

Embracing european cultural diversity: the example of *L'auberge Espagnole*, by Cédric Klapisch.

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In a speech given during a public hearing that took place in the European Parliament in 2010, Wim Wenders makes a strong case against the image of contemporary Europe by stating that “Europe today is perceived by its citizens mainly as a political-technical-burocratic structure, a more or less indistinct economic-conglomerate” (Wenders, 2010). This negative picture is related with an increasing general public discredit of the European ideal and directly connected to some views held by Euro-sceptics. The “disillusioning bottom-line” (Wenders, 2010) that associates the image of Europe mainly with that of its Administration, makes Wenders call for a need to “concentrate more on the emotional side of Europe” (Wenders, 2010) in order to shape a common European sense of identity in the contemporary world. According to Wim Wenders, cinema can play a very important role in this process of creating a stronger emotional bond between Europe and its citizens, since “like no other medium film generates identification and establishes emotional and cognitive connection” (Wenders, 2010), “it reflects the very picture of our society, with its values, habits, hopes and fears” (Wenders, 2010). The President of the European Academy and notable European director takes the mission of European cinema further by stating that “film shapes these values, forms these habits and influences trends” (Wenders, 2010), and much like the way it “helped to invent and to perpetuate the «American dream»” (Wenders, 2010), it also “can do wonder for the image of Europe” (Wenders, 2010).

In keeping with this idea of a “European dream”, in 2002 french director Cédric Klapisch released a movie about cultural diversity and intercultural relationships called *L'auberge Espagnole*, known in English-speaking territories as *Pot Luck* or *The Spanish Apartment*. This franco-spanish co-production “was an international success in both commercial and critical terms” (Ezra, 2005: 1) and led to the release of a sequel, *Les Puppées Russes (Russian Dolls)*, this time a French-British co-production, released in 2004. In the words of Wim Wenders, European cinema “celebrates diversity, even more so: It keeps cultural diversity alive” (Wenders, 2010: 6), and this is most certainly the most important achievement of Klapisch’s film: it succeeds in its mission to celebrate European diversity and to get in touch with the “emotional side of Europe” (Wenders, 2010: 1). By telling the story of Xavier, a french economics student encouraged to participate in the Erasmus Programme, “the flagship programme of the European Union” (Krzaklewska, 2008) and “one of the most inclusive exchange programmes for students” (Krzaklewska, 2008), this movie quite faithfully shows the spirit and the essence of “being an Erasmus” and can be regarded as a counterpoint to the purely administrative and burocratic image of Europe, aiming at “sharing emotions and common stories, instead of just laws and money” (Wenders, 2010: 6).

The movie *L'auberge Espagnole* tells the story of seven students from seven different countries in Europe living together in the same apartment in Barcelona. The main character, Xavier, played by Romain Duris, goes to Barcelona to study Economics as a postgraduate with the perspective of improving his spanish language skills in order

to secure a job in the Ministry of Finance, encouraged by a friend of his father's, back in France. In Barcelona, after a few failed attempts at finding decent accommodation, he finds himself sharing a flat with people from different nationalities, from different parts of Europe: England, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany and Denmark are represented in the movie by six young people coming together and celebrating life as a community in the capital of Catalonia.

In an interview following the release of his fifth feature film, Cédric Klapisch talks about Europe and diversity, describing the European reality as a “mess”: “«Of course, Europe is a mess», he says. «Just as life is a mess. But I try to put a positive spin on the word. [...] And for me, I like to live in a multicultural, melting-pot environment. Because the idea of unifying everything leads to fascism»” (Klapisch, 2003). As we can see, his approach to Europe and integration is related with the idea of diversity as opposed to an oppressive idea of unification and his theory embraces the naturally chaotic process of intercultural relationships, portrayed in the movie and summarized in Xavier's own conclusion: “Je suis français, espagnol, anglais, danois, je suis pas un mais plusieurs. Je suis comme l'Europe, je suis tout ça, je suis un vrai bordel” (Klapisch, 2002). The informal and casual way this movie deals with this theme also reveals Klapisch's clear intention of trying “to put a positive spin” (Klapisch, 2003) on the phenomenon of cultural diversity and European integration. In this aspect, I consider the idea of portraying the Erasmus experience in a movie to be quite interesting, because this approach gives the director the sense of freedom embodied in the spirit of this particular exchange programme, which proves to be the perfect vehicle for the general positive take on diversity and Europeism advocated by the director of *L'auberge Espagnole*. The title itself shows this overtly positive and lighthearted attitude towards cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, as the director himself explains: “«In French it means Spanish hostel, but it also refers to a mess. Spanish hostels in the 19th century didn't have restaurants, so all the nationalities had to bring their own food and eat together. It was all about cultural differences, and sharing»” (Klapisch 2003). In an online review, Frank Ochieng defines the title as “a figurative expression for a mixture of cultures cramped together - much like a tasty bunch of converging ingredients designed to give one a hearty and diverse meal” (Ochieng, 2003). Therefore, the title of movie fits the plotline quite perfectly and once again sets the pace and the tone of the movie, giving it the positive and emotional edge Klapisch was looking for from the very beginning. In fact, in his interview to Xan Brook, Klapisch says the movie was based on his own experience as a foreign film student at the New York University: “I wanted to get out of France because I didn't feel very French at the time. [...] It was the first time I became aware that a European culture existed” (Klapisch, 2003).

