotypical discriminatory representations that lead to racist attitudes towards specific

¹ The term Foreign to English or world film is used here to depart from established definitions of foreign film as a stand-alone genre, as it will be also explained further in the paper.

² Hereafter, BtM.

communities. This set of theories, which I will discuss below, focus on race, racial difference and Othering which is configured and embedded in the processes of production and audience reception.

The representation of the racialized Other is one key focus of media studies in this field. Hall (1997) discusses how race and cultures are represented in film - especially Hollywood, among other cultural products - including characteristics of these depictions and negotiations such as, negative portrayals of people of colour and stereotyping. Hall (1980, p.118) argues that part of this representation is a discursive process, one that involves language as a signifier and as a signified/message. This process, which he formulates into his encoding-decoding schema, on the one hand takes the form of production relations, namely the technical infrastructure and knowledge that are embedded into the message broadcast; and on the other, the structures of meaning, knowledge, and technical set up that enable the decoding (ibid, p. 119). In this process, Hall identifies the discursive and visual signs which communicate meaning existing in social relations and interactions that extend beyond the frames of language which then the encoder and decoder negotiate through language.

Hall (1997, p. 245) discusses the 'racialised regime of representation' as a set of ideological constructs and stereotypes that are represented through image and narrative tropes (see also Hall, 1995) to establish difference. However, Park et.al (2006, p.171) discuss how such constructs and stereotypes may be a useful way to communicate recognisable characters which are also seen as having an essence of truth by the represented minorities, especially in comedy. This is to say, stereotypes may be useful representations in the context of comedy as they function as tokens of actual characters. However, Park et.al (2006,) also argue that these approaches tend to naturalize racial differences rather than contest them.

This process of Othering is also present in TV more widely. Tukachinsky et.al (2015; 2017) link audience attitudes to race and ethnicity to prime television representations across twenty years of American television, highlighting the long-term effects in audience reception of, and engagement with, broadcast material. Further, the consequences of these representations in everyday life are documented by Manatu (2003) and Shaheen, (2000). Martins and Harrison (2012) highlight that stereotyping and racial misrepresentation gradually result in distorted views of minority groups and hostile or negative attitudes. What is more, negative stereotyping of languages and processes of Othering through non-English language have been discussed by Shohat & Stam (1994), Lippi-Green (1997) and Berg (2002). Language, utterings, and tropes in media outputs become a means of Othering, evoking difference, and unfamiliarity, generating ridicule and negative assumptions. Kilborn (1993) discussed in detail the debates of the 1990s on making film and TV accessible in Britain as well as the rest of Europe, highlighting how one's own language dictated policy and approaches to world film and TV. What is more, the prevalence of English across a significant proportion of film production affects how audiences engage with world cultural outputs and hence with film.

These approaches discuss how assumptions, ideologies and constructs of difference are embedded in the production of mainstream film and TV outputs and are less concerned

with specialised film. What is more, they focus on wider processes of audience reception and less on audiences' agency and interpretative capacities despite opening up some avenues for the conceptualisation of audiences as active and engaged. More recently, media research (including BtM work, see Wessels et.al, 2023) has highlighted that audiences are defined as a process of active formation. Audiences are historically seen as active in how they watch film (e.g., in terms of place and time) as well as in their interpretations (Barker, 2012). Livingstone (2007; 2013) expands this definition through an exploration of the diversity of audiences, their social relations and their individual nature that is reflected in the media they consume. Indeed, the idea of active audiences especially in what concerns interpretation is central to the present exploration of processes of Othering through meaning making and language.

Biltreyst and Meers (2018) offer a comprehensive overview of theoretical approaches to film audiences and associated studies focusing specifically on meaning making, experience, and interpretive practices as formed within the historical and intertextual relations embedded in audience engagement with film. Christie's (2012) edited volume on audiences highlights the multiplicity of viewing practices and consumption patterns of film, and how these may shape our understanding of film audiences. Christie's essay in that volume, discusses how audiences form around specific films that are placed within a national culture in the UK. This is a particularly significant frame to reflect how national culture may constitute a lens of interpretation in audience engagement with film, as we shall see below.

