

## **Abstract**

This article discusses the relationship between UK film producers and Europe, offering a historical overview and an extended case study of an existing company, Number 9 Films. It argues that although UK film production and the attitude of policy makers have been shaped by American economic interests, Europe represents an important conceptual and cultural space that encourages producers to make films that are distinctively different from the dominant Hollywood model. Drawing on a range of commentators and original interviews, the article argues that in an era of regional porosity and transnationalism, the traditional polarity between European art cinema and commercial Hollywood is being reimagined and the boundaries re-drawn. This has created a shifting ‘middle ground’ that can be occupied by producers who are prepared to seek collaborations and funding from a varied range of sources. The case study of Number 9 Films analyses how these processes work in detail, examining the company’s multiple and cosmopolitan identities and its business model. It concludes by discussing the company’s move into ‘high end’ television drama production arguing that this shift is typical of independent UK film producers, demonstrating the increasing convergence between the two forms and also a further stage in the evolution of European audiovisual production.

## **Keywords**

European; identity; regional porosity; cosmopolitan; producers; production companies;

## **‘Being European’: UK Production Companies and Europe**

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‘We have our own unwritten brief to make European films over a wide range of subjects that appeal to us’ (Stephen Woolley, co-founder, Number 9 Films).

‘We consider ourselves to be UK and European’ (Elizabeth Karlsen, co-founder Number 9 Films).

### **Introduction: America or Europe?**

Numerous accounts of the British film industry have emphasised its all-pervading reliance on American interests (McDonald 2008; Murphy 1986; Ryall 2001; Watson, 2000). This Atlantic orientation has been encouraged consistently by British film policy which, rather than actively supporting a national cinema culture, has concerned itself with sustaining an industry based on free market economics (Presence 2017). In practice this has meant creating the conditions in which American-based multinational corporations can function profitably, with British firms dependent on the Hollywood studios for production finance and distribution networks that provide access to global markets. The major public funding mechanism, tax relief, is non-selective and benefits US companies more than indigenous ones.<sup>1</sup> However, such ‘inward investment’ by American corporations is actively solicited by the UK government in the belief that without their productions the British film industry would collapse. The concomitant of this North American orientation is that UK film producers have had far less engagement with Europe. As Thomas Elsaesser succinctly puts it, ‘British cinema has always been facing the US, while its back, so to speak, was turned to

Europe' (2005, 62). This reluctance to engage with Europe is part of the broader Euroscepticism that permeates not only large sections of the British electorate – as graphically illustrated by the decision to leave the European Union in the June 2016 referendum – but also UK film policy.

Nevertheless, there have been sporadic attempts by British filmmakers to work with European partners and exploit the cultural affinities the UK enjoys with its Continental neighbours – shared histories, memories, myths and symbols – especially by those producers who regarded film production as a cultural rather than simply commercial activity. However, it would be wrong to polarise this Europe/US distinction as the opposition between an artistic, aesthetically innovative European cinema and a market-driven Hollywood one. Commentators on contemporary European cinema have argued that although the auteur director remains a key element in European production and Hollywood continues to be regarded as a significant 'other', the concept of the European 'art cinema' is outmoded and is being replaced by a looser conception of the 'quality' film that occupies a middle ground between serious, critical art films and stylish consensual mainstream productions, one in which the 'borderline between art-house and mainstream is kept permeable, while not totally erased' (Bergfelder 2015, 44-45; see also Wood 2007, 43-59). This shift testifies to the emergence of a new understanding of European cinema and the institutions that support it, one in which the formerly polarised opposition between Europe and Hollywood is being 'gradually reimagined along axes of taste released from geographical bearings' and in which the concept of European-ness is being superseded by a 'global cosmopolitanism'. Thus, although 'European cinema' remains an important analytical and discursive concept it now 'demands re-imagining along trans-geographical lines' (Harrod et. al. 2015, 12-13; see also Elsaesser 2005, 2015; Liz 2016; Rivi 2007). This reimagining of European identity takes

place within the context of what Peter J. Katzenstein (2005) argues is an era of regional ‘porosity’ in which historically distinctive areas are subject to processes of globalization and internationalization. However, as he cautions, these re-imaginings take place within the overarching power of the American ‘imperium’, which continues to be the dominant force in politics, trade and cultural influence.

In order to explore this shifting conception of European-ness and the particular attitude and alignment of UK producers towards ‘being European’, this article offers a detailed case study of Number 9 Films (hereinafter Number 9), an important UK production company, consistently listed as one of the UK’s Top 40 (Dams 2017), but which has yet to receive extended analysis. As the epigraph quotations indicate, Number 9 styles itself as a European-orientated company, a positioning that, as will be argued, determines its identity and its production strategies. It provides a revealing contrast with Working Title’s predominantly North American alignment, as discussed elsewhere in this special issue. This detailed focus on a single production company enables an in-depth consideration of how these shifting discourses affect the actual working lives of practising filmmakers, thereby contributing to studies about cultural labour in the creative industries as well as extending current debates about international film production and European cinema. In particular, it enlarges existing discussions about the role of the producer (Spicer, 2016, 2014; Spicer and McKenna 2013). The article’s detailed attention to production practices and production cultures contrasts with other studies of the UK film industry’s involvement with Europe that focus on broad trends, and augments the surprisingly slender literature on individual media production companies despite their significance to the European economy.<sup>2</sup> The analysis is based on three separate extended interviews with the company’s co-founders, Elizabeth Karlsen and Stephen Woolley, as well as a comprehensive trawl through the trade press and other sources, official,

journalistic and academic and a lengthy interview with a prominent UK Europhile producer, Simon Perry.<sup>3</sup>

However, before considering Number 9, it is important to contextualise its activities through a broader historical overview of the occasional and rather hesitant – in the face of a prevailing official Euroscepticism – European cultural positioning adopted by some UK producers and production companies and a consideration of the, albeit limited, opportunities that have existed to encourage UK producers to ‘think European’.

