

Sweden Online Lab / Biolabb, September 9th & 10th, 2021

Report

Europa Cinemas joined forces with *Film i Sörmland*, *Film i Skåne* and *Filmkonsulenterna Region Stockholm* in order to organize a two-day meeting for Swedish exhibitors. The main objectives were to present Europa Cinemas more widely to Swedish professionals and to get an international outlook in order to re-design the collective cinema experience in Sweden.

56 exhibitors and other industry professionals from Sweden participated in the first conference day, and 34 of them followed the Swedish-speaking labs organized by our collaborators the next day. The event was moderated by **Lena Ek** (*BUFF Malmö Filmfestival*).



First day

The first day started with welcome words from Lena Ek, followed by a presentation of Europa Cinemas by Miila Norros who outlined Europa Cinemas' main actions and missions, presented the Network results in 2020 and introduced the new *Collaborate to Innovate* funding scheme. She emphasized the importance of the operational support Europa Cinemas gives alongside the financial support.

After a short Q&A session with Miila and Fatima Djoumer, Head of International Relations at Europa Cinemas, the stage was given to three industry professionals from Network cinemas:

- **Mustafa El Mesaoudi** (Director, Cinema Wuppertal and Rex Filmtheater, Wuppertal, Germany): Reopening strategies: "Back to the movies"
- **Wiktoria Pelzer** (Programmer, Stadtkino im Künstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria):

"#doyouloveme? - Audience surveys as marketing tools during lockdown and closure of your cinema"

- **Monica Naldi** (Programmer, Cinema Beltrade, Milan, Italy): Reopening strategies: "Suggestions from an unreal exhibitor"

The presentations were followed by a Q&A session with all three participants.



Monica Naldi, Lena Ek, Wiktoria Pelzer & Mustafa El Mesaoudi during the Q&A (first day of the event)

Although Monica, Wiktoria and Mustafa had each taken different actions to keep their cinemas going during the pandemic, four main themes emerge from their experiences:

1 – Personalizing the relationship with the audience

What stemmed from each experience was the lesson to keep the cinema closer to the audience members. Every speaker emphasized the importance of adding a personal touch into the communication with the audiences, like small sparks of humour or other human emotions.

Monica reminded that a cinema should always be part of the community and society where it is located, and participate in it with actions. Mustafa had included the audience members in the communicational videos in order to keep that collective feeling going during the closures. A strategy that was proven to be effective, as the opening rates of their mailings and the reactions received in the social media show.

Wiktoria's experience showed that some initiatives, like an audience survey, can be done even with a small team and tight resources, as long as one has time and good ideas. She also found it effective to communicate about the results to the audience members, as they were interested in seeing the overall comments of something they had participated in.

During the Q&A session, the question of personal communication & offering behind the scenes material was raised. The speakers were asked if they were planning to make the staff members more visible (in the social media) in the future.

Monica mentioned that their staff members had always been visible to the cinema-goers as they are a small team, but that they would continue to do so in the future and make the offline activities available online (through live actions, author Q&A sessions and registrations).

Mustafa replied that his priority in the future will be on the audiences who come to the venue, the main challenge being to bring people closer to the cinema.

Wiktoría had organized a live-stream panel discussion on the stage of his cinema to promote an upcoming film release, and one of the motivations behind this was to lure in the audience when the cinemas would open again. She had not made up her mind yet about making the staff members more visible: although she realized that it made communication more human she would rather see the films speak for themselves.

2 – Online events as a tool to add value

Without a shadow of a doubt the hybrid and online events are here to stay, and what may have started as an obligation is now considered as something that adds value to the onsite events.

Monica asserted to be confident that organizing online events will not drive people away from movie theatres, but will offer an opportunity to those who cannot come to the cinema for a reason or another. Mustafa, too, saw an opportunity to add value to a screening, and was planning to start broadcasting content before screenings in order to introduce the film and engage the audience better.

Monica had launched a VoD platform called *1895* with other independent cinema exhibitors, which they will continue to use as a tool to foster collaboration, host events and prolong the life of a film after its theatrical window.

3 – Collaboration is the key

All speakers talked about the importance of having discussions with colleagues and doing benchmarking in order to create synergy.

Wiktoría explained that before starting to work on the audience survey she had turned to her colleagues in other countries to see what they were doing. She also said she was currently studying the possibility to create an arthouse cinema pass, inspired by Cineville in the Netherlands. Monica mentioned that connecting with the colleagues and tossing the ideas and seeing what comes out of that was crucial to her too. Mustafa raised the example of getting together and discussing the forthcoming films in order to draft one's programming.