Similarly, BtM asked questions about how audiences form and engage with film based on their lived experience, the cultural and material resources they have and their sense of place (see Wessels et.al., 2023). This discussion focused particularly on both the provision and reception of non-mainstream film through a multidimensional approach setting the project in the forefront of research on specialised film in the UK. As a result of this approach, audiences are defined as multidimensional processes of formation which are linked to structural (provision, exhibition, programming), interactional, experiential, and consumption-based aspects of viewing and engaging with film. Furthermore, these different aspects provide the basis for the distinctive types of audiences formed through their active interaction with film (see also the Introduction and Wessels, in this special issue). In other words, this process manifests through the specific relations audiences develop with film and viewing experiences as well as the multiple ways in which they interact with film within these experiences (Wessels, 2022, p.7)

Specifically, as Wessels. et.al (2023) show, audiences negotiate the meaning of the textual aspects of films through their lived experience, namely through their connection to the place or the landscape represented. They also employ their knowledge about a certain place or practice, affinities to landscape and ways of living in the place represented to make sense of specialised film. Lastly, they mobilise preconceived and developing ideas about the topic, time, or content of specialised films. In that way, they argue, audiences form around interpretations that draw on personal and contextual cultural recourses such as, the regional

provision of cinema, the structures of living in a certain region, their relationships, their life shifts, and their interests more widely. Furthermore, they reintroduce the importance of textual interpretations of film as part of a contextualised process of sense making. In this issue, Forrest looks broadly at the ways in which textual analysis of films is enthusiastically built through an openness to critical and personal readings despite participants' divergence in cultural capital, specialist knowledge, and specialist language in film criticism. Earlier, Forrest & Merrington (2021a) discussed how audiences engage with realist specialised film through emotion, knowledge, and location, negotiating text and image through links to personal experience and levels of familiarity and distance. Relatedly, Forrest & Merrington (2021b) discuss constructions of 'Frenchness' through active interpretations and meaning attribution processes rooted in understandings of place, language, practices, narrative, and directional approaches; but also, through a local/national cinema lens.

Drawing on this idea, I explore how language other than English plays a key role in film interpretation. I focus particularly on processes of meaning making of foreign to English film through language, content, and image and how they contribute to constructions of Otherness, familiarity, and difference. I also argue that language invokes generalised cognitive schemas stemming from preconceived ideas of difference and similarity in cultural identity. Language constitutes a lens of interpretation of non-English language film (and specifically, Russian, French, and Italian) which carries established assumptions in the process of sense making (Forrest & Merrington, 2021b). Language is embedded in processes of Othering which often precede the experience of viewing and engaging fully with a film. Yet, interpretations are embedded in an interactive nexus between the self, personal experience, and representation; they are active and reflexive processes despite carrying assumptions (Livingstone, 2007, 2013).

Methodology

To address the multidimensional and diffuse nature of audience formation and audience engagement, BtM employed a mixed-method approach. This rested on epistemological principles that extended beyond the binary issues of provision/production and reception to address film and film engagement and consumption as processes underpinned by structures; but also, as practices and experiences linked to cultural products or forms actively negotiated in space and time which define audiences. On the one hand, film was conceptualized as a cultural form (Wessels et.al, 2023, p.41; Chaney, 1990) namely, as a cultural product created, distributed, and consumed. On the other hand, film was approached as a cultural experience embodying meaning-making processes that take place in a variety of spaces, namely virtual or physical. These spaces are direct outcomes of policies of provision in space and time. This, in practice, necessitated a set of methods that could address the complexities and different expressions of the above definitions; and that 'can be linked to each other, coherently to inform each other, cross-reference each other,

and simultaneously build on each other in the ways each offers particular insights' (Wessels et.al 2023, p. 41). In other words, it entailed a relational approach that materialised into different streams of research, methodologies, and data analyses.

More specifically, this multidimensional approach involved secondary analysis (quantitative) of film and cultural participation data drawn from the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), and BFI survey data, which produced a socio-cultural index of audience members' cultural profiles. It also involved 200 semi-structured qualitative interviews across the four English regions that highlighted how film is consumed. Further, BtM employed a quantitative analysis of consumption figures and a discourse analysis of 200 film and industry policy documents to understand regional film provision. The BtM team also conducted sixteen film elicitation groups (four in each region) examining interpretations of specialised film clips. Lastly, a three-wave longitudinal survey of regional film audience patterns and twenty-seven semi-structured interviews with policy and industry experts looking at strategies for film distribution and exhibition were conducted (see Wessels et.al 2023, Merrington et.al, 2019). This approach was represented by a computational ontology, namely a way to digitally represent data and data relations, developed to highlight the links between the different types of data and the different types of processes linked to audience formation and audience consumption patterns (see Hanchard and Merrington, 2019, Hanchard, et.al, 2020). This computational ontology is part of an epistemological paradigm that seeks to represent knowledge and conceptualization through models (digital in this case) to highlight the complex interrelation of data and phenomena.