### **UK Film Producers, Policy Makers and Europe: An Historical Overview**

Although European national governments have tended to favour protectionist policies such as tariffs and quotas to try to safeguard indigenous film industries, there have been repeated attempts, starting as early as 1908-1909, to establish a cross-national film industry in Europe spurred by cultural as well as financial considerations (Jäckel 2003a; Liz 2016). In the 1920s and 1930s the concept of ‘Film Europe’ emerged to ‘describe the ideal of a vibrant pan-European cinema industry, making international co-productions for a massively enhanced “domestic” market and thereby be in a position to challenge American distributors for control of that market’ (Higson and Maltby 1999, 2). Some UK companies adopted production strategies that were loosely aligned to this concept, developing European co-productions and using international storylines and settings (Higson 1997; 1999). However, these initiatives never coalesced into a body powerful enough to challenge American dominance. Efforts to create a strong European cinema were revived after the Second World War through the negotiation of several co-production treaties, beginning with the Franco-Italian Agreement in February 1949. These agreements were designed to encourage the production of ‘quality

films' whose higher production values would enable them to compete with Hollywood and also, crucially, as a cultural policy to encourage producers to escape the conceptual and mental dominance of the American idea of cinema (Jäckel 2003b, 232-33, 239). Although Britain eventually signed a co-production treaty with France in 1965, efforts to make Anglo-French productions faltered through cultural, institutional and political differences; the French favoured a policy of active state intervention in the film industry in contrast to British reluctance (Jäckel 1996). In his analysis of early UK-European co-productions, Justin Smith argues that the ambivalence and uncertainty that characterises the UK's attitude mirrored larger political equivocations (2010, 51-66). Smith's archival research clearly demonstrates that successive UK governments considered that their 'primary orientation' was towards North America rather than Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this prevailing scepticism, the UK government signed the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production in 1992, which enabled three or more companies from different European countries to benefit from tax relief on a single production and with a £5 million fund spread over three years (Macnab 2018, 38). The co-productions encouraged by this scheme were designed to respect the values of the majority producer and thus contribute to the expression of authentic national cultures (Rivi 2007, 64) rather than a factitious European identity that had characterised the much-derided 'Euro-puddings' of the 1980s that were uneasy compromises between competing national sensibilities (Galt 2006, 103-05). The concept informing the co-production convention formed part of a wider agenda that abandoned the attempt to create a common European culture in favour of the concept of cultural diversity and fluid boundaries (De Vinck and Pauwels 2015, 105) and 'unity in diversity' has been the official European motto since 2000. Such co-productions enabled filmmakers to pool resources, obtain subsidies from collaborating countries, access partner

distributors and secure wider markets, factors that often outweighed time-consuming bureaucracies and increased costs (Jäckel 2003a, 58-65). During his stewardship of British Screen (1991-2000), Simon Perry made strenuous efforts to encourage UK producers to find European partners and was able to use the newly-created European Co-production Fund to support UK-European collaborations including with Eastern European countries (Spicer 2018). However, Perry's efforts were undermined by the Conservative government's abrupt volte face over Eurimages, the fund established in January 1989 by the Council of Europe that supports production, distribution, promotion and exhibition (Finney 1996b, 108-113; Jäckel 2003, 76-90; Macnab 2018, 114-16). The UK joined the scheme in 1993 and co-productions increased, but withdrew its membership in 1996, despite the fund investing £12.5 million in UK co-productions and generating an estimated £40 million in film activity in return for the £5.5 million membership fee (Wayne 2002, 13-14). When a single film authority, the UKFC, was created by the Labour government in 2000, it was much more concerned to encourage inward investment rather than European co-productions (Doyle et. al. 2015, 52-58, 81-86, 133-38) nor did it show any inclination to re-join Eurimages, prompting Perry to argue that non-membership makes Britain 'the coproduction partner-of-last-choice within Europe' (2014).

