

Interview with Claude-Eric Poiroux
General Director, Europa Cinemas

Le Film français - 09 December 2011 – Anthony Bobeau - Translated from French

Europa Cinemas' Annual Conference was meant to take place in Athens between the 17 - 20 November but was cancelled due to the economic and social situation in Greece. Do you regret this decision?

No. We'd reached a point where it was no longer possible to envisage the smooth running of this Conference. The disruptions regarding transport became ever more frequent, planes included. Had we kept going, we would have risked having to cancel at the last minute because our participants had difficulties landing in Athens. This would have affected almost 500 participants who were already pre-registered. What's more, the insurance companies were not willing to cover us in the event of a national strike. Our members have been very understanding regarding our decision to cancel the Conference. We've received numerous messages of encouragement which have served to emphasise the important position this Conference holds in the eyes of the professionals in this industry: this Conference has become a place where like-minded people, who share the same values and attitudes, can exchange their ideas and reflections.

Why did you choose Athens as host city?

There are several reasons for this decision, which we already had to take a year ago. First and foremost, it was a way of showing our solidarity to a country severely affected by the crisis. Furthermore, Athens is a city where Europa Cinemas is particularly well represented. There, the numerous theatres in the network are competitive as well as friendly. And in December 2010 no one imagined that the situation in Greece would take such a turn for the worst. But despite all that, we're staying positive and will be organising our Conference in Athens in 2013. And next year we'll celebrate our 20-year anniversary in Paris.

What would have been the focal points for discussion at this conference?

We were hoping to tackle the subject of digitisation from different perspectives. There is of course the issue of screening but on top of that we also all live in a digitised world, which brings us closer to our audiences. This is something our theatres don't turn a blind eye to in their everyday running. Social networks, blogs and the Internet in general are all forms of communication, which the younger generations are fully engaged with. It serves as a fantastic opportunity to get our films and events into their diaries and henceforth rejuvenate our audience. I'm convinced that online interactivity could bring about new trends and new tastes regarding our European cinema that's so diverse and rich in content.

On that subject: has the network made enough progress with respect to its digital transition?

Around 30% of the network has already been digitised. These developments are consistent but we're aware that several hundred theatres - many of which have single screens - do not have the financial means to equip themselves alone. This dichotomy is a first in the history of Europa Cinemas. Besides, the situation varies considerably from country to country: in Great Britain, 88% of our sites are digitised whilst the National Park's figures barely reach 60%. Same issue in the Czech Republic where our figures are at 60% in a market whose average is 30%. Only 30% of the French theatres in the network, on the other hand, are digitised - lagging behind in other words. But further progress looks promising thanks to the legal framework and the CNC.

It's not about pitting the small markets against the big ones then?

Divisions in the markets exist but it's particularly the size of the company that counts; this goes for the film theatres as well as for the distributors. For a VPF economic model to be viable the distributors need to release a minimum number of prints and the theatres need a sufficient number of admissions in the first week. We have legitimate concerns regarding the most delicate films and small theatres, which are personally passionate about their screenings. There, nothing is possible without regional or state consent. Local authorities intervene to provide financial support whilst being forced to watch a determinant number of nearby cinemas disappear. The most surprising thing is the lagging behind in the digitising progress we're witnessing in countries such as Spain, Italy and to an extent also Germany regarding reaching agreements. These are the big markets, which could make digital

contributions and hence allow a large majority of the network to be equipped. Using either an invented, a French or a Norwegian style corrective system, it could be a win-win situation for everyone. Exhibitors who want to equip themselves are left alone and the banks are sceptical of supporting them in this time of crisis. Globally, there's a lack of real political unity at the heart of the European Union - a political body which aims at maintaining the diversity of programming and variety of films on offer. The MEDIA programme is tackling this and according to Piotr Borys' report, progress has been made regarding the resolution that the Parliament has just adopted after having received the large majority of votes (Editor's note: 506 in favour, 27 against and 46 abstentions). This must be related back to Athens.

So this resolution recognises the necessity of supporting the theatres that are struggling the most...

The representatives are aware of the vulnerability of certain theatres, particularly of those in small towns and rural areas. They're requesting a prompt increase in the financial state support that's made available by the European structural funds. However, the exhibitors cannot directly access these funds; they need to convince their elected representatives to apply for the regional funds that are available - common practice in countries such as Poland and France. We're pushing Europe into putting in place procedures quicker because this urgent situation requires it. In less than two years, 35mm prints will belong to the past and the theatres, which aren't digitised, will no longer have new films to programme! European cinema will be the first to lose out.

What conclusions can be drawn from your initiatives as you approach Europa Cinemas' 20th anniversary?

At present, we've by far surpassed our initial objectives. When starting out, the target was for the theatres in the network to reach 50% European screenings, half of which would be non-national films. Last year, we reached a figure of 60% European screenings and 36% non-national. Our role is crucial in the dissemination of the majority of European films.

What role can cinema continue to play in a Europe whose political concepts are more roughed up now than ever before?

In general, cinema has not been affected by the crisis; audiences have continued to frequent film theatres. Nor must one forget that this industry represents 4.5% of the European GDP. The politicians are aware of this and don't want to unsettle this dynamic sector which provides employment and which additionally is representative of widely recognised cultural values. The MEDIA programme will be respected and its funding increased. In 2014 it will be integrated into the Creative Europe scheme and its budget is set to increase from 750 million euros to 900 million euros - an increase of 20%. What's more, cinema in Europe is a particularly creative art: more than 1000 films are produced every year. These films exemplify the image of Europe for its own citizens and worldwide audiences alike. Hence the necessity of distributing them.

How do you envisage the future of Europa Cinemas?

We have many projects still in progress. As David Lynch says, we have to make good use of this digital era to strengthen various concepts; strengthening the "ritual of cinema going" and, most particularly in our network, our identity and the modernity of our theatres. All this without losing sight of the educational aspect of our involvement with young audiences. We also have to continue developing on an international level. We've crossed European borders by building on the idea that European cinema is often regarded as the only foreign alternative to Hollywood productions. Since 2004 we've supported the distribution of European films in countries outside MEDIA and since 2009 have expanded our network to include theatres in Asia, Latin America and the Mediterranean basin within the framework of MEDIA Mundus. Finally, regarding the markets which are the most difficult to access, we are willing to break new ground by linking theatres up with other distributive support projects such as VoD (Video On Demand), as well as increasing the impact and screening of European films.