This paper draws on qualitative data collected for the project 'Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised film in English regions' (UKRI, 2017). Specifically, it draws on fifty interviews with men and women aged between 18-85 across the four English regions, namely North East (NE), North West (NW), South West (SW), and Yorkshire and Humber (YH) exploring attitudes and ways of engaging with specialised film including non-English speaking/world film. It also draws on data from sixteen film elicitation groups across the same regions exploring responses to and interpretations of specific clips from foreign to English films such as *Loveless* (Russian), *Things to Come* (French), *Happy End* (French) and *Call Me by Your Name* (English and Italian).

Interview data collected as part of the BtM project focused on the ways in which audiences engage with less familiar films, namely specialised or non-mainstream, as well as the ways in which they experience and participate in film culture and film viewing. 200 semi-structured interviews³ with audience members were conducted as part of Work Package Four inquiring into audiences' film and venue preferences, access to film and film provision in their area. Also investigated were the ways in which audiences watch film and the meaning of these viewing processes in their everyday lives. Interviewees discussed their experience and practices of watching film including the interactions involved in these

³ Interviewees were aged between 18 to 85, out of which 106 were women and 94 men (see further Merrington et al. 2019).

viewings. The present paper draws on fifty interviews, sampled based on their references to non-English and world film.

Film elicitation groups were conducted between September and November 2018, in which participants were presented with short clips from films released in the period 2016-2017. These were selected based on references made in the interviews (WP4). Each group consisted of six participants and watched two foreign to English specialised film clips along with two English language specialised films⁴. Questions were concerned with understandings and interpretations of the clips; however, responses reflected wider approaches to world film. Participants came from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds and age spans. Participants ranged from culturally engaged and familiar with specialised film frequently attending cinemas to those who were less familiar and infrequently attended cinemas (see also Forrest and Merington 2021). Participants' names were pseudonymised, while other identifying characteristics were removed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

For the purposes of this paper thematic analysis was conducted with the aid of the 'Ontology' feature on the BtM website; using the following nodes to locate relevant excerpts: Foreign film, world cinema, subtitles, *Loveless*, *Call Me by Your Name*, *Things to Come*, and *Happy End*. I also used the search function in the 'Ontology' section for the words foreign, English and non-English, language, French, Italian, Russian. These searches generated 50 excerpts of interviews and excerpts from the Elicitation Groups negotiating world or non-English speaking Film. These were then collected and re-analysed. Analysis focused on emerging themes linked to attitudes to film language, attitudes to world film, interpretations of world film content and constructions of Otherness. What is more analysis focused majorly on meaning making and the ways in which non-English language informs further interpretation and sense making of film.

Foreign Language or World film? terminology and the issue of language

BtM adopted the British Film Institute's (BFI) definition of specialised film as 'non-mainstream films including documentaries, foreign language films and re-releases of archive and classic film' (BFI Yearbook, 2018, p. 231). This definition, which is purposively broad to include a variety of genres which are not blockbusters or highly commercial, points to the challenges of classifying film based on audience reception and understandings. The BFI definition explains how 'world film' or 'non-English language' film is always classified as specialised, as a result of audience unfamiliarity with films made in languages other than English. The BFI also employs the term 'foreign language film,' which is considered a stand-alone genre, often associated with non-mainstream specialised film. Indeed,

⁴ The English-speaking films were the following: *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) directed by Ken Loach, *The Eagle Huntress* (2016) directed by Otto Bell, *Dark River* (2017) directed by Clio Barnard and, *God's Own Country* (2017) directed by Francis Lee.

Hanchard et al's (2019, p. 8) analysis showed that audience preferences contribute to genre differentiation, and that foreign language film emerges as a distinct genre, yet associated with arthouse film, in viewers' choices. This is further reflected in participants' narratives and was also highlighted by the BtM expert interviews (see BtM and Wessels et.al, 2023).

