

# Cinema from the South: the Cinema of Diversity

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Historically, the Mediterranean region has demonstrated a creative strength derived from the richness of its societies. This creativity has been captured in the audiovisual field, which has always reflected the socio-cultural peculiarities of Mediterranean countries. Today, recent events in the southern countries brought about by the Arab Spring have had a great impact on the products and strategies of audiovisual communication. APIMED, through initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Documentary Market (MEDIMED), strives to defend cooperation between all actors in the audiovisual universe to share their own productions, produce and show films, consolidate production structures and facilitate access to the international market.

The Mediterranean region has recovered a notable international centrality because of the political changes experienced in recent years. Conflicts of a political and economic, social and cultural, and confrontational and religious character, as well as permanent migratory flows, make the Mediterranean basin a scenario of special interest for identifying the diverse processes and factors that can better serve the cause of peace, understanding and cooperation between the peoples who have their natural environment of communication and coexistence in the *Mare Nostrum* of the Romans.

In this respect, opportunities for creation, exchange and alliances in the audiovisual, cinema and new media field can offer important foundations for dialogue and cooperation in the cultural and communicative space. In fact, this framework of activities has been shaped as a strategic front for intercultural communication in the Mediterranean. The significance

acquired by the image in contemporary culture, the omnipresence of the great audiovisual media in our societies, the unquestionable impact of the collective references and imaginaries channelled by the media, and even the new employment opportunities offered by the information society, all provide compelling reasons to emphasise the transcendence of the audiovisual sector.

Given the repercussion of the circulation of intercultural communication among peoples, cultures and religions in the Mediterranean area, today it is clear that a central part of cultural dialogue and exchange tends to be through audiovisual media and the image industries, especially cinema, television programmes, video and new multimedia products.

Different organisations have been created to enhance the film industry and cooperation between Mediterranean countries, but the only civil society association that brings together audio-

visual producers from both shores is APIMED (International Association of Independent Producers of the Mediterranean), based in Barcelona since 1999 at the invitation of the IEMed and the Government of Catalonia.

APIMED was founded in 1997 in Montpellier with the aim of contributing to the affirmation of the cultures that share this geographical area through diversity and tolerance in the audiovisual field. Professionals and production companies in the audiovisual sector of any Mediterranean country can be members of the association. APIMED works to multiply contacts between producers, circulate projects and productions, develop new synergies among professionals of the Mediterranean basin, maintain the identity of productions from our own cultures, share resources and knowledge, unite efforts, exchange experiences, confront ideas, promote new productions and learn about our differences in the field of audiovisual production. We understand the Mediterranean as an entity and culture in itself, but can we speak of a collective imaginary in the audiovisual panorama of Mediterranean countries?

We know very well how far cultures, customs, and ways of living and seeing the world are interrelated and sometimes confront each other. It is crucial that the Mediterranean peoples do not find themselves immersed in a media and cultural universe that could hide the reality in which they live. It is still necessary to develop cooperation between all actors of the audiovisual universe in order to share their own productions, produce and screen the films, consolidate the production structures and facilitate their access to the international market, through, for example, initiatives such as MEDIMED: the Euro-Mediterranean Documentary Market and Pitching Forum, organised by APIMED since 2000. In its 14 years, MED-

IMED has helped develop and consolidate a network of professionals on both shores of the Mediterranean and has stimulated quality co-productions between North and South of interest to international audiences. These are documentaries that explain local conflicts and complex realities that shake the perceptions of viewers and help dismantle the false theories of the intolerant and denounce them before a large television audience that discovers and understands the reasons and complexities of not so distant societies. In the Pitching Forum, over 350 projects have been presented that, once funded and produced, have had a long international presence and achieved recognition and awards. Notable among them are *Songs of War*, Emmy for Best Documentary 2012; *La Plaga*, winner of four Gaudí awards; *The Damned of the Sea*, Grand Prix at the Festival de Monte-carlo, Best Documentary of the IFFI Panafrican at Cannes, Audience Award at the Festival Visions du Réel, and *Google and the World Brain*, sold to over 20 television channels worldwide.

