Rene Clair’s A Nous La Liberte (1931), can be shown to enunciate the ‘national’ through Hayward’s ’cartography of the national’ in film. A Nous ideologically presents conflicting institutional and social organizations diegetically, as well as affirming cultural empire-building and countering iconoclasm within the film’s modes of production. In A Nous, sound is appropriated for the dissemination of indigenous cultural myth that provides a pretense for the film enunciating the national more than a confirmation of such. It is the collaborative aspect of the production of A Nous that is the clearest form of its enunciation of the national, especially with respect to its self-reflexive treatment of this aspect, within the narrative of the film.

Hayward recognizes the concept of the ’national’ as coming close to myth through its tautological and teleological definitional roots.[[1]](#endnote-1) This ’mythic’ quality of the national gives rise to its expression through ideology and is largely influenced by the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution.[[2]](#endnote-2) The ideology of the national manifests through a triptych of meanings - arrogance/optimism, malaise/morosity, and security.[[3]](#endnote-3) These meanings render the concept of the ‘national’ toward becoming an insular concept, where Althusserian ‘Subjects’ reassure national identity through ideologies that demarcate and recognize ’otherness’ on both a foreign and indigenous level.[[4]](#endnote-4) Clair’s A Nous, permeates a particular ideology to affirm the ‘national’ from an indigenous cultural perspective within the narrative and diegetic of the film, while he also employs a mode of production for the film that mirrors this enunciation of the national, specifically through the use of sound and set design. Clair’s enunciation of the national in A Nous, expresses the film as a ‘national’ product through all seven distinct typologies of Hayward’s cartography.

The first typology is narrative and recognizes that film narrative constructs the nation.[[5]](#endnote-5) A film can use narrative to confront the spectator with an explicit or implicit textual construction of the nation.[[6]](#endnote-6) In A Nous, Louis and Emile ’traverse’ varied echelons of urban social construction in that modernist period. Louis’s venture takes him from the desolate landscape of prison to the open and accessing world of bourgeois capitalism. Meanwhile, Emile transitions from his prison setting to the ironically more stifling “liberated” lifestyle of urban factory-bound proletariat. Clair endows the narrative with a full spectrum of living contexts within the urban French environment (even Emile gets a taste of vagrancy, if only briefly). Clair uses lengthy tracking shots to frame the urban environments as vast in a confined way, while Emile’s brief moment in the sun is captured through high and low angle point-of-view shots that provide a sense of vastness as well - the open and liberating “great outdoors” of nature. By the end of the film, the long dolly has been ’appropriated’ to frame the “liberated” lifestyle of the factory collective.

A Nous has a narrative trajectory tightly bound by the juxtapositional sequences of the physical environments and corresponding social contexts. The characters represent ’types’ (both self-reflexively and ironically in the case of Emile and Louis) more than the film approaches them as psychologically distinct individuals who mould their environment from their wills and desires. Thusly, Clair shifts narrative progression from individual characters to groups, collectives, and environments and does so by utilizing set designs of the mise-en-scene which underscore the more dominant theme of allegorical relationships between the varying environmental contexts. Lazare Meerson was the art director for the film and had worked with Clair a year earlier on Under the Roofs of Paris. While influenced by Soviet Constructivism, German Expressionism, and traditional naturalism, Meerson was most concerned with ’authenticity’ and the ability to use sets in a way that gives rise to atmosphere which elicits mood and meaning synergistically with the inspiration of the director.[[7]](#endnote-7) Certain elements of the mise-en-scene and the sets of A Nous help construct identity within the narrative. The mirror in Louis’s mansion is a place for self-reflection on an individual level, yet it is never used by the bourgeois that pass by it. The self-reflection of the bourgeois is indirect as evidenced through the dinner guest’s attraction to the melancholy crooner‘s ballad. The prisoners and factory workers use each other as self-reflexive points of reference. They are both individualized and collectivized in a direct way (which also has the effect of assuring a de-individualization overall). The juxtaposition of prison and factory life is emphasized throughout the narrative by institutional uniforms and vast hollow-like concrete complexes. Clair demarcates institutions (school as well) as being constructions that oppress social organization, and that workers as well as the buildings themselves can be labeled (in this case by number) as sole property of magnates that control them. Clair’s reliance on Meerson’s set design enunciates the national within the narrative by overtly providing a direct example of French *fraternite* in the mode of production of the film itself. Meerson’s sets are a conduit for the collectivization theme of the narrative.

