

Societies without Film Culture are Extremely Poor

Håkan Bjerking, Chairman of the Federation of European Film Directors (FERA) and President of the Swedish Film Directors organisation

We spoke with Mr. Håkan Bjerking during his recent visit to Slovenia in the context of the international workshop entitled "What Do Directors Want From Their Collective Management Organizations". The workshop was organised in Ljubljana by the FERA (with our interviewee as its Chairman), Directors Guild of Slovenia (DSR), and Collecting Society of Authors, Performers and Film Producers of Audiovisual Works of Slovenia (AIPA Association). This year Slovenia is obviously the meeting place of European directors, as in June the general assembly of the FERA – attended by 60 delegates from all over the world in order to select the new leadership of this Federation – will take place in Bled. Thus a large-scale debate about the changes, challenges and difficulties of the European film, manifesting themselves in the form of digitisation, international agreements like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and strengthening of cultural monopolies that we in Slovenia are only becoming aware of, is very relevant.

Why is it important for the directors to come together in the FERA, a European association?

We have much to learn from the various experiences of the individual states and parts of Europe. For example, at the last general assembly in Malmo, we found out from Cypriots, who attended the assembly for the first time ever, that they did not even have a word "director". At the employment office they wanted to list them as actors or photographers, as they do not have their actual profession as an option. At the assembly the Cypriot directors could recognise their work as a profession that they dedicate themselves to and identify with. We were able to communicate our experiences and realisations to them, as were the British and Croats, who managed to do a lot of good in the field of film in the recent years. We can also support individual members, if the need arises.

Names like our President Alan Parker as well as other visible members help gather the support and engage the audience. It is also about inspiration, which is just as important.

Why have you, as a film director, headed from the creative field into the organisational and administrative area as well?

Fortunately I'm not the CEO, who is responsible for the largest share of administrative tasks, which are not precisely my forte. However, at the political level it is very important that you stand up and speak out for yourself as well as for your colleagues, because we can achieve much if we stand together. If you get organised, you can change things; while nothing will happen if you just keep sitting around and complaining. I said to myself, if I don't do it, who will. And so I got involved.

Which is the most pressing issue that the FERA is currently addressing in Brussels?

We mostly focus on copyrights, agreements that we as directors have to conclude with the exhibitors, television and film producers, and our working conditions.

The film industry and audiovisual sector in general are facing profound changes like important international agreements and digitisation, which also influence the changes with regard to copyrights at the global market. What will this mean for you as authors and the future of European film?

The future lies in cooperation and cross-border co-production. My function has allowed me to visit almost all of the EU states and we truly have a lot to learn from each other. Digitisation brings new challenges in the field of copyrights, and so does piracy. If we see globalisation as an opportunity rather than a threat, the world will open up for us directors and provide new opportunities in other states. However, in order to bring this about you have to travel, meet actual people, talk to them and explore what is being done in certain places.

Meanwhile, important struggles take place in the background in order to keep these opportunities open for everyone, for example the TTIP. What point are the negotiations at and what could the implementation of the Transatlantic Partnership mean for the field of film? More commercialisation, Hollywoodisation?

TTIP could present a problem. For now culture and thus film has been excluded from it, but you never know, as it has not been signed yet. France has taken a firm standpoint that this should not be subject to such an agreement, and we're also firmly against it. Should this nevertheless happen, the state and regional financing of European film would no longer be allowed, as it would imply an advantage of the national cinematographies in comparison to the American cinematography. I was the main speaker at the conference about the TTIP in Denmark, as this is very important for us. I also emphasised that the problem lies in the deficient democracy. As I am a Roma on my grandfather's side I'm appalled when I see what is going on in Hungary with Jobbik as well as in Romania, where the Roma are seen as second-class citizens who should be forcefully deported from the state. Therefore it is important that we reaffirm the idea of Europe, work together, help each other, and keep our minds open rather than separating ourselves to "us" and "them".