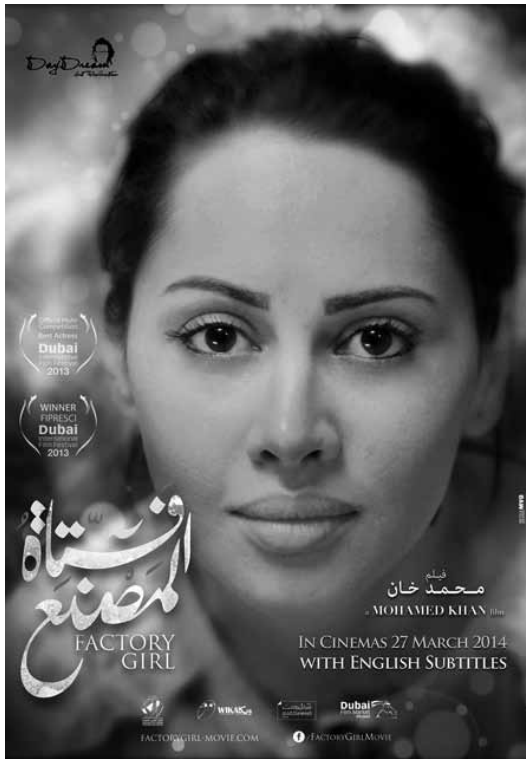
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The cinema and audiovisual landscape of the Mediterranean basin is unequal. It is formed by countries with a great capacity for production and marketing and by others with limited capacity experiencing a period of significant transformation. We will now analyse the latest available data on the production of films and documentaries:

Fiction accounts for most co-productions in the southern Mediterranean region with 68% of films produced in this way.<sup>1</sup> Some coun-

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1. Source: Census and analysis of film & audiovisual co-productions in the South-Mediterranean Region 2006-2011, Euromed Audiovisual, May 2012.



Poster of *Factory Girl*, 2012.

tries almost exclusively co-produce fictional films (85% in the case of Israel), while Arab countries co-produce a high number of documentaries. The percentage of fictional films co-produced between countries of the region (excluding Israel) drops to 63%. Among Arab countries, Jordan has co-produced more documentaries than fiction and Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt have co-produced almost the same number of documentaries as fictional films.

The last great success of Egyptian cinema was *Factory Girl* (*Fatat El Masnaa*) by Mohamed Khan, which in just a few days proved a success with critics and audiences.

However, the number of co-produced documentaries has increased in recent years because of the so-called Arab Spring. But these political upheavals linked to the Arab revolutions do

not in themselves explain the increase in documentaries co-produced during this period. One of the reasons for this high percentage of co-productions is the growing influence of the Gulf countries (United Arab Emirates and Qatar, in particular). For some years, these countries have created funds for the production and co-production of documentaries and fiction with very positive results.

Historically, the European Union is the main partner in terms of co-production, with 72% of films co-produced, mainly with France and Germany (both countries are involved in almost 50% of co-productions with Europe: 38% and 11%, respectively). This situation is explained by a combination of different factors: political, economic and cultural agreements with southern Mediterranean countries and the common language factor, as in the case of French, used today in numerous Arab countries. We must also consider funding possibilities and market availability, as well as the notable experience of certain European production companies in co-production with countries of the region. Some companies in Germany or France have co-produced more than ten fictional films or documentaries with these countries.

For around the last four years, the influence and involvement of the Gulf countries in terms of funding, promotion, distribution and exhibition of films produced in the region has been gaining prominence. The appearance of the festivals Dubai IFF, Abu Dhabi IFF and Doha IFF and, consequently, of film institutes in each of these countries, has created a notable increase in co-produced films, although they only represent 8% of all co-productions in the southern Mediterranean. The growing activity of the aforementioned organisations suggests a considerable rise in co-productions with the Gulf in the immediate future.

The limited collaboration between Arab countries (the so-called South-South co-productions) is significant, as it only represents

7% of the films co-produced and only 2% correspond to co-productions exclusively between two countries. The Palestinian-Tunisian film *Laila's Birthday*, by Rashid Masharawi, is a good example of a new production formula between Arab countries, which has obtained well-deserved recognition in the main international festivals.

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This data shows that the co-production agreements between Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have not been functional. It also shows that most co-productions are initiatives of production companies based in countries that do not form part of this geographical area.

Fantasy, imaginary and creativity are characteristic of all peoples. Throughout its history, the Mediterranean has shown its creative strength, mastery of taste and aesthetics and cultural richness. Without rejecting the changes that come from progress, we should continue along the path trodden for so many centuries.

The new technologies offer extraordinary opportunities, but they can put an end to originality through the standardisation of tastes and the monopolisation of creation. Prefabrication has never been a synonym of dynamism and creativity. We are in favour of “cinema-diversity” and the right to difference, but without therefore closing the borders to audiovisual products from other parts of the world. We are also in favour of the viewer having a choice, a real choice between differences.