The present paper employs the term foreign to English language film and alternatively the term world film to differentiate these from the established definitions⁵. Further, it does so to highlight the normative assumptions linked to the word foreign, centred around English/Western centric definitions of home and foreign cinema. This is to emphasize that the term carries assumptions and connotations of Othering that are actively employed in interpretations, which is the central argument of the present paper on audience engagement with film. The word 'foreign' features in participants' narratives when they negotiate their film preferences or specific film content. They often use the term interchangeably to mean films produced outside the UK and films that do not have English as their primary language, but equally often to mean specialised films. This indicates our participants' varying levels of familiarity with specialised and/or world film but also the cultural resources and expertise available to different groups of the sample. As explained in the methodology section, engagement with foreign to English language film varied in this sample, ranging from expertise to complete lack of engagement. The diversity of these experiences reflects on participant attitudes towards and approach to world film.

For some participants world film was an unknown territory; for example, Kirk explained that: 'don't think I've ever seen a foreign film'. The lack of exposure to world film culture is critical to how participants understand non-English speaking film and the ways in which they may negotiate content should they come across it. This is the case for a proportion of the Film Elicitation Group members that watched clips from foreign to English language films. These participants avoid world film altogether as not being something that attracts them to view. For example, Maria and Nicola respectively concurred 'No, I don't think it'd be foreign film' and "Yeah, we don't tend to watch foreign language films.' Therefore, audience segments reflected on this sample have no experience or interest in engaging with world film.

One set of explanations for the lack of engagement have been outlined by Wessels, et.al (2023); namely that there are limits to accessing film which are directly associated with the extent of provision in specific regions in England. More specifically, BtM research has shown that there are differences in provision among the four English regions which are classified as having: (1) diverse film cities, (2) mainstream multiplex cities, (3) diverse film towns, with independent film exhibition, but no multiplex facilities, (4) mainstream film towns with a multiplex cinema but limited independent exhibition, and (5) limited underserved areas with little or no film provision of any kind, which often entails that people will travel to a different location to access a cinema (ibid, p. 81). As a result, these different levels of provision affect both the intention and the experience of watching world film among other genres.

⁵ The paper, however, will be using the term world film interchangeably for the sake of text fluidity.

On the other hand, as participants reported, one of the key barriers to engaging with world film is language, namely the absence of linguistic resources, knowledge, and familiarity with other languages. Also, the presence of subtitles contributes to audiences' limited engagement with world specialised film. For example, Keith goes on to explain that: 'If it's foreign, reading subtitles, that sort of thing, I don't think I've ever seen one of them'. This indicates that language and text remain a barrier in people's engagement with film. Kilborn (1993) showed how one's own language dictated policy and approaches to world film and TV across Europe, and how the dominance of English across a significant proportion of film production affects audience engagement with international cultural outputs. Other participants may be more inclined to watch foreign to English film but language per se makes them perceive content as inaccessible. As Poppy explains:

I wouldn't watch a film with subtitles because I just can't concentrate then. If I'm reading the subtitles, then that's what I'm thinking about and I'm not thinking about what is going on in the scene.

While Brandon admits after watching the clip from *Loveless*:

It would have been interesting to have seen the film dubbed instead of subtitled, then I could have maybe noticed the scenery more instead of trying to figure out what they were saying.

At the same time, participants with more cultural resources and cultural capital see language as a key interest and may seek to engage with world film as a result. Josephine explains her appreciation to foreign to English films and subtitling: 'It's always interesting to see foreign cityscapes or foreign languages, it makes the film going experience more interesting'. Others see non-English language, as explained earlier, as a signifier of art. Lilian makes the connection between what she sees as artistic, namely foreign to English language film:

I've described like...the feeling of going to like the arty ones and I quite like feeling a bit snooty (Laughs). Oh, yeah. So just me watching a film that was made in Budapest about (Laughs) It's fascinating.