In Perry's view this lack of encouragement meant that most British producers 'Brexit-ed in 2000' (see Spicer 2018). However, some have benefitted from the UK's membership of the European Union's MEDIA (Measures to Encourage the Development of the Audiovisual Industries) programme, launched in 1991 and renamed Creative Europe in January 2014 when audiovisual assistance was merged with support for music, literature and heritage. This programme does not directly fund productions but, through grants and interest-free loans to producers and distributors, promotes European co-operation through development awards

such as the European Script Fund, distribution support and training programmes (Jäckel 2003a, 67-80; Liz 2016, 37-61). Between 2014 and 2016, the Creative Europe fund supported 283 UK ‘cultural and creative companies’ (Creative Europe in the UK 2016). Several, including Number 9 as discussed below, benefitted from slate funding, enabling them to spread risk over a series of productions. And although the BFI, which, from 2010, assumed control of public provision for the UK film industry, has not supported re-joining Eurimages, it has supported continued membership of the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production as part of its drive to ‘[s]ustain strong partnership working within Europe to benefit UK screen sectors through working with our European Screen Agency counterparts’ (BFI 2017a). These European Agencies (e.g. the Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Norsk filminstitut) invested £340 million in supporting 66 British films between 2014 and 2016 (BFI 2017b, 232).

The sums involved in these schemes are relatively modest and have never matched their ambitions to challenge American dominance (Crusafon 2016, 91, 95). Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s argument, made nearly twenty years ago, still obtains: ‘Even where [European] films are individually competitive, it is in a market geared in the first instance to American-led supply’ with each European film having to ‘carve out its own niche in the marketplace’ (1998, 10-11). The key problem remains not production – the number of European films made each year significantly exceeds that of the US – but distribution and market penetration (Crusafon 2016, 84, 89). In light of these economic disparities, Andrew Higson argues that although European co-productions currently represent a ‘small but important aspect of the British film industry’ (2015, 136), most British producers see them as funding opportunities rather than cultural exchanges. He characterises British producers’ engagement with Europe as ‘generally short term, small scale, piecemeal and opportunistic, while official UK policy



remains highly Eurosceptic, focused as it is so much on the attractions of inward investment' (2015, 130). He concludes that it is the US-backed big-budget action films that perform conspicuously well in Europe thus continuing to encourage British producers to look to Hollywood rather than Europe. Huw Jones, noting that the lack of specific financial subsidies for co-productions makes European collaborations difficult for UK producers who engage in far fewer co-productions than their Continental counterparts, reaches a similar conclusion (Jones 2016; see also Jones 2017).

Although it is difficult to gainsay the economic validity of these arguments, they are, I suggest, too narrowly focused on identifiable co-productions with European partners and downplay the function of Europe and European cinema as an important conceptual and cultural space whose value often outweighs purely commercial considerations (Elsaesser 2015, 28). As discussed in the introduction, the idea of European-ness remains an active element in the identity and habitus of some film producers. Monica Sassatelli argues that whereas a national identity is based on a 'strong sense of "being" ... [and is] endowed with specific contents', European identity is based on conscious choice and is 'more about a sense of "becoming"' that is continuously evolving (2009, 198). She notes that European identity is becoming increasingly plural and 'nomadic' and that it is 'necessary to examine how this operates in individual instances' (2009, 39-40). With this injunction in mind, the remainder of this article will explore the specific example of Number 9 Films whose European-ness does not reside in specific geographical connections but in a particular idea of what cinema is. This conception determines the company's attitude to filmmaking that involves a conscious and deliberate commitment to a mode of production that is constantly evolving but whose consistent goal is to support an eclectic and cosmopolitan range of creative talent to make interesting and engaging films, both in choice of subject matter and in aesthetic treatment.

As will be demonstrated, Number 9's European orientation does not mean ignoring America – dealing with American distributors and gaining access to the North American market is a fact of life for any UK feature filmmakers operating above low-budget levels – but of finding ways of working with various UK and European agencies that circumvents the need to find major US studio finance. Number 9 attempts to occupy this emerging conceptual and industrial 'middle ground' through a series of interlocking collaborations (a 'system') whose complexity and precariousness – in an international marketplace dominated by the 'imperium' of US-based multinationals – create a range of challenges. As will be discussed, Number 9 has multiple identities at once national (British), supranational (European) and transnational, exhibiting a global cosmopolitanism in its search for talent.

### **Number 9 Films – A UK/European Company**

#### **Identity, Core Values, Choice of Subject and Mode of Production**

Elizabeth Karlsen and Stephen Woolley co-founded Number 9 – named after the avant-garde Beatles' track 'Revolution 9' on *The White Album* (1968) – in January 2002. The company's core identity, as promoted on its website, lies in 'forging relationships with a wide range of talent in the UK, across Europe and in the States' (<http://number9films.co.uk/about>). Both founders have significant track records as producers, are highly networked and nurture a series of longstanding collaborations, combining what Woolley characterises as an 'an American philosophy of enthusiasm and hard work and an appreciation of the art of cinema that is more European' (Dawtre 1999, 9) alongside a deep commitment to indigenous UK production as an important economic and cultural asset. Each has a wide-ranging knowledge

of the film industry. Woolley is a former exhibitor – he owned the Scala Cinema in London and curated its radical and eclectic programming) – and distributor: he co-managed Palace Video, which acquired, marketed and distributed over 250 independent and European films), as well as a producer, co-founding and running Palace Pictures then Scala Productions with partner Nik Powell (Finney 1996a; Macnab 2018, 47-75). The cosmopolitan Karlsen, American-born, with a British mother and Norwegian father, had performed a variety of industry roles. She worked in New York as a runner, proof reader and maker of short films, progressing to production co-ordinator and assistant editor, before moving to London in 1988 as assistant to Woolley at Palace Pictures. Karlsen became Head of Production, a role she continued at Scala Productions before forming Number 9 with Woolley (Picardie 1996; Rees 2008).