Hayward’s second typology references genres as enunciating the national within cinema. She recognizes comedy as a long-lasting tradition in French film genre and reflects on the trending up of the *polar* (cop/thriller) genre in national representation starting in the early 1950s.[[8]](#endnote-8) A Nous features eight slapstick chase sequences reminiscent of early cinema attractions. Sight gags are also prominent throughout the film, such as when the dinner party guests get to “have” their cake and eat it too. A Nous provides some antecedents for the *polar* genre in its blackmailer subplot. Although, the film is often considered a political satire, Clair keeps the mood up-beat by maintaining a reverence for tried-and-true cinematic comedy techniques. This is punctuated in the final comedy sequence when the high winds of nature usher in a new era of lifestyle and physically usher out the old caste. The final sequences of the film provide nature Herself with the task of reorganizing society into those with her favour and those without it, and in this sense, Clair defers political ideology toward an appeal to the “common sense” of a higher authority (Nature, but not God per se).

The third typology of the cartography addresses codes and conventions. Film can enunciate the national through its labor and production practices.[[9]](#endnote-9) A Nous is a prime example of a film that is “self-reflexively national” in this regard. Clair was creating his films of the early 1930s within an economic environment that required artisanal modes of production and encouraged (if not necessitated) collaboration, co-production, and teamwork.[[10]](#endnote-10) The story of the film presents an ideal of collectivization and fraternity to achieve new forms of production and thus create a real form of liberty. One can imagine that Clair who relied on collaboration, co-production, and teamwork would hope that A Nous could become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy (it remains to be seen though how a film can create and reproduce itself with little more than minimal human supervision). A Nous is more than pointed political satire, it can be seen as French ‘national’ idealism expressing a desire out of necessity (stifled production with conversion to sound film) as much as it is surely affirming a need to shift ideologies and reorganize socially (increasingly expressed and then embodied by the Popular Front).[[11]](#endnote-11) A ‘national’ French history provides for the idealism and wish-making of A Nous as French people have radically changed their social organization and modes of production throughout history and can be relied on in the future for similar efforts bound by the national triumvirate credo of *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite*. Clair positions the cinema (ie. film industry) as a point of self-reflection for French people in a troubled time as well as endeavoring to have the film itself as a testament to that reality. A Nous is more than ‘agitprop’ - it is cinema itself. The salvation of the factory workers from capitalist oppression is as much an allegory to the social conditions of the French people of the 1930s as the diegetic phonograph’s vitality and evolution in modes of manufacturing allegorizes a need for the film industry to evolve beyond the national means of its day.

The fourth and fifth typologies refer directly to film casts. Gesturality, or gestural codes, are deeply rooted in a nation’s culture[[12]](#endnote-12) and are prominently placed in A Nous. Louis nurses Emile’s wounds on two occasions and both scenes are captured in a medium long-shot (and not through shot-reverse-shot editing). The static framing of these scenes are distinguished from the otherwise fluid mobility of Clair’s camera. They capture a continuity and simultaneity in cause and effect that underscore the meaning of a ‘national’ *fraternite*. The second of these scenes punctuates a sense of *egalite* as Emile and Louis’s social status is cast aside while the first of the two scenes is important to the overall theme of collaboration and fraternity leading eventually to *liberte.* Although, Louis and Emile have nothing more in common than sharing a prison cell (allegory for France, or urban France) they gesture to each other with congruence and “complicity” that forges their winks, smiles, and song into much more than friendship, but into a form of solidarity (Clair also utilizes ample eyeline matches and Le Hanaff‘s creative editing to further these kinds of unifying connections between characters). There are many ‘stars’ in the film that may indicate a pretense of the national, however the ‘star as sign’ enunciation of the national in A Nous is most pronounced through the contributions of those away from the direct scope of the lens - Georges Auric, Lazare Meerson, and Rene Hubert. Hubert was a veteran costume designer coveted by MGM and other Hollywood studios before returning to France to work with Clair and others.[[13]](#endnote-13) Meerson had been an influential member of the Films Albatros group and had shown a dedication to French production and an appreciation for French art forms and movements.[[14]](#endnote-14) Auric was a member of the group, “Les Six” with Satie and Cocteau. He was a film theorists as well as a renowned musical composer. His connection with Apollinaire’s *esprit nouveau* endowed his work with a national character defined by Apollinaire’s own mantra that, “art increasingly has a country. Poets must always express a milieu, a nation.”[[15]](#endnote-15) The contribution of these “stars” in the production of A Nous clearly identifies the film as a national product and would inevitably be influential in helping audiences to make the right associations between the film and its national relevance.