These valorising connotations of foreign to English language film have wider implications for audience engagement with film and the schemas employed in the processes of interpretation. This is because they reinforce assumptions about how world film overlaps with specialised film, which often leads to positive or negative evaluations, as we shall see later. Therefore, the association of language and language delivery comes with both negative and positive dispositions towards, and evaluations of, non-English language films. However, attitudes range from negative to positive with language being one of the key reasons for attracting or deterring audiences. Trepte (2008:3) argued that preferences for national

programmes explain the success of TV programmes, but also that the country of origin may determine the success of a cultural product more widely. In this light, audience consumption of national cultural products, or at least national language products, remains a key issue in understanding film consumption too, highlighting the need for linguistic and cultural familiarity/proximity (see Straubhaar, (1991). This is reflected on the present sample evaluations. For example, Cody explains that the sound of an unfamiliar language affects her impression about the value of the film. Specifically, she argues: “[...] I find Russian’s quite an odd language to hear in a foreign language film because I don’t think it’s very expressive.” As a result, the lack of familiarity with the language as a sound resulted in the rejection of the film.

Further, interest in foreign to English language film has been associated with resources and class originations. Judith offered an interesting insight in this respect:

... as I’ve grown older, I’ve developed a liking for foreign language but when I was younger, I would never have watched a foreign language film ever...It’s not on my radar. But also, our background is very working class... And we are from a working-class town... So, upbringing is very important with your choice of films I think... Cause people don’t expect people from our kind of town a very mining town to be into that kind of thing, and we are and...Why can’t we be? Like with my background, a Mining background. Why am I watching foreign language?

As Wessels et. al, (2023) have shown, one’s relationship with film changes during the life course, and overlaps with shifts in everyday life, changes in resources and place of residence as well as understandings of film. What is more, the assumption that engagement with foreign to English film is potentially linked to a set of cultural interests and practices that are middle class, or at least not a part of a working-class habitus, may inform choices and levels of engagement with film. Hence, language skills and interest in other languages are directly associated with cultural capital, and in this case become the key mechanism for the evaluation of film and film consumption.

Attitudes to Foreign to English Film: Subtitling and Engagement

Connected to the issue of language is world film delivery and subtitling. Wessels et al (2023) discuss subtitles as part and parcel of the set of barriers to engaging with non-mainstream non-English speaking film. Subtitling as a process of making accessible a film to non- English speakers is something that has been debated across the sample in relation to the quality and delivery of subtitling, the pace, and the skills required to read subtitles. Here we will focus on how subtitling may create a lens through which film may be approached, interpreted, enjoyed, or rejected.

Subtitles incite attraction or repulsion for parts of the audiences/viewers, and people position themselves immediately with respect to foreign to English language films either positively or negatively. Subtitles provide access to the film content and narrative, yet they constitute a lens through which film is negotiated and interpreted. This way audiences engage with non-English speaking film often carrying assumptions about the style, quality or features of a film. Specifically, some participants expressed their positive predisposition to films that are subtitled, signifying a preference to foreign to English language films. For example, Rose explained: 'Just because reading the subtitles makes the film seem more interesting' while Jessica concurred that "subtitles [are] so fresh, always best for me'. What is underlying here is the primacy of the language and its mode of delivery as key sources of appreciation. In other words, there is a valorising disposition towards films which communicate stories through languages other than English. Other participants explained that subtitling interferes less with the dramaturgy and the authenticity of the film, allowing for voices to be included in the interpretation within the film and by extension the interpretative frameworks the viewers employ during exhibition. For example, Malcom explained 'The voice is a performance, so you would lose so much'. In that sense, subtitles constitute a gateway to performance and often a gateway and a vantage point to a story, more often than not, the story of the Other. However, Malcom, who was situated in the South West of England and directly involved in arts as a theatre director and set designer, employed their knowledge and cultural capital to negotiate film content. For them language and text are useful tools in their interpretative endeavours.

In similar manner, participants with more cultural resources and an enhanced knowledge of world cinema recognise how subtitled foreign to English film may be constructed as artfilm/specialised on account of it being non-English and subtitled. Very often mainstream and popular foreign to English film is considered specialised. For example, Gavin who is situated in North West of England and who is a part of a film club and therefore actively engaged in film viewing and film programming argued:

And obviously a lot need a subtitle but, I would say, they're not that arty [...] Well, if you were living in France, the films we have would be blockbusters. But because they're in French with subtitles that become arty over here. So, *Untouchable*, do you remember that film a couple of years back? We had that, and our biggest seller of the year. Well, that's not a blockbuster really... But it was a French blockbuster.