The company was founded on the pair's desire to make films with which they have what Karlsen describes as a strong 'emotional and intellectual connection' and to work with filmmakers with whom they have close cultural affinity. She insists: 'We don't chase the budget. We chase the idea and we chase the talent.' This is typical of a European mode of production that emphasises the importance of long-term collaborations based on mutual respect and trust in which the producer is an active creative force rather than having a purely financial or deal-making role (Finney 1996b, 21, 44; Jäckel 2003, 35-36). In order to have a creative role, both are intimately involved in every aspect of the individual productions in which they are the lead producer. This includes making the initial pitch to possible financiers, being on set throughout filming, exercising a strong influence over casting, scripting and the musical score and actively promoting the finished film (Jilla 1995, A4; Petrie, 1991, 178; Rawsthorn 1998, 11). However, both respect the sovereignty of the director during production.

Working in this ‘European’ way is also, particularly for Woolley, a deliberate avoidance of being answerable to a major corporation and thus part of the American ‘system’:

I think part of Number 9’s identity is that it’s not an American company. I spent a long time in the 1980s and 1990s in America ... If you’re living and working within the main studio system in Los Angeles, producers are not producers as we know them in Europe ... once you’re making a film within a studio, once you’ve agreed the budget and the script and the cast, you’ll go into a system. The subject matter that you work with becomes the studio’s subject matter, not the subject matter you choose. Whereas in Europe, if you’re making a film you’re not part of a system, *you create the system yourself* [my emphasis].

His decision to go to America was typical of British producers – ‘It’s the big apple we all bite’ – but one he now sees as mistaken, a failure of nerve and imagination. Reflecting on the lure of the American market, Karlsen opined: ‘Have we distinguished ourselves in this regard? We’ve distinguished ourselves through making independent films largely through British talent and European talent that has been developed here. You need to be very aware of that as your core business and where your strengths lie.’

In order to chase ‘talent’ and create a specific system round particular films, Karlsen and Woolley have built up a network of collaborators with which they work consistently in different combinations in order to access additional finance and to spread the risk. Its partners are not necessarily chosen because they are European but consist of people and companies it respects and trusts and with which it shares a European conception of filmmaking. Number 9 has co-produced with the American Indie company Killer Films (Christine Vachon – who

Karlsen had worked with before she joined Palace Pictures – and Pamela Koffler) on three occasions: *Mrs Harris* (2005), *Carol* (2015) and *Colette* (2018); twice with the UK-based Wildgaze Films (Amanda Posey and Finola Dwyer, who both started out at Palace Pictures) on *Stoned* (2005) and *Their Finest* (2016); and three times with an Irish company, Parallel Films (Alan Moloney) for *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), *Perrier's Bounty* (2009), and *Byzantium* (2012). Number 9's determination to 'chase the talent' has led to an eclectic range of films, as Woolley acknowledges: 'We've never sat down and talked about the kind of films we make. We've never identified a type.' A glance at the company's oeuvre reveals a varied mix of genres: comedies, crime thrillers, biopics, horror and melodramas. However, two consistencies emerge: most are adaptations and the majority exhibit a preference for 'female-driven subjects'. The latest production (at time of writing) – *Colette* starring Keira Knightley – is a biopic about the bisexual Parisian author and depicts her struggle to have her creativity recognised and her sexual preferences accommodated. Karlsen is currently chair of Women in Film and Television and her championing of films with female leads is partly an attempt to offer more varied and rewarding roles to female actors and hence for audiences. It is also a response to Hollywood's ingrained sexism, a deliberate challenge to its 'circle of men hiring men and telling men's stories': another powerful reason to produce in Europe rather than for a US studio. Thus rather than through choice of subject, or setting, or source of funding, Number 9's European identity is defined by its mode of production and the producer's creative role.

Several other UK companies have a similar ethos, including Qwerty Films founded in 1999 by Michael Kuhn, ex-CEO of Polygram Filmed Entertainment, and the more venerable Recorded Picture Company founded by Jeremy Thomas in 1974. As Christopher Meir demonstrates, Recorded Picture has a corresponding eclecticism in subject matter but one

bound together by the centrality of Thomas as an active producer able to work with a very wide spectrum of international talent, promoting a 'brand' that espouses the centrality of the auteur director, high-brow literary sources, controversial sexual politics and the innovative treatment of genre (Meir 2009).

