

Mr. Frédéric Mitterrand, French Minister for Culture and Communication
15th Europa Cinemas Conference – Paris, 19 November 2010

Version as spoken

Mr President, dear Claude Miller
Messrs Vice Presidents, dear Ian Christie, dear Nico Simon
Mr Director General, dear Claude-Eric Poiroux
Dear friends,

First of all, of course I'd like to wish a warm welcome to Paris to the some 700 participants from 47 different countries at Europa Cinemas' 15th Annual Conference: you are a striking image of what is and what will be cultural Europe, with which, as we know, Jean Monnet would have liked to have "started".

I know that you gathered yesterday evening for screenings – in a way the spice of this annual conference – in the theatres of the "Entrepôt". As you can imagine this does not leave me indifferent... because it was I who built them in the crazy years of my youth.

Your conference is patronised by two great directors: Claude Miller and Wim Wenders, both of whom are impassioned by the digital innovation and put it to use in their art. Over the years Europa Cinemas has shown itself to be a true success story of European cinema policy.

Bringing together these cinemas that foster the diversity of European cinema was an excellent idea from the start. Encouraging them in their programming efforts and promoting the emergence of a network of dynamic and creative entrepreneurs has further enhanced the positive outcome.

Thanks to your dedication to the cinema, you have enabled this idea to blossom by enlarging the network – which now comprises almost 3,000 theatres – even beyond the borders of the European Union. By opening notably to third countries, in particular those in the South, you have helped these countries to rekindle the activity of their cinemas. You have also been able to fix new objectives, such as awakening and educating the younger generations so as to stimulate a love for the cinema and the irreplaceable joys it procures.

The Europa Cinemas network does not merely exist thanks to subsidies and funding from Brussels. It forms a veritable "cultural crucible", rich in projects, talents and exchanges. You share a common principle: your commitment in favour of European cinema.

Thanks precisely to this commitment, the share of European cinema in the theatres of the European Union has progressed constantly for the last 18 years, reaching 30% in 2009. Thanks also to your commitment, theatres have been preserved and open-minded, diversified programmes have seen the light.

In addition you have been able to take account of and analyse the big issues of the past years, first and foremost the digital transition and the conditions under which it may take place so as to preserve the vitality and diversity of European cinemas.

I'll be frank, France has profited greatly from your discussions, and the political choices I have made – more on these in a moment – to accompany French cinemas on the road to digital technology have benefited from the fruit of your reflections.

Much more than a cultural requirement, it seems to me an absolute necessity in our "image society" that a programme of the European Union should be devoted to the cinemas. As you know, I still have a great fondness for the profession of cinema exhibitor, which I exercised at the start of my career. Having experienced all of the difficulties of this trade, I know it is both exquisite and very difficult. It will never be said often enough, without it the cinema simply would not exist.

I often remember with nostalgia the time when as an exhibitor-cum-projectionist I was confronted with the hazards of films that unfurled, twisted and emptied out into the projection booth and then onto the staircase before spilling into the theatre like diabolic snakes... scenes from comic silent films to which I was frequently subjected in my inexperience as exhibitor-projectionist. Digital technology will definitively put an end to such anguish, but it will just as certainly create others.

Because the "here and now" of the spectacle of cinema, to borrow Walter Benjamin's phrase, due to which this art of reproduction ultimately preserves its "aura", the shared emotion of the spectacle, is due to the cinema, the film theatre, the veritable birthplace of film!

The cinemas of Europe have weathered many storms in recent years. The appearance of the multiplexes, the disappearance of many small establishments. The changes in political culture that the continent has undergone have certainly weighed heavily on the cinemas and their relation to their audiences.

Several conclusions may be drawn regarding this recent history: after a long, often difficult and even cruel period of resistance, people's deep desire for the spectacle offered by the cinema has persisted, developed even, irregardless of the large increase in dissemination modes on small home screens, and today on tablets and digital devices.