The lack of democracy is obvious at the highest levels as well, as the TTIP has been drawn up in secrecy and for a long time the public has been excluded from the debate.

As if they wanted to carry it out behind the people's backs. The politicians simply decided to take care of this for them. We have examples that illustrate what the consequences of the TTIP could be. Americans could sell their low-quality poultry, which they would otherwise not want to consume or feed to their children. They'll say: we can do it cheaper. Of course things can be done cheaper if you don't take care of the environment, health and other important issues. In this regard the TTIP is certainly a threat.

However, this would not only be restricted to food. The same problem could take place in the field of culture as well, as also here we are facing the "fast food" principle, established formulas and domination of marketing.

We are already under attack as it is, but in this case the pressure would only strengthen. Most of the cinemas in Great Britain are already owned by the Americans. They can choose which films to distribute throughout the country. A similar situation, although not yet to such a degree, is already apparent in Germany. Americans make demands: if you want to screen this film, you have to distribute it all over the country simultaneously, you should do this, this, and this. They take control. Meanwhile, the owners of the cinemas allow it, because they are privy to a lot of free marketing, which means that they reach a larger audience and make more money. They do not care about promoting local films as well.

Besides technological advantages digitisation also brings more control, reduction of the number of independent cinemas and emergence of new monopolies. How should we deal with this?

This is an enormous problem. We should establish alliances with producers, screenwriters, actors and others from all over Europe and state clearly that we want to keep making a different sort of films, at a higher artistic standard.

You have also mentioned copyrights and payments for authors, which is another pressing problem. At the assembly a year ago you said that the Greek and Portuguese television stations did not pay the agreed-upon compensations for authors or contributions to the European film fund, while in Germany things were being put under control. What is the situation around Europe today?

Unfortunately, Portugal and Greece still face the same problem, and the situation is bad in Spain as well. Hungary produces but a few films, and the Baltic countries have

significant difficulties as well. The events in the Ukraine are also upsetting, of course. In a way everything is a struggle for an open Europe. On one hand we are facing the Russian threat, while from the other side of the Atlantic we are threatened by fatty foods and fast film, if I paraphrase the situation a bit. Americans subscribe to the concept where in the beginning the protagonist presents himself, his problems get bigger, but suddenly everything gets turned around and he always solves it all on his own and dies standing. That's a simple solution, a solution of the single white middle -class male.

If we exaggerate a bit, such simple formulas don't need authors and directors. These patterns also keep emerging in Europe, and this is also one of the important problems you have to face.

For example, long-term television series have the so-called show runners. These are not directors. According to the American model these are represented by the writers, creators of the series. In Scandinavia, for example, these are two people: the team of the director and screenwriter. This is an important way of acknowledging the value of direction. We should find ways to preserve some control over the creative process.

What kind of a copyright regime would be necessary in order to avoid supporting the large production corporations exclusively, but authors at all levels as well?

Here we should look towards the Swedish and British examples. In Sweden, in the 1970s, we excluded everyone in a single stroke to protect our own rights, and a similar solution was implemented in Great Britain – in order to get our own share and have some say in how the things are being done. You have to be strong and you shouldn't only listen to what the government says. Therefore directors should come together in a joint organisation and be ready to fight, otherwise nothing will happen.

You also support the alternatives to the current copyright law, for example the open "copyleft" and "creative commons" regimes, which focus on the openness of culture and freedom of artistic production and reproduction?

Only if we can find a way of addressing this in an agreement. It doesn't happen just like that. We can't simply say, fine, this is a good idea, because we have to explore the issue and see what's best. While we do that we should keep in mind the value of the film, its artistic effect, how it will spread and change people's lives rather than just focus on its commercial success.

To what degree can digitisation cover the film history, which will surely not be digitised in its entirety and promptly, in connection with copyrights and commercialisation pressures?