This synergy can be taken a step further to create collaboration not only with exhibitors but also other actors. Monica said that exhibitors should reaffirm the elementary market rules and point out the unfair practices that already existed before the sanitary crisis in order to

make sure that the conditions don't get worse. She said that one outcome of working together can be developing a deeper consciousness of oneself as an exhibitor and of one's set of skills – and this can be used to make distributors understand independent cinemas better and eventually to develop new market rules. Mustafa, too, pointed out that independent exhibitors should have deeper discussions with distributors and challenge them about their strategies for each film.

Mustafa had worked on reopening campaigns with local & governmental authorities and had thus taken time to explain the industry of cinema to them. He reminded that in the countries or regions where this had been done and the relationship was now established, it should be developed further in the long run.

4 – Trials and errors make innovation

Although innovation has been in the heart of exhibitor's work since the very beginning, its role was accentuated during the pandemic period. During her presentation, Monica highlighted that each independent cinema does have their own role and identity, and that it is important to value this. Although the immediate challenge is to bring back the audience now that cinemas are open, finding ways to develop cinemas needs to be the next step. In fact, one of Europa Cinemas' mission is to increase and diversify the programming of European films, but also to encourage innovative practices and make the network cinemas stronger in the global market.

During the Q&A session, the speakers were asked whether the exhibitor's role had changed in a lasting way during the pandemic – and what they would identify as the main learnings, needs and solutions for cinema's survival.

Wiktoria answered that she believed she would in the future tackle social and political topics more. Her cinema had recently started to collaborate with *Fridays for Future* (a global climate strike movement), the idea being that they would program a weekly curated screening and discussion each Friday, that could draw in the younger audiences but also raise knowledge on environmental issues.

Monica said she had always been in connection with local associations, and was currently making efforts to reach different neighbourhoods and to raise conversation on the problems that exist in Milan. She also said she would develop more regular screenings on environmental questions.

Mustafa added that he now identified as a curator *and* an influencer, as he had come to a better understanding of his cinema's impact on his neighbourhood and on the society. He encouraged all exhibitors to be self-confident enough to become a *local hero* who defends cinema as a cultural institution and the main place to consume films.

Second day

The second day was opened by a surprise guest, award-winning director Ruben Östlund, who shared his thoughts on the situation of cinema industry in Sweden. He talked about film

schools where the discussions often revolve around what kind of films one should make in order to please a maximum number of people or on how to attract a certain audience (young audiences for instance).

He reminded that capitalism sells us our basic needs and instincts, and that the film consuming from one's home sofa is not an exception as it is dictated by an algorithm that chooses your films for you. For Östlund, cinema professional's role is to cultivate people by making a careful selection of films and by offering a place for social encounter where everyone can watch films together - and discover different worlds. He told that he would like to do a performance for the opening of *Triangle of Sadness*, a film that treats the privileges beauty gives in our society. His idea was to provoke discussion about the film and its theme with ticketing booths where people could buy a ticket, but the price would vary depending on how much the client corresponds to the global beauty standards.

Östlund said to be tired hearing people say that Swedish producers should just make better films to draw in the audience, as this is not the right conversation to have. Instead, one should understand that changing the cinematographic culture is long-term work, and that the cinemas have a crucial role to play in this. For Östlund the starting point would be to see cinemas as a group of professionals who offer a collective experience.

The participants were then divided into groups to discuss and develop the following themes:

- Reopening: how can cinemas draw in the audience?
- Johanna Koljonen's concept of *cinema experience*: how to develop the cinema product to compete with the streaming services?
- European exhibitors: what experiences and ideas to get inspired from and insert to your own business?

Further on, each discussion leader shared a short conclusion of the discussion. The most frequent ideas that came out of the discussions regarding European synergy, were:

- Many of the elements presented by Mustafa, Wiktorina & Monica can be applied in Sweden too.
- The idea of an arthouse cinema pass should be explored.
- Audience surveys as a tool can help many cinemas in Sweden.
 - o Helena Fagerstam, from Folkets Hus och parker, had already done an audience survey and had received many replies (300). She said she could share the results and her thoughts of it with others if needed.
- Further discussions between exhibitors and distributors (about the prices and common practices) need to be pursued.
- Online events should be developed to add value and to draw in audiences from different geographical situations.
- The exhibitors should share good practices with each other more:
 - o The creation of a common Facebook group for this purpose was proposed.
 - o Some exhibitors said they usually selected films they had heard of before (for example from festivals), but that it could be interesting to form a discussion group about upcoming films too.

The two-day event was concluded on a positive note. Despite the undoubted fact that each country has their specific situation, one can learn from the experiences of others.

Miila Norros



Monica Naldi discussing the importance of sharing good practices (first day of the event)

You can find detailed descriptions of Mustafa's and Wiktor's previous presentations [here](#) and Monica's presentation [here](#).