This must reassure us that to the extent that we support it, the cinema still has a very bright future. The figures speak for themselves: today there are 29,000 screens in the 27 countries of the EU. A majority are in independent cinemas, a reminder that these play a determining role in bringing films to audiences. In addition there has been a continual rise in admissions in most of our countries. And I am particularly happy to say that in France we will no doubt reach a new high this year, with admissions attaining levels we haven't seen for over forty years.

Despite the revolution in practices and faced with technological upheaval, we must resolutely preserve the cinema as the founding location of motion pictures, a location of social intermingling and film education, a location that has denied none of its popular, fairground origins, as the film pioneer Georges Méliès, the 150th anniversary of whose birth we will celebrate next year, reminds us.

Let's not forget that it's only when a film is projected in a theatre that it really becomes cinema. And let's not forget that if the cinema plays such an important role in fashioning our culture it's because it is able to bring us together for a great spectacle. And finally let's not forget that individual screens will never replace the poetic and aesthetic power of images projected on a large screen. This is why cinemas are so key for cultural policy.

The appearance of digital technology assuredly poses new challenges and profoundly redefines the professions of exhibitor and distributor, as well as their interrelationship.

Our country has gone to great lengths to preserve and modernise its network of independent cinemas. Without wanting to hold up France as a model, I would like to stress to our friends from Europe and elsewhere that we are sending a strong political signal.

Several weeks ago at the Forum d'Avignon I spoke at great length with the European Commissioners responsible for these subjects, Androulla Vassiliou and Neelie Kroes, about what's at stake in digital technology.

I believe in the solidarity of the network of European cinemas. I believe in the circulation of works and writings. For this vision to become reality, we must promote a veritable "European digital strategy" to favour the creation and circulation of works.

Two complementary instruments have recently been put in place in France to accompany and anticipate this technological change. It is my firm conviction that the cinema must not be the slave of technology. The "digital revolution" must not be perceived as a menace, but as an asset.

The first of these instruments is the law on the digitisation of cinemas, adopted almost unanimously by parliament in September. This law establishes the principle whereby distributors contribute to the costs of digitisation and puts in place a framework for relations between distributors and exhibitors adapted to the new digital situation. The law is based on a clear principle: since distributors will benefit from this modernisation which will reduce the cost of prints, it is only fair that they should contribute financially to digitally equipping exhibitors for a limited period of time.

The second instrument is the funding plan that has just been set up by the Centre national de la cinématographie et de l'image animée (CNC). Its objective is to guarantee that all cinemas may equip themselves with digital technology regardless of the level of contributions received from distributors.

The cost of this equipment (roughly 80,000 euros) is too high for some cinemas, in particular those unable to obtain sufficient contributions from distributors. For the most part these are independent cinemas in small or medium-sized cities and rural areas. But they also include the mobile cinemas – notably the cinema vans – which play such a fundamental part in bringing culture to these areas and without which many of our citizens would have no access to the cinema. Without the funds for digitisation they could be forced out of business. But we do not want them to disappear, nor do we want a multi-speed cinema.

It's for these cinemas, roughly one thousand in all, that the CNC has set up a specific aid mechanism with a budget of 125 million euros, in the form of new support for digitisation covering up to 90 percent of investments. Already France counts 1,500 cinemas equipped with digital technology. With this system it must be regarded as the first country in the world to plan and implement the transition of its total screenage to digital technology. Please understand me: far from being the expression of an over-administrated economy, this is much more the expression of a political will that fully recognises the role of cinema in our country's culture.

It would be a matter of profound satisfaction for me if the French experience could furnish the rest of Europe with a feasible plan for accompanying cinemas on the road to digital technology. You are the proof: for our cinema to develop and thrive we need a true European network. Here it cannot be a matter of every man for himself. We can only succeed together, on the basis of viable goals for the cinema in Europe and of course beyond.