From Klapisch's words we can say that it was a cultural immersion experience that made him aware of not only his own cultural identity but also of close cultural ties with people from different countries in Europe, making him aware of the existence of a European culture. The Erasmus experience portrayed in the movie has the same effect on the protagonist, the parisian economics student Xavier, particularly when he later contemplates all he has learned and gained during the period spent abroad with his European flatmates. Thus, in the movie, Xavier looks back on his Erasmus year and tells his story from his bedroom in France, sitting at his computer remembering all he has been through during his stay in Barcelona. He does this with a mixed sense of longing and accomplishment, punctuated by moments of introspective reflection which clearly show personal growth, maturation and change: in the end, Xavier does no longer want to pursue a career in economics and decides to become a writer instead.

Klapisch's words concerning the chaotic construction of the movie shed a light on the movie's organic process and its relationship with the movie's main theme: "«The story was constructed this way: the ideas did not come from the script, but from the research of locations and cast that would be informing the screenplay. The film was made in any «old way,» struggled along, and appeared a bit «upside down»" (Klapisch apud Béguin, 2004: 73). As we can see, this chaotic and confusing process of creation suits the theme of the movie but, as Béguin aptly notes, "this confusion is organised in a certain way" (Béguin, 2004: 73): "The film demonstrates how there can be unity in things that apparently do not have any. Where so many odd-couple-type movies make a big deal about overcoming differences, this European community finds its balance with an easy effortlessness" (*Ibid.*: 73). In this sense, this is a movie about the balance between chaos and equilibrium, in an attempt "to discover unity in diversity" (*Ibid.*: 73).

In this aspect, the movie establishes an interesting link between novelty and tradition, between past and present, between old and new in a way that is completely contemporary and postmodern: it is inspired by the past but offers a contemporary and fresh look, presenting old clichés, stereotypes, models, world views and historical misconceptions and assumptions towards some aspects of European culture and history, rearranging them and them with a good dose of humor and irony, always managing to keep the movie's lighthearteness and good-natured environment (in truth, the movie's pace and tone don't allow it). Also in technical aspects, the movie seems to combine the old and the new, combining a more traditional, linear, narrative fit for Hollywood-esque romantic comedy with a few twists in editing that give the movie a fresh and edgy artistic feel: "Although the narrative is fairly traditional, Klapisch spices things up with some interesting camerawork. These stylistic quirks are enough to maintain an element of spontaneity, but do not go overboard to the extent that they call undue attention to themselves" (Berardinelli, 2003). Some examples of this include the earlier scenes of the movie, where "the monotony and pointlessness of working in a stifling corporate environment is highlighted by the use of literal fast-forwarding (for example, characters are speeded up as they walk from office to office)" (Berardinelli, 2003) and also "during a key sequence near the end, when residents of the apartment are racing home to «save» one of their own from being discovered in a compromising position, Klapish employs fast cuts and split screens" (Berardinelli, 2003).

As we have seen, the movie's attitude towards European integration is very closely related to Wim Wenders call for a mobilization of European cinema that could be able follow the example of Hollywood's relationship towards the idea of the "American dream", hoping that European governments develop a serious attitude towards film, that will help project a successful image of Europe, promoting its unique and diverse cultural dimensions, celebrated in Klapisch's movie in a very appealing and compelling way, tackling clichés and stereotypes, facing them in a very carefree and natural manner, embracing contradictions and cultural misconceptions in a way that can help demistify old-fashioned perspectives towards identity and diversity, always with a right amount of humor and irony. Thus, Klapisch's movie is a good example of how film can depict the multicultural reality of Europe in a way that might strike a chord with the younger generations of Europeans and allow them to look beyond clichés and stereotypes in both an entertaining and insightful way.

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