Turning to individual productions, I wish to argue that Number 9's European mode of production is, paradoxically, nowhere better demonstrated than in *Carol* (2015), despite its New York setting, its American source novel (Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel (*Salt*), cast (Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara), director (Todd Haynes) and its co-production company, Killer Films, located in New York City. Karlsen described the film as a 'passion project' that she spent fourteen years, on and off – including steeping herself in the subject matter, reading Highsmith's diaries and letters held in a Zurich library – getting to the screen because of her conviction of its importance and singularity: 'It was so scandalous at the time because it has a happy ending. Even today you can count on one hand the number of gay stories with a happy ending. But it is also just a wonderful love story, with two very powerful women at its heart. And that, sadly, is still very hard to find, even in 2015.' (Ellis-Petersen 2015). *Carol* is also aesthetically experimental, deliberately shot on super 16mm to give a grainy texture to the images and with an ethereal, elliptical sense of time. *Carol* thus exemplifies the kind of 'quality' films Karlsen is committed to producing, ones by writers and directors 'who have a vision' making stories that are 'challenging, narratively, distinctive in their filmmaking aesthetic or the stories that they tell, and the way those stories are told.' *Carol* is both a European film because of its challenging subject matter and innovative visual style but also an internationally cosmopolitan one through its partnership with an American company that has a similar commitment to a radical gender politics. *Carol* was both a *succès d'estime* –

nominated for numerous awards including six Oscars – and a box-office hit earning a worldwide gross of over \$40 million.<sup>5</sup>

This mode of production also defines the European-ness of *Their Finest* (2016), which takes its title from Winston Churchill's wartime exhortation and depicts the making of a Second World War feature film about the evacuation of Dunkirk. In part this film speaks powerfully to Woolley's strongly national as well as European identity, offering him the opportunity to explore his relationship to a major period of British film-making in which films 'really mattered', and became a means of 'applauding our British cinema heritage, which, as a producer, excites me as much as making the film'. Like Karlsen, Woolley immersed himself in the subject matter, conceiving himself as a 'resource' by viewing every wartime feature film and drama-documentary no matter how obscure or hard to locate. In this way, Woolley became a 'walking library' to ensure that the cast and crew understood the milieu and its attendant sensibility. This was particularly important for its Danish director, Lone Sherfig, a European creative talent chosen for her ability to understand and realise a story which shows a young woman, Catrin (Gemma Arterton) making the transition from secretary to screenwriter and in the process gradually beginning to discover her own voice, resist the patronage of male colleagues and assert her independence. Its narrative, like that of *Carol*, offers a challenge to the hegemony of telling 'men's stories' and also highlights the historical ingrained sexism of British companies such as Ealing Studios.<sup>6</sup> Thus the European-ness of *Their Finest* is expressed through its use of European talent and its gender politics rather than its resonantly British subject matter.

### **A European Business Model: Occupying the Vacated 'Middle Ground'**

## Development and Production Finance

In interview Woolley commented: ‘Our projects are films we love but ones that we can raise money to develop and finally make.’ Number 9 occupies what has emerged as a ‘middle ground’ between action-driven blockbusters and low-budget indigenous productions that has been vacated by Hollywood studios, which now are entirely focused on high-budget productions forming franchises that can be exploited across multiple platforms (Balio 2013, 25-26). Number 9’s films have budgets that are typically between £7-10 million whose subject matter does not have an obvious or automatic appeal in the global marketplace either through their genre or the presence of a major Hollywood star.<sup>7</sup> Karlsen argues that these are ‘the hardest films to get made now. It’s the section of the financing market that has really collapsed.’ Her view is corroborated by Mark Batey, chief executive of the Film Distributors Association, who described this sector as ‘incredibly treacherous. It is really difficult to sustain viable life. Everything is very risky indeed.’ (Wiseman 2017). Number 9 has to rely on ‘patchwork’ or ‘jigsaw’ financing from a range of different sources that is typically European, what Karlsen referred to as a ‘European model that’s worked well for us so far’.

Although, as noted, the UK has consistently privileged inward investment and the interests of American companies, the UKFC (later BFI) directly supports the development, production, distribution and sales of indigenous films through its Film Fund that prioritises the ‘risky end of the commercial spectrum’ with projects assessed on their ‘cultural value’ as much as their commercial potential (Presence 2017, 253). Although Number 9 received development money for individual films – *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (2007) and *Made in Dagenham* (2011) – more significant was the award of £400,000 in December 2004 that enabled Number 9 to develop an initial portfolio of projects that would spread the risk. This



award formed part of the UKFC's Development Fund, which had a broad remit to invest in companies as well as projects. Number 9's award was part of a second cycle of investment in which £2.5 million was given to 'seven experienced robust companies' – including Recorded Picture and Blueprint Pictures, another company that tries to occupy this perilous 'middle ground' – that had in-house expertise to bring in match funding from industry, manage increased development spend, collaborate with distributors and sales agents and offer opportunities for new talent and convert projects regularly (Doyle et. al. 2015, 93-94). Thus companies receiving slate funding had to persuade the UKFC of their potential commercial viability through the quality of their partnerships. Number 9's key partners were Film4, the sales company Intandem, the Irish Film Board (via a partnership with Parallel Films), and the now defunct distribution company Tartan Films. Karlsen is emphatic about the award's significance: 'Without slate funding, I don't think we'd be where we are today. Most of the projects bar two have gone into production' (quoted in Macnab 2011).

However, like most UK independent film production companies, Number 9 relies on television finance as its principal source of funding. This money comes from Film4 and BBC Films, the semi-autonomous film arms of two of the UK's public service broadcasters; currently neither ITV nor Channel 5 fund feature films. In addition to production funding, Film4 and BBC Films also often supply development funding that is much harder to obtain. As noted, Film4 was one of Number 9's initial partners and that collaboration formed part of Woolley's longer term relationship with Channel 4, whose actively interventionist policy in funding UK films was based on models derived from the major European television industries in France, Italy and Germany (Hill 1996, 156, 158) and supported a theatrical release as well as broadcast. In Woolley's estimation, 'British cinema as we know it now was launched by Channel 4. They initiated a more serious approach to filmmaking because until

then all the major directors were working in TV ... it made us think British cinema was vibrant and serious and could make money'. In his view, Channel 4 gave British producers the confidence that they could succeed through encouraging experimentation and supporting individual talent rather than investing in 'safe' genres or tested formulae thus facilitating an international, primarily European, dimension to UK filmmaking.

