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Launch Of Media International Programme

Fish? Some Thoughts Accompanying The Launch Of Media International Programme

It has been seventeen years since the European Commission introduced the first MEDIA programme to support the European audiovisual industry. Over this span of time MEDIA has grown into a tree with deep roots and numerous branches, reaching out to support almost all aspects of European filmmaking: the education and training of film professionals; script and project development; film production, distribution, exhibition, promotion; film festivals. Without MEDIA numerous internationally recognized film projects and events would never have happened, especially in the smaller European countries, where the history of cinema culture is not as vivid as in France, Italy, Germany or Great Britain. In these smaller countries, institutions that nourish film are not as developed, also their film markets are far from self sustainable.

One could argue that MEDIA has been quite a successful competitor to the unscrupulous film-producing machine called Hollywood, and a precious, wise initiative which Europe should be thankful for. MEDIA allows Europe to maintain a cinema driven by soul instead of money, and – as in the golden age of European cinema masters – to focus on creativity instead of being burdened and suppressed by the dictatorship and expectations of the market. Well, at least to a certain extent.

This article is not a fairytale, and MEDIA is not a pixy turning into gold whatever is touched by her magic wand. When one wants or needs to compete with harsh business machinery, it is impossible to do so without resembling or adopting certain tools and mechanisms of the one that one is fighting against. We can try to change them for the better but still need to follow them in one or another way. As a person who cares about cinema and honours the freedom of filmmaking, I can see several problematic side effects of MEDIA's programmes, and other similar bodies out there (namely numerous co-production markets attached to the biggest European film festivals). Some are narrowing the freedom of European cinema itself, while the others can harm the rest of non-European cinema. In the field of film production, it hurts to see how films from European countries with very different cultural backgrounds are embracing one, same narrative way of storytelling, or how such a high number of European films discuss similar questions of 'European identity', migration inside Europe, crossings of its borders or how popular the display of national (ethnic) stereotypes is... and how this kind of 'human interest' perspectives are intertwined into stories that, in their essence, have nothing to do with the enforced cultural and political agenda European funding bodies are looking for.

Sometimes it seems there is a list of topics and narrative techniques a filmmaker must follow in order to receive a grant or funds for his or her project to be developed and realized. Numerous directors complain quietly how European funding, and especially co-productions, have left traces on their films they don't like, and mention how they were bound to work in

environments (studios, landscapes...) or with film professionals (editors, directors of photography, set designers, even actors...) they wouldn't have chosen without being obliged to accept them as part of the international financial construction of their project. In the field of film festival organization the main condition for being able to apply for a European subsidy is to show a minimum of 70% of European cinema, which leaves very little space for presenting the films coming from other parts of the world. Similar restrictions apply also in the field of distribution (strictly European cinema is being encouraged for purchase) and exhibition (again there is a quota on the percentage of European films shown in a cinema or network of theatres to qualify for a subsidy).

I would argue that the restrictions in the film production and project development mentioned above have already started to show on the face of European films, and support this thesis with the abridged innovativeness and increased mono-form we've been watching in European cinema over the past ten years. The centre of the most interesting, independent filmmaking, filmmaking charged with the urge to say what needs to be said and show what needs to be shown, filmmaking which stills has its soul intact, – a reputation once closely attached to the European cinema –, has moved to Asia, Latin America, Africa... or as the West would say, to the 'Third World'.

One could dispute that this new focus on the non-Western world might also have something to do with new technologies, which have made filmmaking more accessible to economically less developed countries, and which have made the cinemas of those countries more visible (through DVD releases, internet downloads and other ways of copy-left practices that have in the last decade substantially changed the concept of film canons and film histories predominantly written by Westerners). It is a fact that the world cinema landscape has mutated also in this direction, but the praise and the attention the cinemas of the 'Third World' have been receiving both in the field of film criticism and festival circuit, states there must be something more to it than just a technological turnabout. Could it be the freedom these filmmakers have in that they do not need to match their ideas with the political/cultural agendas their financial backers have on their mind when shaping project pitches, development grants and subsidies? This could be the right answer if the question was posed some years ago. Today I can see how more and more filmmakers from Asia, Latin America and Africa are trying to match their film projects with expectations the West has when deciding which projects to support, and how cinema coming from 'Third World' is becoming similarly mono-formed as European films have the tendency to be.

Relying on money coming from Western funds and co-production markets has become a common film production practice in 'Third World' countries, and up until today is still one of the very few possibilities those filmmakers have to bring their films from paper to screen. While single projects get funded, the local production bodies have stayed as undeveloped as they were before the international praise and attention given to their native films and filmmakers. Which reminds me of an old, simple saying: Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and feed him for life. Questions arise: Does Europe know how to fish? Is it teaching it?