The sixth typology addresses the concepts of centrality and periphery with regards to a film enunciating the national. This typology is heavily based on a frame of reference and emphasizes ‘flux‘.[[16]](#endnote-16) A Nous is peripheral along three dimensions of the typology - it is not a Hollywood production, it utilizes sound from German labs as well as employing Clair’s more unique use of music in lieu of dialogue and natural sound, and it is an auteurist/artisanal production. In an international context, A Nous can be regarded as peripheral and thus could be distinctly national. The typology would require that the film have centrality also in order to enunciate the national. A Nous has a veteran filmmaker, is the third sound film of that filmmaker, and is a reunion of many of the personnel from previous French productions. When combining the central and peripheral aspects of A Nous we can understand the film as being central on a national level and thus reinforcing the ‘national’ centrally as well as peripherally against the dominant of classical Hollywood.

The seventh typology is the one most mired in its application to Clair’s A Nous. The typology claims that cinema mobilizes myth to enunciate the national. There is an aspect of historical transformation and appropriation - a kind of historicism.[[17]](#endnote-17) A Nous is a political satire that takes a radical look at state structures and social/economic organization. If the myth of the French historically struggling for liberty is indeed manifest, does A Nous represent a national character or a more fragmented set of representations? The extensive collaboration on the film seems to indicate that A Nous enunciates the national of the French film industry (and artisanal filmmaking specifically). The real issue arises when trying to assess the general public’s perception of the film enunciating the national character and ideology of a collectivized France. Even quantitative statistical analysis would fall short of gleaning the necessary information, as box office receipts for a film do not indicate whether particular audiences watched the film ten times. Also, film audiences do not represent the entire nation (although they may often come close) and not all film audiences flock to the same kind of films. Perhaps the most potent quagmire is illustrated in the example of filmmaking in Vichy where box office revenue could still recoup negative costs despite state censorship rendering film content into uniform expressions of strict state ideology - a far cry from enunciating the national, as was shown during the Occupation.[[18]](#endnote-18) This renders a vague assessment of whether A Nous enunciates the national by mobilizing national myth, however, Hayward recognizes that cinema often reconstructs myths of the nation that have already been inscribed by the indigenous culture.[[19]](#endnote-19) As such, Clair’s use of song and music in the film is perhaps the closest signifier for an expression of pre-existing indigenous culture. It is song and music in A Nous that enunciates the national within this seventh typology. It is song and music that also enunciates A Nous as centrally a French film.

Clair was once quoted as saying about the French film industry’s response to the conversion to sound film that, “the gravest error to which our enthusiasm carried us was to project the image of the only cinematographic art that we then knew into an unlimited future, without reckoning on the technical changes that were to modify its characteristics”.[[20]](#endnote-20) The shift to sound involved industrial regimentation that was not as conducive to the artisanal production style of French cinema.[[21]](#endnote-21) Clair was determined to cut his losses through the transition but refused to deny the ‘visual’ in the art of cinema as evidenced by his mobile camera and depth of field in A Nous.[[22]](#endnote-22) Clair felt that sound didn’t need to duplicate information in film.[[23]](#endnote-23) Musical score could replace the hackneyed effects of ‘novelty sounds’ as musical score was accepted as an overall enhancement to musical accompaniment in the silent film era.[[24]](#endnote-24) Clair believed in sound enhancing the visual, while Dale (also Boon and Kramer) even assert that Clair employed sound in an ambivalent manner that produces a dialectic between the two separate and distinct narratives of sound and visual in A Nous.[[25]](#endnote-25) Clair might agree as he purported that “the alternate” use of visual and sound produces the greatest effects.[[26]](#endnote-26) The use of sound was certainly an ‘economy of means’ in A Nous as complete sections of dialogue were replaced by non-diegetic musical score for many sequences including the first twenty-three minutes of the film. The collaboration of Auric and Clair employ song and music toward complete integration with the diegetic narrative of A Nous, however, examining the recurrence and significance of the march, waltz, and foxtrot, as well as the theme song to which the film gets its title, would simply be too ambitious and grounds for a new paper altogether (the integration of musical score in the film is splayed out meticulously by Roust[[27]](#endnote-27)). The motif of the LP record would also provide ample discussion through its complex use as a temporal icon indicating ellipsis throughout the film. However, it should be sufficient to acknowledge Clair’s use of sound in A Nous as enunciating the national (patriotic songs of freedom urging revolutionary spirit) and the national of the film industry as well (economy of means use of sound as an adaptive technique in a French cinema marred by the conversion that took it by surprise).