However, subtitling may similarly invoke negative connotations of similar nature connected to assumptions about non-English films. Very often foreign to English film is considered as artistic (arty), as we have seen, which further signifies that language entails or is associated with certain characteristics (real or imagined but certainly constructed) about what is being viewed or how relevant this is to the viewer. Rachel explains:

Erm, I wouldn't watch like artsy kind of cultural films. I don't... I can't watch anything with subtitles'; or as Melissa states: 'I wouldn't watch foreign films... No. Because I wouldn't read subtitles... No, I'll be bored doing that.

In these cases, language and text become the key reason for rejecting world film before even engaging with it, as they simultaneously signify a genre which is not preferred. Other participants like Samantha, find engaging with subtitles difficult for their attention span and interpretation process:

That you actually have to then sit and like... Yeah. Really concentrate on it whereas, erm, if you've got something is where your own sort of like switch-off for half-an-hour, come back... Yeah. To come back and be like, "Oh, that, what's going on?" Yeah. Even though I've just been on the phone for 10 minutes.

The capacity to dip in and out of engagement and interpretation that is primarily linked to familiarity with language are therefore stifled through subtitle reading, which then makes world film a less likely genre with which to engage. However, other participants argued that their attitude towards and engagement with subtitles depends on the language of the film per se.

Language, Othering, and Interpretative Frameworks

In this section, I explore the approaches, interpretations, and forms of attachment to, or rejection of, foreign to English films, drawing primarily on a series of film-elicitation focus groups, as well as a series of interview excerpts referencing interpretations of world film. The specific non-English-speaking films used in the elicitation groups were *Loveless* (2017) by Andrey Zvyagintsev, a Russian production featuring Russian language, *Things to Come* by Mia Hansen-Løve, and *Happy End* by Michael Haneke which were both in French and *Call Me by Your Name* by Luca Guadagnino, a multinational production featuring English, Italian and French.

As we have seen, foreign to English language films may be seen in a negative light because they are perceived as unfamiliar, daunting, and difficult to understand. Or they may be perceived as exciting because they are linked to social experiences of the Other. One of the key themes emerging from the data is how foreign to English film may constitute a route to the Other, a window into another culture. While film in general plays that role at a lot of levels, there is something to be said about how language may mediate and in fact act as a token of Otherness, a site where difference is constructed in advance of the narrative, which influences engagement and interpretation of film. Approaching the film entails the construction of a distinct distance between the viewer and what is being viewed as one signifying Otherness. The immediate connection between non-English language and cultural

difference is present in participants' interpretative attempts, some of which are more conscious than others.

Interpretations of Loveless

This subsection will explore the attempts to interpret of the film *Loveless* and show how the Russian language plays a key role in the negotiations of film content often not linked to the textual aspects but projected on image and narrative. For example, Emily explains about the opening scenes of *Loveless*:

Because I love how it's a window into a culture that you wouldn't normally see. I realise at the beginning of the clip I think that the director is trying to show the mundanity of the lives that they're experiencing at the moment, before this drama happens later on in the film, but I really enjoyed that. It would be different if it was set in the UK but, because it's set in Russia you get to have a bit of a nosey at what their mundanity is, either down to looking at the food that they were eating in the canteen and like, oh we wouldn't get that!

This is the immediate response to the opening scenes of a film portraying the everyday life of a divorced couple who continue with their everyday life post separation. Some of the scenes are depicting particularly common aspects of life such as riding the train, looking at a mobile phone, driving to work listening to the news which are then constructed as different and as indicative of the essence of the Other's life and everyday reality in Russia. In this example, Otherness is a priori constructed as different by virtue of its non-English origin. The indication of 'foreignness' is of course language. It is through the film's language that viewers recognise its 'alien' character. In the following interpretative attempt Brad is reflexive of their expectations by virtue of their effort to engage with the language and the content:

I was focused on reading the text on the screen and that takes the impact away from what the viewer's meant to be getting from that, I suppose. It seems like it's an interesting portrayal of Russian lives, because I would automatically presume that there'd be this strong man that would go to work, the very traditional relationship, whereas the strong woman and a sort of weaker-minded man perhaps.

These expectations come from preconceived ideas about the Other which are activated through the encounter with foreign to English language film. Arthur commends on the atmosphere and city space appearing in *Loveless*: 'It seemed quite colourless, it was inner-city, tower block, foreign country and a different culture to a point'. These images are associated with an unfamiliar Otherness, despite its often-obvious links to everyday experience of space in the English regions. For instance, specifically darkness, building and tower block housing is a common occurrence in various parts of England. In that sense,

unfamiliarity is embedded in the interpretative processes of audience members before it is actively encountered and recognised.