Woolley has a clear idea of the type of films that appeal to Film4, 'cutting edge ... films that would probably be more likely to win awards and more likely to create new talent, to stir, to shake and unsettle', such as the low-budget visceral thriller *Hyena* (2014) or *Carol*. By contrast, he considers that BBC Films is rather more conservative, more concerned with how a film will play to mainstream audiences and command sizeable viewing figures when screened on one of the corporation's main channels. Thus Woolley sought investment from the BBC for *Made in Dagenham*, based on the real life story of a group of female machinists which took on the Ford Motor Company in 1968 in order to achieve equal pay that is highly political but humorous and celebratory rather than didactic. *Their Finest* also fitted the BBC's preferred model of 'intelligent, middlebrow filmmaking' (Woods 2017; see also Andrews 2014). He contends that there exists a 'very good balance' between Film4 and the BBC: 'It's good that they don't cross over too much. There is a clear distinction, so you know the kinds of projects that you would want to take to one or the other.' Although this differentiation is significant, both funders enable Number 9 to make medium-budget quality films for the middle ground of the international marketplace.

As with a number of British production companies including Aardman Animations and Lupus Films, Number 9 has also directly benefitted from European funding: the European Development Fund to make *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* and slate funding

from Creative Europe in 2014 (€180,000) and 2016 (€210,000) that provided development funding for a range of films (Creative Europe UK 2016). In this respect, it is surprising that Number 9 has only engaged in one officially defined European film, *Youth* (2015), an Italian/French/Swiss/UK co-production. On one level this questions their professed European-ness, but the argument in this article is that Karlsen and Woolley are driven by the ‘talent’ they wish to work with more than available sums of money and are always keen to exert maximum creative control over their productions and work with those they consider sympathetic to their vision for a particular film. In this instance they were keen to participate in a project they did not initiate because of their admiration for its director Paolo Sorrentino – described as ‘arguably the most high profile Italian director to emerge since the new millennium’ (Marlow-Mann 2011, 97). They considered that because a portion of the film was shot in London and one of the main characters, a retired composer played by Michael Caine, was British, they were involved in a collaboration that had a genuine creative and cultural affinity between its partners rather than being a factitious ‘Euro-pudding’. Other films have obtained pockets of European funding, including *Their Finest*, which, through its director Lone Scherfig, accessed funding from the Danish Film Institute, as well as attracting European financial support from the Creative Europe programme and Sweden’s Film i Väst (Film Goes West), a public funder, and Filmgate Films also based in Gothenburg. This complex tapestry of funding sources demonstrates Number 9’s agility in finding finance that will not compromise its creative vision but also the complexities of this European way of working.

## **Distribution and Exhibition**

As discussed earlier, the key problem for European films is distribution and market penetration. Thus an even more significant aspect of the European producer's role in creating a 'system' around an individual film is to find potential distributors and exhibitors. Woolley, in particular, uses his industry experience to cultivate 'very close relations with all the distribution heads in the UK and much of Europe'. These networks enable him to choose the companies that are sympathetic to the cultural values of the specific production and which can tailor distribution, sales and promotion to the film's particular requirements, which enables Number 9 to exploit its qualities to maximum advantage. Number 9 often works with sales agents – the sales agency Intandem was one of Number 9's initial slate funding partners – which negotiate licensing deals in various territories and have become important to independent filmmakers that have to depend increasingly on international pre-sales if a film is to recoup its costs (Meir 2016, 55). Sales agents are increasingly morphing into sales, marketing, financing and distribution companies such as HanWay Films, the sales arm of Recorded Picture, with which Number 9 works frequently, which is dedicated to collaborations with 'visionary filmmakers'. Number 9 also has a close relationship with the distributor Lionsgate UK, which has always 'prided itself on its independent and entrepreneurial spirit, and on its support for Brit[ish] filmmakers' (Barraclough 2015b) and works closely with producers on the precise marketing of particular films. These companies may also provide production finance and development money, as did HanWay for *Made in Dagenham* and *Their Finest* and the German distribution company DCM, one of the companies that distributed *Carol*.

One of the most important companies is Studiocanal, which has distributed and part-financed several of Number 9's films within Europe, including *Byzantium* and *Carol*. As Christopher Meir argues in this volume, Studiocanal, although a major international corporation, has

positioned itself explicitly as a European firm whose choice of production companies its partners is guided by its 'European sensibility' and a preference for working with European artists who have singular visions and styles that provide both cultural capital and the company's distinctiveness within the international marketplace. In interview Karlsen enthused about Studiocanal's importance in demonstrating that it is possible to make films in Europe using a 'European model'. Number 9 also works frequently with Ingenious Film Partners, an investment company that is able to cash-flow tax credit, set against a pre-sale in the North American market, which can provide nearly 20 per cent of the production funding. Although Ingenious recoups its investment money first, it provides the crucial financial support before the revenue stream from box-office sales comes through.