A Nous is a film rife with political satire and irony that is both self-reflexive of the medium by which it is produced and the socio-economic system that fostered its birth and growth. The film enunciates the national through Hayward’s cartography and presents the concept of “revolution” as a necessary undertaking and continuous evolution toward human progress as well as Clair urging revolution to be recognized as an ideologically “sound” endeavor pinned down to national myth with a reliance on fraternity to achieve equality and thus liberty. Based in this revolutionary humanitarian message underlying Clair’s work, the film achieves an enunciation of the national as well as enunciating the international - a borderless world visually and audibly hailed as utopian in the final sequence of A Nous La Liberte.

1. Susan Hayward, “Introduction: Defining the ‘national’ of a country’s cinematic production” (1993) in *French National Cinema*, pg. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ibid, pg. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ibid, pg. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ibid, pg. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ibid, pg. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ibid, pg. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Film Reference. “Meerson, Lazare.” Accessed Oct 28th, 2012. http://filmreference.com/meerson-lazare.html [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Susan Hayward, “Introduction: Defining the ‘national’ of a country’s cinematic production” (1993) in *French National Cinema*, pg. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. ibid, pg. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Alan Williams, “An Unexpected Upheaval” (1992) in *Republic of Images - A History of French Filmmaking*, pp. 157-183. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Alan Williams, “Politics, Poetics, and the Cinema” (1992) in *Republic of Images - A History of French Filmmaking*, pp. 213-242. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Susan Hayward, “Introduction: Defining the ‘national’ of a country’s cinematic production” (1993) in *French National Cinema*, pg. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. IMDB. “Rene Hubert.” Accessed Oct 28th, 2012. http://imdb.com/rene-hubert [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Film Reference. “Meerson, Lazare.” Accessed Oct 28th, 2012. http://filmreference.com/meerson-lazare.html [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Colin Roust, “Say it with Georges Auric - Film music and the esprit nouveau,” in *Twentieth-Century Music* 6:2 (April, 2011): pp. 133-153. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Susan Hayward, “Introduction: Defining the ‘national’ of a country’s cinematic production” (1993) in *French National Cinema*, pp. 13-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Susan Hayward, “Introduction: Defining the ‘national’ of a country’s cinematic production” (1993) in *French National Cinema*, pp. 15-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Evelyn Ehrlich, “Filmmaking in Vichy” and “German Initiatives” (1985) in *Cinema of Paradox*, pp.13-56. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Susan Hayward, “Introduction: Defining the ‘national’ of a country’s cinematic production” (1993) in *French National Cinema*, pp. 15-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. R.C. Dale, “A Clash of Intelligences - Sound vs. Image in Rene Clair’s “A Nous, La Liberte,” in *The French Review* 38:5 (April, 1965): pp. 637-644. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. R.C. Dale, “A Clash of Intelligences - Sound vs. Image in Rene Clair’s “A Nous, La Liberte,” in *The French Review* 38:5 (April, 1965): pp. 637-644. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Rene Clair, “The Art of Sound,” (1929) in *Film Sound Theory*, pg. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. R.C. Dale, “A Clash of Intelligences - Sound vs. Image in Rene Clair’s “A Nous, La Liberte,” in *The French Review* 38:5 (April, 1965): pp. 637-644. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Rene Clair, “The Art of Sound,” (1929) in *Film Sound Theory*, pp. 92-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. multiple entries -

    Jean-Pierre Boon, “Narrative Voices in “A Nous, La Liberte,” in *The French Review* 55:4 (March, 1982): pp. 514-519.

    R.C. Dale, “A Clash of Intelligences - Sound vs. Image in Rene Clair’s “A Nous, La Liberte,” in *The French Review* 38:5 (April, 1965): pp. 637-644.

    Steven Philip Kramer, “Rene Clair: Situation and Sensibility in “A Nous, La Liberte,” in *Literature Film Quarterly* 12:2 (1984): pp. 142-?(144). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Rene Clair, “The Art of Sound,” (1929) in *Film Sound Theory*, pg. 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Colin Roust, “Say it with Georges Auric - Film music and the esprit nouveau,” in *Twentieth-Century Music* 6:2 (April, 2011): pp. 133-153.

    “Quiet on the Set!” - Sound, Image and the Enunciation of the National in Rene Clair’s A Nous, La Liberte

    FCS310Y - French Cinema

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    8 pages + endnotes [↑](#endnote-ref-27)