This policy will serve the promotion of European cinema, as will the necessary regulation of the new services "on demand" which must also actively promote European films. This is the idea behind the decree on audiovisual media services on demand (SMAD) which has just come into effect in France.

In the 1960s Visconti's neo-realism coexisted alongside the "Nouvelle Vague" of Truffaut, Chabrol, Rohmer and Godard as well as the very personal visions of Bergman and Antonioni. With incredible aplomb, films and creative talents seemed to transcend the limits of nationality and simply comprise "European cinema", I would venture to say even cinema itself. The decades that followed were marked by Ken Loach's political combats, by Mike Leigh and Moretti, Werner Herzog's high formal standards, Manoel de Oliveira's subtle poetry and Pedro Almodóvar's very fertile imagination. After going through a veritable golden age and being nourished by major co-productions, the cinema encountered competition from the television, this "strange little window" which is not, as you know, such a stranger to me. Today – as television in turn faces competition from the non-linear services – I believe these apparent antagonisms are now behind us. I believe we have entered a phase of reconstruction, a renaissance of European cinema. Film production in Europe is making great strides, both in quantity – with almost 1,000 new films, twice as many as in Hollywood – and in quality. Today's new generation of directors, including Fatih Akin, Danny Boyle, Cristian Mungiu and Paolo Sorrentino to name just a few, have taken their place alongside older hands like Almodóvar, Frears, Kaurismäki, Haneke and the Dardenne brothers. Together they contribute to the remarkable creativity of European cinema.

Theirs is a cinema that speaks to us, one that is anchored in the reality and history of each of their countries. At the same time it has a universal appeal and is perhaps the cinematographic translation of what it is to be European, including an essential openness to the world and the cinema of countries that lie further away. I am not forgetting the cinema of the non-EU countries, and the collective demands that we must bring to support the network of cinemas in countries to the South. Neither am I forgetting the vitality and creativity of the young Korean cinema as testified by "Poetry", which was shown at Cannes this year and is an absolute masterpiece.

This is the visual heritage, which must be championed by the Europa Cinemas Network. And I do not doubt that the redefinition of the MEDIA programme after 2013 will enable us to move towards a new stage of European culture and European film, notably regarding young audiences, the children of the digital era. We must now transmit and enhance this common heritage. Here digitisation represents a formidable tool for film education.

Now is the time to mobilise to ensure that our European film heritage, the treasures I spoke of just now, are digitised, restored and treated with the dignity they deserve by the new technologies at our disposal.

Consequently the plan we have established for the cinemas is complemented by a plan for digitising the French cinema heritage, making the masterpieces of cinema accessible on new networks and in digitised theatres as well as on the supports of the future: digital projection, high definition DVD, VoD, etc. This digitisation concerns thousands of feature films and will be undertaken with the help of future investments and new support from the CNC. Not long ago Europe witnessed a growing awareness of the importance of book digitisation with Europeana. I believe we must also have a common European strategy for digitising the film heritage that has been handed down to us by European history. Ours is an immense, infinitely rich continent, and we must now transmit this heritage to younger generations so that they may discover and appropriate it for themselves.

Tonight you will have the privilege to see the first images of the film that Wim Wenders dedicated to the brilliant and much regretted Pina Bausch, which he shot in digital 3D. So it's only fitting that I should end by quoting Wim Wenders's superb opening words from his marvellous film "Tokyo Ga".

In his German accent over the background music, he talks about Ozu's films. It's an enchanting, very profound cinematic moment, and what's more he's talking about the cinema: "For me neither before nor afterward has the cinema been so close to its essence, its very determination, that of providing a useful, true image of 20th century man, in which he not only recognises but above all discovers more about himself."

How to better express the nobility and ambition of your mission, of our mission – we who endeavour together to map out the future of cinema as Méliès did more than one hundred years ago – than with these words by Wim Wenders in homage to Ozu?

I wish you an excellent conference and screenings of excellent European films in the excellent "Entrepôt". Thank you for your attention.

(Translation: Cinescript)