However, Number 9 cannot ignore the US market which is crucial to its economic viability, as Woolley acknowledged: 'It's hugely important for us to get US distribution which most British films don't.' Because the big American studios are no longer interested in working with independent producers on 'small' films, here too deals with North American distributors have to be worked out for each individual film. Number 9 has worked with several, including The Weinstein Company (TWC), Sony Pictures Classics, Tribeca, Main Street, Fox Searchlight, and STX Entertainment that distributed *Their Finest*. Relationships here are characteristically less close than with European companies.

As an ex-exhibitor, Woolley is only too aware of the need for a producer to create audience interest in a forthcoming release, particularly for films that do not have obvious 'hooks' on which to hang a promotional campaign. He averred: 'We know it's hard for British films to succeed. We need to support them, because we're fighting against big movies like *Avatar*. But the thing is, so many people in Britain who make films say: "Let's not over-hype them."'

I don't. I think – let's go out and sell the film.'(Quoted in Gritten 2010, 28). In contradistinction to the Hollywood blockbusters aimed at a younger audience, Number 9's films are often targeted primarily at the 'grey pound', the older audience that is becoming a significant market for contemporary filmmakers with 21.7 per cent of the total only slightly below that of 15-24 year olds (29.1 per cent) (BFI 2017b, 172). A trade reviewer commented that *Colette* 'ought to appeal to older art-house crowds' (Grierson 2018). In interview, Woolley revealed that *Their Finest* had been made with 'an eye on the older audience' and that it had performed very well in 'lesser towns' and the London suburbs rather than in the West End. He also noted that its success with European and Antipodean audiences had offset a 'somewhat plodding' performance in the US.<sup>8</sup> Like most European producers, Woolley and Karlsen use festivals and other showcases to promote their films to maximum advantage for exhibitors and more discerning audiences. *Their Finest*, for instance, was premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (10 September 2016), the London Film Festival (13 October 2016) and at Sundance (January 2017) before going on general release in the US/UK in April 2017, accompanied by extensive television advertising which, along with word-of-mouth, Woolley considers the most effective form of promotion.

### **Diversification: High End Television Production**

Number 9 is unusual among European and UK film production companies in devoting itself almost exclusively to feature film production, predicated on what Woolley referred to as the 'Old Model' of funding. However, in June 2016, a deal was announced between Number 9 and the UK television company RED Production, to produce a television series adapted from *Portrait of a Lady*, with finance to be provided by the BBC for one of its primetime Sunday evening slots. As trade commentators noted, the partnership offers a synergy between RED's

intimate knowledge of television production and Number 9's extensive experience of making period drama which RED lacks. The companies also have the cultural compatibility that is crucial to a successful partnership. Karlsen stated: 'We believe we share a sensibility with Nicola [Shindler, CEO of RED Production] of being drawn towards material with complex and compelling female lead characters, which is one of the defining elements of *Portrait of a Lady*.' (Wiseman, 2016).<sup>9</sup> In addition to a shared gender politics, RED is another UK production company that has a European rather than American orientation, underlined when it preferred acquisition by a European company – Studiocanal – in 2013 rather than look to an American buyer (Spicer and Presence 2016). This collaboration between RED and Number 9 was brokered by Studiocanal, which has ambitions to expand its European television operations.

In making this shift, Number 9 is finally following the pattern of most UK (and European) film production companies into making 'high-end' television drama (HETV), which benefits from UK tax relief. HETV is now regarded by many UK film producers as a way of underwriting their film work (Macnab 2016b, 40) and is rapidly becoming a significant component of the British screen media landscape, generating £912 million production spend in 2016 (BFI 2017b, 212). HETV represents a highly significant convergence between the film and television industries in which there is equivalent cultural and economic status in the production of 'quality' drama. Although the move is being led by Karlsen – Woolley is somewhat more cautious because television's mode of production does not lend itself to the hands-on role for the producer that is his *metier* – this new direction offers the security of collaborating with a highly successful television company in what is now a lucrative international marketplace, one that has a 'very long tail' that can be exploited across multiple platforms (Macnab 2016b, 41). It therefore increases the possibility that Number 9 will be

able to sustain itself as a fully independent UK production company that can continue to compete internationally through a dual production model. However, this market is also dominated by the American ‘imperium’, new global players such as Amazon and Netflix with their subscription model of finance and audience reach that will have profound consequences for European producers (De Vinck and Pauwels 2015).

### **Conclusion: Being European**

This article has demonstrated that in an era in which cultural identities and affinities are becoming more multiple, plural and nomadic, ‘being European’ is still a meaningful term for a contemporary UK production company as an important conceptual marker of differentiation from the dominant model of Hollywood filmmaking even if that distinction is being reimagined and reconfigured in an era of regional ‘porosity’ dominated by transnational flows of money and talent and is no longer encompassed by geographical location. Focusing on Number 9 Films, I have shown the ways in which being European comprehends more than a search for markets and sources of finance having, at its core, a commitment to a mode of production that respects the cultural value of film and its importance as an artistic as well as commercial activity. This requires Karlsen and Woolley to seek a cosmopolitan range of collaborations and partnerships – UK, European and American (Indie) – with which they have a cultural affinity and believe can bring the projects they have chosen to fruition. Thus their latest film, *Colette*, received investment from Bold Films, an American independent film production and finance company that styles itself as making ‘talent-driven, studio quality films, which have worldwide commercial appeal’ (<http://boldfilms.com/about/>), a description that could equally be applied to Number 9.