This preconceived notion of unfamiliarity intersects with active negotiations and reflexive processes. For example, some participants reflected on the intentions of the director in offering social and political commentary or exercising political critique, but this is tied in with already established ideas about the Other. For instance, Eleanor reflects on watching the clip:

I think lots of the differences of the culture that were coming through. I'm surprised that they had potatoes on the plate, just little things like that. I don't like potatoes particularly, or bread! [laughs] So it was looking at them, they're not kind of things like hotpot or something that I was expecting them to be eating.

Expectations are already embedded in the meaning making processes employed and Eleanor is particularly motivated by the notion of difference rather than commonality and/or similarity. Other participants are reflexive and conscious of their expectations and the interpretative schemata they employ with regards to the specific film. Cassandra reflects:

Um, I think potentially, I suppose the interesting thing sadly was working into work and not saying hello to everybody, that's just, [...] but you get that sense of difference. But I suppose I don't know if it necessarily felt Russian, I don't know why that is like that? but I don't know if that's because I was looking for Cossacks or bears and Putin in the background, I'm not sure!

However, assumptions are embedded in the process of sense making of film. Colin also confirms:

Straight away it struck me I know nothing about modern Russia, there was no babushkas or spies anywhere in it. I straight away made parallels with the community, it was the same community, everyone on the phone on the metro, boring traffic jams, running late

Even for those participants who recognise the universality of experience represented, this is often linked to the reverse expectations or may come as a surprise. Donna explains:

...then I started thinking about the cultural side of things, thinking it's just like everyday life here, people are maybe doing that. I was watching the amount of mobile phones on the subway, I was watching that.

Similarly, Edna confirms:

Yeah, and it was quite every day, like you've had lunch in a canteen, you've walked through a busy office, it was quite relatable, even though it was set in Russia and they were speaking in a totally different language, I'm like, oh yeah, I've had these conversations.

The issue of familiarity extends then to personal experience as Wessels et.al (2023) have also shown; namely, that audiences actively employ personal experiences in their interpretations. Specifically, the self becomes an anchor for the process of interpretation through invoking everyday life personal experiences, personal links to space, and interactions. For example, Brandon states:

I enjoyed it, even though it was set in Russia instead of being set here in Yorkshire, as it was set in an urban setting I could identify more, you know, looking at your phone on the train, going to the office, saying hello to your workmates. It was interesting that he shook hands with his workmate when he got there, I worked in France and every day you'd shake hands with your workmates unlike you do here, it's just a little thing they do in a different country, just difference.

Relevance and attachment therefore appear to have a firm anchor in aspects of the self, the personal experience of place, ideas about belonging and ideas about the Other. These predispositions towards film manifest more concretely in the active interpretive frameworks employed when exposed to world film. Appreciation or rejection come from attempts to access, negotiate, and engage with textual aspects (the Russian language in this case) among other features of the film.

Thus, participants actively negotiate all aspects of film which often leads to questioning their assumptions and reflections on the potential tensions between their interpretations and the rationale or the intention of the film maker. Corey reflects:

What I was wondering is, would we be reading too much into it if we thought that this whole don't let the bosses find out thing reflects somewhat on Putin's Russia, or the Russian Russia that people outside of Russia like to think of?

What this demonstrates, is that representations, whether realistic, symbolic, or completely fictional are negotiated in real terms and may become a means of challenging assumptions, or at least questioning, existing knowledge about, and interpretations of, reality. Archie further contends:

Yes, it's how we're also driven to [think] how Russia is, whether it's actually like that I don't know, but that does fit the sort of thing that I think we're fed, and the news at the beginning of all the outside influences that are going to affect us, and the end of the world is coming.

What is more, audiences may reflect further on the angles from which this knowledge is generated. As Anthony confirms: ‘because when you hear about Russia it’s all the bad stuff and this is how you imagine it’.

Overall, we have seen how participants responded to the film *Loveless* and how they negotiated content and image in light of the origin and language of film.

