



Mohamed Bourouissa, *Le reflet* (Périphéries series), Musée de l'Histoire et de l'Immigration, Paris.

# The Mediterranean, A Mix of Cultures?

**Isona Passola.** President of the International Association of Independent Audiovisual Producers of the Mediterranean (APIMED)

In opposition to the uniformity of the language and culture of the Anglo-Saxon world, it is important to reassert the complex and difficult diversity of today's Mediterranean as a virtue, certainly hard to manage, but with its inherent nobility: knowing how to look into the eyes of the Other, with understanding and consideration and expect the same in return. This objective was behind the gestation of Medimed, the only Euro-Mediterranean documentary market that exists today. The funding system of this market, which makes co-production essential, thus fosters dialogue between producers from the two shores of the Mediterranean. Moreover, we must highlight the major participation of women in this project since its beginnings, both directors and creators.

When Dani Karavan, the Israeli visual artist, was given the Catalan National Prize for Culture in 2015 for his monument to Walter Benjamin in Portbou, he exclaimed: "The olive trees should be our borders!" We all invoke the Mediterranean identity as a desire and we should assess, based on practical experiences more than voluntarisms, if this desire is possible.

It is clear that, beyond the landscape, the climate and the salty sea, we Mediterraneans can only share our endeavours by land and by sea thanks to a feeling of neighbourhood, long before aeroplanes made people from all over the world neighbours. But before this happened we experienced many years, many centuries of contacts, in short, loves and hates, familiarities and kinships, and all this leaves a series of epigenetic marks that we acquire through culture and are inherited and are not easily erased. There must be something good

about these contacts when the Mediterranean cultural legacy is what the – for now – powerful and influential Western world has made its own.

But which epigenetics have we inherited from the cradle of Western culture or, rather, which one remains?

We name the Mediterranean and we name a universe! But what is certain is that the sea is an agora of exchanges and that water equals fecundity, and this sea of ours has been crossed in all the cultural directions of history: from North to South; from East to West; by Arabs, Jews and Christians; by paganism and religion... Otherwise, how do we understand the coexistence of witchcraft and the underworld with science, the birth of mathematics and articulated thought, the invention of logic as an instrument of everyday use and at the same time as a system that structures the idea of the world? This suggests a diverse and very

complex web that encompasses all the virtues of complexity. In opposition to the uniformity of the language and culture of the Anglo-Saxon world, so subject to Mediterranean cultural inheritance, we have to reassert the difficult diversity of today's Mediterranean as a virtue. Certainly hard to manage, but with its inherent nobility: knowing how to look into the eyes of the Other with understanding and consideration and expect the same in return. Because in the end complexity makes human beings more generous, more open, richer and wiser.

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Culture, put simply, is the main characteristic that differentiates human beings from animals, because it drives critical thought from aesthetic emotion. If we leave to one side the anthropological vision of culture, the classification of culture into diverse and well-defined arts is established in the classical Mediterranean. Now that so many classifications have gone up in smoke with the emergence of artificial intelligence and its infinite inventorying capacity, everyone is subject to defined cultural disciplines, just as our Greek ancestors were. The only thing we have added to sculpture, painting, architecture, literature, dance and music is the seventh art, cinema, and, by extension, audiovisual art, which has turned out to be the one that, drinking from all the others, has been more influential because of its reach, which is why we call it mass culture.

From the perspective of this enormous influence of audiovisual art as a tool of discussion and dialogue, and keen to expand the space we occupied, in 2000, the Catalan Association of Film Producers, which I chaired,

joined APIMED, the International Association of Independent Audiovisual Producers of the Mediterranean, founded a year before in Montpellier. We established its headquarters in the Catalan Institute of the Mediterranean, the original name of the IEMed, and under the motto "We don't talk about the Mediterranean, we make it!" we created a Euro-Mediterranean documentary market in Sitges, with the help of the European Union MEDIA Programme, the Catalan Government and the Spanish Ministry of Culture. With this very old idea of the agora, the market to exchange ideas and projects, we have rediscovered the civil society of the Mediterranean.

It will soon be 16 years since Medimed got underway, the only documentary market that exists. The European Union, which in audiovisual terms went from strengthening the Mediterranean identity to supporting eastern countries, has continued to support Medimed, given the results achieved and the success of the initiative, both in terms of the participation of producers, around two hundred every year, and the interest it has awakened from television channels.

The documentary can cover themes ranging from geographical and anthropological issues to the subject that makes it more powerful and attractive: conflict. Unfortunately, our sea, which has no tides and, therefore, should be an example of stability, is actually a well of inspiration and a source that has given life to very important documentaries about the tragic conflicts taking place in it, and that have made it a beacon of news for all the television channels of the world.

When we look at the list of the three hundred documentaries produced over these 16 years, its funding system is worthy of interest and study. Through cooperation, this system has made the establishment of a passionate dialogue between the producers from both shores compulsory in order to reach not only

economic but also thematic agreements. Joint production between Israelis and Palestinians is common, and the friendships that are forged every year highlight the need for these markets in which participants meet regularly, find out about the experiences of others and discuss how to address issues of shared interest, from the critical point of view always inherent to the documentary.

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Another interesting aspect to emphasise about Medimed is the major role of women in the projects undertaken, both as directors and creators. Paradoxically, given that in the Arab countries (except Egypt, which has a big

audiovisual industry) cinema is quite a recent art, women have become involved at the same time as men. Thus, 30% of the projects in our market are promoted by women, which is quite unusual bearing in mind women's employment situation in many Mediterranean countries.

But as Walter Benjamin stated: "There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Thus, I am convinced that, when the hope that the Arab springs awoke in us has gone, the next markets will be full of documentary projects that will tell the story of millions of refugees fleeing dictatorships, wars and atrocities perpetrated in the name of God that tinge with blood this sea that should be a oasis of tranquillity. Let's hope, *Inshallah*, it is otherwise! Meanwhile, we will continue to make the Mediterranean instead of only talking about it, and we will do so from our praxis of dialogue and cooperation that we offer to you with an open heart.