This core European identity requires Number 9 to produce ‘quality’ films that occupy a precarious middle ground both aesthetically: the fluid border between art-house and mainstream production, and industrially: between indigenous production and a globally-orientated internationalism funded by American studios, the twin production modes that dominate current UK feature film-making. Occupying this space requires Karlsen and Woolley to seek funding and support from a range of sources and their negotiated dependence on national agencies – BBC Films, Film4 and BFI funding – is more important than Number 9’s reliance on pan-European ones. This orientation to national funding bodies is unsurprising because, as a UK company, Number 9 exists within a fundamentally Atlanticist and Eurosceptic UK film policy regime, one that has failed historically to encourage UK producers to engage in European co-production despite some palpable advantages, a disposition that will probably be intensified by Brexit, which undoubtedly will make it more difficult, culturally and economically, to work with European partners, to access European funding and to operate in that perilous middle ground that Number 9 Films occupies. This is not the place to discuss those consequences at length, nor have they emerged at the time of writing (October 2018) with any clarity. However, the European co-production treaty will continue as it was instigated by the Council of Europe and there is the hope that the UK will remain part of the Creative Europe programme akin to Norway that participates without being an EU member (Macnab 2016a). However, a recent article has argued that while the pound’s post-Brexit plummet has been good for inward investment, it has put increased pressure on UK independent producers and distributors and will encourage the migration of talent elsewhere (Wiseman 2017). Karlsen was one of the overwhelming majority of UK producers who expressed her dismay that access to Creative Europe funding for both single projects and slate may no longer be available (in Macnab 2016a). A more hopeful sign is the emergence of a European corporation, Studiocanal, that actively

encourages a focus on the European rather than a North American market and whose shared European cultural values and affinities have been important for Number 9 and a number of other UK production companies, including RED and also Aardman Animations (Spicer 2017).

Although not an evaluation of the successes and failures of Number 9 as a production company, this account has emphasised the crucial creative role played by two enlightened producers who, in this case, have shared sensibilities, but also specific areas of interest and particular cultural knowledges. Karlsen gravitates towards American sources (*Carol*, *Portrait of a Lady*); Woolley towards British ones (1960s pop icons, the Second World War and London settings). Each takes the lead on particular productions creating a ‘system’ around each individual film that carefully nurtures projects from inception to exhibition and forges the space within which auteur directors can operate to maximum advantage. That system is deliberately differentiated from the Hollywood studio model, enabling Karlsen and Woolley to retain creative control of their projects and incorporate a commitment to a progressive gender politics as part of their endeavour to produce films that tell distinctive stories artistically. As commercially savvy producers who wish their films to be seen by as wide an audience as possible, Karlsen and Woolley combine European cultural values with American hype in promoting films in an attempt to make international productions that are distinctive as well as enabling the company to be financially sustainable. The recent shift into television production may provide additional stability in the notoriously volatile film industry and allow Number 9 to maintain its intelligent middlebrow filmmaking and television production that is prepared to take calculated risks and which offers audiences the continued possibility of a distinctively different kind of screen drama.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, between 2007 when the scheme was introduced and 2014, Disney accrued over £170 million in tax relief (Sylt 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> The article builds on the investigations undertaken during a three-year European research project: Success in the Film and Television Industries. (See <http://sifti.no/index.php/en/> and the summative collection: Bakøy, Puijk and Spicer 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The author conducted two interviews with Woolley: in Bristol on 2 October 2014 and in London on 17 May 2017; the interview with Karlsen was in Bristol on 12 December 2015. All unattributed quotations are from this source. I am grateful to both for their willingness to discuss the company at length, for supplying budgetary information about selected films and for their detailed comments on an earlier draft that enabled me to remove several misperceptions. Perry was interviewed in Bristol on 28 November 2017.

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth analysis of one British producer's attempts to co-produce with Eastern European partners see Spicer 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See note 7.

<sup>6</sup> Catrin's character is based loosely on Diana Morgan the only woman in-house writer at Ealing who recalled the studio's misogyny: 'We'll send in the Welsh bitch to put in the nausea', i.e. write the more romantic and sentimental aspects of the screenplay. See Nelmes 2014, 62.

<sup>7</sup> *Carol*'s budget of nearly £12 million was at the upper end of Number's 9's financial envelope; *Their Finest* cost £8 million (figures courtesy of Number 9 Films).

<sup>8</sup> According to Box Office Mojo, *Their Finest* earned \$5,282,720 at the UK box-office (higher than *Carol*, which was \$3,976,888) but \$3,605,484 in the US box-office in contrast to *Carol*'s \$12,711,491.

<sup>9</sup> Karlsen also observed that television is 'far more successful at diversity on every level. That is really attractive to me working as a woman in the industry' (quoted in Macnab 2016b, 41).