The Swedish Film Institute is very dedicated to the efforts to digitise the 35 mm film heritage. In this way the films are being preserved as well as made more accessible. Currently the creation of a platform which would allow the films to be viewed online for a modest fee is being discussed.

What is the role of directors in the today's audiovisual sector and media-dominated world, where an increasing number of people can use new technologies to capture images in a decent quality?

You need education and practice. You can't just call yourself a film director because you've shot a film with your phone. It takes a while to learn how to do it. However, it is positive that experimentation has been made easier. I even have a friend, a director of photography, who shot an entire film with his iPhone. However, you have to know how to work with lighting. Of course, the sound was not perfect, but it is astounding how good it was. He published the film on YouTube.

The roles in the creation of films in the digital age are not necessarily so clearly separated any longer. Where are directors now, as far as their cooperation with

others is concerned?

Today directors should be more open. Films should no longer be thought of merely as creations which are to be screened in the cinemas and have to be 90 minutes long. One of my colleagues works on twelve-minute films directly for YouTube. This is definitely a way of promoting and opening one's own channels, which is why he is found by increasing numbers of people online. He says that if he can get a hundred thousand views he will also get a bit of money from YouTube, but it is especially good because he can work on films, practice, so to speak, while counting on a certain kind of response. He doesn't only sit around, waiting for his opportunity, but keeps creating and directing films.

What makes the audiovisual sector so specific in the field of arts?

It includes everything. Pictures, images, text, three dimensional space. And it can travel. Your film can be shown all over the world, at the same time. Films are much more alluring than radio, photography or reading books. These forms of art have their advantages, but films include all of these aspects.

That is why the responsibility of filmmakers is so much greater.

Of course, I know that.

This may not be the primary concern of film, but it nevertheless has a significant potential for the creative industry, which is a very strong factor in Europe. However, on the other hand we are facing austerity measures, in our country and especially all over the south of Europe, where the cuts are usually first made in the field of culture. In Slovenia only around three percent of the cultural budget is being invested in film, while the total amount has decreased by around a third in the recent years. In order to justify this, the politicians depict artists as parasites who keep spending public resources. How would you comment on this?

If you want to have a cultural heritage, you should definitely support film directors and screenwriters. In this way you make sure that our time is preserved for the posterity, otherwise the memories will gradually get lost. Film is such a strong medium that in my opinion societies without film culture are extremely poor.

In the recent years the FERA also started addressing the gender equality. This is an increasingly prominent problem, as Jane Campion, the only female winner of the Golden Palm to date, also emphasised in Cannes last year. According to some information female directors only make around sixteen percent of films. What can you, as an association of directors, do to change that?

We keep supporting and emphasising female directors. In Sweden we have already achieved that now half of directors are women. It is very important to preserve this and keep mustering further support. The problem has been underlined at the Swedish Film Institute, which we cooperate with very nicely, and that is why we have already come so far in addressing this issue.

How about the rest of Europe?

I'd say that Sweden is currently the leading force in this regard. In certain countries men still dominate the field, as, for example, our colleague Adela Peeva explained with regard to Bulgaria, but otherwise the situation differs from country to country. However, I think that our work in this department represents a good example.

In this way the film loses the women's outlook on the world.

Without female directors half of the population and its equally important perspective of things would be lost, of course.

What can the states do to provide a better support for the audiovisual and film sector? Are tax incentives or subventions more important? Which examples of

good practice should be looked up to?

The most important thing is that each individual should support and see the local and national production. These are your stories, the stories that will enrich you, not another film starring Tom Cruise. The end of that movie will be the same: he will fight a lot of people, almost die, but in the end he will always survive. You're already familiar with the concept, so forget about it and see original stories from your own region instead.

How important is it for the states to attract filmmakers and appear in films as a location?

Very important. However, it is up to the politicians to understand what a fantastic tool they are overlooking if they fail to support this. They should certainly focus on this issue more.

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