Interpretations of Things to Come

Forrest and Merrington (2021b) discussed constructions of ‘Frenchness’ through film interpretations and specifically of the film *Things to Come*. They show how preconceived ideas about ‘Frenchness’ are often projected on directional tropes, scenery, film rhythms and film atmosphere. For example, scenes such as sitting around a table eating or smoking, are thought to be characteristic of French lifestyle but are also recognised as tropes within French films. Albert contends that: ‘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’. Amy agrees: ‘it’s very French, him smoking a cigarette in the car, all the women very attractive and well-dressed, discussing philosophy’. These tropes are linked to, and reinforce ideas of, cultural differences and depictions of Otherness as distinctly different. Adam considers longer shots or silences to be characteristic of continental and particularly French and Spanish films:

Can I just say one thing on the production of continental, the Spanish are very similar, they almost become over-indulgent in the length of shot, whereas with British and the American films we tend to cut a performance and it’s very quick edited.

As Forrest and Merrington (2021b:13) discuss understandings of ‘Frenchness’ are tied to ‘totalising narratives of French otherness’. Indeed, they quote Mary’s totalising interpretation of *Things to Come*:

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 we can see how language, content and the origin of film become amalgamated in audience members assessments and generalisations about film production more widely.

Interpretations of Happy End

In his interpretation of the film *Happy End*, Bartholomew recognises some key features of French film in the way they depict French society, but also the focus on the minutiae of everyday life. According to Bartholomew:

French cinema is very protected and has funding, so it allows lots of films, and I think that's great, so it has lots of films that are like that, you know, people talk for a very long time about a subject and focus in on the small things in life.

Arthur, however, generalises his experience of watching French films and projects it on the interpretation of *Happy End*:

It's kind of like the French just pointlessly trying to make a point about something that doesn't quite grab me, excite me or draw me in or anything like that. I've seen a couple of French films, some are okay, some are bizarre, you think, oh no! It doesn't really

Stereotypical understandings of cinema tropes are considered as traits of an overly homogenised national cinema. These interpretations may be the result of active continuous engagement with film and draw on observations which are informed by preconceived ideas about national cinema tropes, styles, and features. This is reflected in the interpretations of the film *Call Me By Your Name*.

Interpretations of Call Me By Your Name

In is response to the clip from the film *Call me by Your Name*, Adrian ties previous viewing experiences with the particular clip, thus making connections between films that lead to a generalisations about national tropes of film making:

Well I thought it was very much in the same tradition as the previous clip because it's that French and Italian cinema thing, straightforward narrative drama with a minimum of special effects and quite long scenes in specific locations

Amy also contends:

The first bit again felt very French, with the not much dialogue, long pauses, you know, just lingering on the steps for instance and then what you take from that, and her smoking.

Here again the image and directional tropes are linked to a specific kind of national production which reinforces assumptions, and totalizing generalizations.

Indeed, the above interpretations of all films are linked to individual or collective understandings of other cultures which are employed by virtue of their encounter with foreign to English language film. They often rest on the assumption that films are intentionally representing Otherness or cultural features which are specific to other cultures. Fetishizing world film, namely seeing film as a signifier of the culture of the Other by virtue of its language of delivery entails a process of interpretation which precedes engagement

with film as we have seen. In that sense, foreignness/Otherness is projected through various interpretative frameworks which are actively employed. However, participants at points remain reflexive about these projections depending on their level of engagement with world film and the cultural resources available to them.

Conclusion

This paper discussed generalised and specific attitudes to world/foreign to English films as sites of engaging with difference. As shown, language plays a key role to processes of interpretation not just in relation to accessing film content but rather as a lens through which audiences engage with film. More specifically, language informs preferences, namely the likelihood of selecting, or rejecting a film. What is more, language and mode of delivery, specifically subtitling is both a deterrent and a point of attraction for audiences. For some audience members, subtitles are a synonym of inaccessible content, often mistakenly associated with specialised or arthouse film. Subtitles and non-English language constitute a lens of interpretation as shown by the specific examples drawn from the film elicitation groups. Participants negotiated film clips concentrating on language and cultural difference very often contradicting their own experience. They consider world film a window to the Other and emphasise notions of difference and distance anchored in what they recognise as their personal experience and understandings of the world. What is more, the origin of the film, reflected on the language spoken, informs how they make sense of the style, directive tropes and subject matter, thus homogenising film making into national tropes. However, these interpretations show how these audience segments remain engaged and active in their selection, consumption, and negotiation of film despite the dispositions, preconceived ideas and assumptions they carry in the process of meaning making and understanding specialised films.

Biographical Note

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