Allow me a short detour and let me tell a story about Isola Cinema, a small film festival based in Slovenia (a member of European union since 2004 ... and a 'Third European' country ...) devoted to the cinemas of Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe with Friends. Clearly, the programme of the festival focuses on films coming from disregarded world cinemas, opposing the dominance of European and North American cinema in both festival and theatrical distribution. The festival was launched by a group of enthusiastic cinéphiles, financially backed by an enthusiastic mayor of the town Izola (where the festival takes place) who supported the festival with the municipality money and had drawn all the biggest local industrialists to patron the project. The first edition of the festival (which happened shortly after Slovenia had become a member of EU) had a loud and somewhat magic echo in the international film community since the filmmakers and other film professionals attending the

festival seemed to find something unique and fresh in its focus on films that are hardly accessible, and especially in treating them and their creators with the same respect and care as if they were big European or American films. Armed with the support of several award winning directors and a number of important European film officials the festival team started knocking on the doors of the future possible supporters. The first doors they approached were of the big European cinema institutions like MEDIA. They were told that the programme of the festival unfortunately does not correspond with the goals of encouraging European cinema, however the charming festival would definitely receive their help if it managed to show 70% of European cinema in its upcoming edition. The festival team had also knocked on the doors of big European funds supporting »Third World« cinema (like Fond Sud Cinéma in France, Hubert Bals in Netherlands, Locarno Open Doors in Switzerland etc.) only to find out that since the festival is taking place in an EU country it should be able to find financial base and support for the cultural diversity it stands for within its own community. And so it did, for the next three years, till it finally got all subsidies cut by both the local and national government in spring of the year 2008, also known as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. (EYID 2008 recognizes that Europe's great cultural diversity represents a unique advantage. It will encourage all those living in Europe to explore the benefits of our rich cultural heritage and opportunities to learn from different cultural traditions.)

What happened to the value of cultural diversity which has made cinema – being as much an art as it is an industry – a cultural exception while the rest of the industries are following the regulations of the free market and world trade? It is this exception and the value of cultural diversity that makes the existence of programmes such as MEDIA (as well as co-production markets and other cinema funds) possible in the first place.

And another question: When do well intended supports of non-European cinema descend into a(nother) form of cultural imperialism, or even colonialism?

It was a beautiful surprise to read about the new MEDIA International programme launched in the spring in 2008, aimed to strengthen relations and networks between EU and 'Third countries' professionals in the audiovisual sector – 'reflecting all the opportunities and challenges of globalization, for the mutual benefit of the European industry and the third countries involved. The envisaged actions and cooperation (more about them in the SEA Images' News section) include: Continuous Training, Promotion of cinematographic works and the support of Cinema Networks. On this basis the European Commission intends to develop a proposal for a new programme, possibly to be called MEDIA MUNDUS and propelled in 2011. MEDIA MUNDUS would 'represent a commitment to effective multilateralism and to engage with global partners, to the mutual benefit of the audiovisual sectors'. (Note: In MEDIA documents, the expression »films from third countries« refers to films originating from any state other than the 25 European Union members, with the exception of films originating from the US.)

I strongly believe that the communication between Europe and »Third World« will evolve into a dialogue. The figures of non-European and non-American films shown in European cinemas have grown in the past five years, mainly on the account of the rapidly increasing co-production film projects, which have enabled some non-European films to be considered as European, and thus included in the »European« quota of films to be screened in European cinemas. This is a surprisingly positive side effect of the economic approach to measuring cultural diversity, but also an effect that – again – leaves out all the films which do not include European investment. It is good to launch support programmes which will enable local exhibitors and distributors in Asia and Latin America to buy non-commercial non-American films to show to their audience, as long as those non-commercial non-American films will not prove to be exclusively European, and the subsidies the exhibitors and distributors will be able to apply for will not continue to marginalize local and non-European cinema.


Worldwide circulation of world cinema is what every cinema lover stands for, or should stand for. It's brilliant that we have MEDIA, MEDIA International, Berlinale's World Cinema Fund, Locarno's Open Door, Rotterdam's Hubert Bal and CineMart, Paris' Fond Sud Cinéma ... It's great we have all the films produced through the support of those film bodies which would probably never have been made otherwise. Many of them are exceptional and many of them have managed to avoid the traps and perils that come with international funding and have preserved their original motives and ideas. But let us not forget that there is a significant difference between providing support and creating a well of dependence. And that in a world so full of cultural and economical conflicts and contrasts, balance and equality is what we all must strive for. The stronger we are, the greater the responsibility to do so.

By Nika Bohinc

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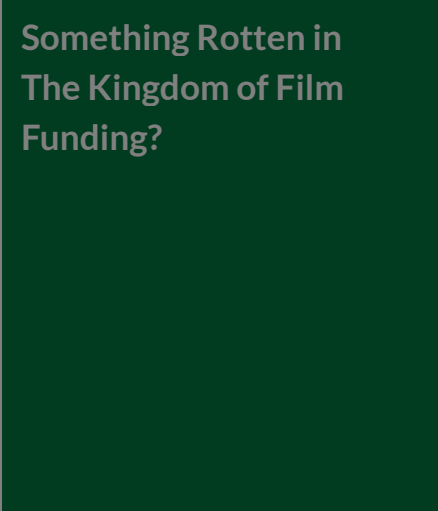
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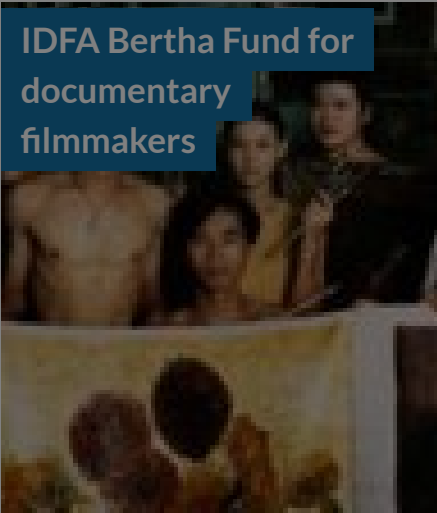
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