

The Difficult Construction of a Mediterranean Cinematic Area

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Each Mediterranean country has its cinema. Nevertheless, each country must assert its existence in the face of globalisation and must struggle against the hegemony exercised, particularly, by the USA in this sphere. The issue is not just economic. Hence the idea of a 'cultural exception.' After giving rise to a good number of debates, particularly in France, this idea was set down in writing in the UNESCO Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expression in March of 2006. Ratified by the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, it has not yet been accepted by the Maghreb and Middle East countries.

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Francophonie (the International Organization of French-speaking countries), the Arab Maghreb Union... there is no dearth of structures to strengthen ties in the sphere of cinema, as well as in other fields, among countries on both the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. Yet the Mediterranean being at the intersection of broader regions – i.e. the Euro-Mediterranean, African-Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Regions, and so on –, spheres of action often simply no more than coincide or overlap. Though the multiplication of festivals in the region bears witness to the will to create a Mediterranean cinematic area, it largely remains to be built.

The Vicissitudes of Production and Co-Production

On the European side of the Mediterranean, the results for 2006 were rather encouraging. Whereas Spanish production set the pace, Italian production

rose by 2%. A bill for the organisational reform of the sector announced by the Ministry of Culture could lead to substantial progress. In France, over 200 films were produced. Although experiencing a growth of 7.5%, box office sales in France did not reach the 2004 level.

The results were mixed in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean area. The Cairo Festival, which granted the award for the best Arab film to Djamila Sahraoui for *Barakat*, rightly rewarded Algeria: with the return of security, Algerian filmmakers are making a comeback. Tunisia, on the other hand, only produced 5 feature films and 15 shorts in 2006. All things considered, it was in Morocco that film production flourished the most. The number of films produced rose 15-fold after an amendment to the financing law allowing 5% of television publicity revenue to be allocated to a cinema support fund. The French system has created a following here. It is not surprising that Tunisian filmmakers are calling for the creation of a National Centre for Cinema modelled after the CCM (Centre Cinématographique Marocain, the Moroccan film centre). If Tunisia is lagging behind, this may be because the State does not have a sufficiently aggressive policy. The principal problem is that the country suffers from structural distortions. Although it has no less than 500 producers (this is the official number, though there are actually few professionals among them), since the SATPEC (Société des Artistes Tunisiens Producteurs, or Association of Tunisian Producers) went under in 1990, Tunisia has lacked the technical means for creating ambitious films. Will the establishment of a post-production laboratory in Gammarth in November of 2006 by the company, Quinta Communications, in which Tarik Ben Ammar is in partnership with Silvio Berlusconi, suffice to improve the situation?

The number of co-productions with Europe is

decreasing, though agreements do exist; Italy, for instance, has agreements with Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Yet co-production has been one of the goldmines of Mediterranean cinema. The number of French-Algerian co-productions can be ascribed to the fact that the directors have dual nationality, though it is difficult to gain an accurate overview of this complex situation. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs created the “Fonds Sud Cinéma” (South Cinema Fund) in 1984, and it is increasingly providing support to Asian and South American cinema projects to the detriment of projects from Maghreb and Middle East countries.

The Part Played by the European Union

The EU Media Programme concerning the distribution of European audiovisual works has been renewed. The first programme expired on 31st December 2006, after 6 years in operation, after

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which the European Union adopted the MEDIA 2007 Programme in November 2006. Also launched by the European Union, the EuroMed Audiovisual II Programme seeks to provide support for the structures of the audiovisual industry in the southern Mediterranean countries, from the production to the operative stages, and to combat the threats it faces, in particular piracy. Hence, new legal instruments have been posted on the EuroMed Audiovisual website. By the same token, aid projects were launched in January 2006 that will be rolled out on a staggered basis until late 2008. They are led by either public or private organisms of the Mediterranean countries. A cog in the wheel of the European Union, these countries have been entrusted with carrying out and handling the budget of one of the programme initiatives. Morocco has taken the lion's share here, not so much for the number of projects managed – after all, there were only two – as for the financial sum they represent: 15 million euros, that is, a third of the overall EuroMed Audiovisual

II budget. Most likely Morocco owes this to the significant progress made in infrastructures.

Two of the programme's four areas (the Development Area and the Promotion Area) are designed to provide support for production and encourage co-production. The Mediterranean Film Business School project, launched by Spain's *Fundación Cultural Media*, seeks to create a network of professionals operating in the public and private spheres in order to step up cooperation and exchange. 20 producers and projects were involved in 2006. Even more pragmatic, the Media Films Development initiative, led by Ali n' Productions and the Audiovisual Attaché of the French Embassy, shall assist – on an annual basis until 2008 – 10 producer-screenwriter tandems in preparing films that will be shot, in principle, in Morocco.

The projects under the programme area, Support for Distribution and Screening, are designed to enhance the conditions of distribution and screening for films produced within the European and Mediterranean regions. This is quite pertinent, as the southern Mediterranean countries suffer from a blatant lack of movie theatres, in particular functional ones. There are probably no more than 30 movie theatres and 14 screens considered functional in Tunisia. By the same token, their number has fallen in Algeria, though a few rehabilitation initiatives have been undertaken by certain city councils.

A second goal of the Mediterranean Film Business School project is also to enhance distribution. Projects such as “The Caravan of the Euro-Arab Cinema,” launched by Egypt, can prove excellent promotional tools, but, symbolically, may entail the risk of going beyond the Mediterranean area or diluting it. The project, EuroMed Cinema, led by the CCM and scheduled to extend until July 2008, is, moreover, the only one that embraces the entire Mediterranean Region and aims to foster the “circulation of Mediterranean films” in addition to the presence of European films in the MEDA area.

The Multiplication of Training Initiatives

No promotion, distribution or screening is possible without the professionals capable of making it happen. It is therefore not surprising that over half of the projects under the aegis of the programme (7 out of 12) fall under the category of “Training”.

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European institutions invest more in this area than in promotion. Therein lies the profound significance of the Mediterranean Film Business School project. Even more pragmatic, the project “Generation Big Screen 2006,” an initiative of CICAIE (International Confederation of Art Cinemas), aims to increase the audience for Mediterranean and European films in 10 countries of the MEDA region (Algeria, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey). It has allowed 45 young or future distribution professionals, including film club operators, to undergo training in 2006. Its two training courses took place at the Venice Film Festival in Italy and the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia. In addition, the Mediterranean Films Crossing Borders workshops, managed by Madrid-based Iberantar, were held in Cannes and San Sebastian/Donostia. The European Institutions, which in 2006 provided support for 18 events in 6 Mediterranean countries, deliberately chose to locate these events in Carthage, Cannes, San Sebastian/Donostia, etc. The EuroMed Audiovisual Programme will therefore have directly reached 40,000 spectators in the Mediterranean region.

All in all, in 2006, the programme will have provided training for 250 professionals in 10 countries of the MEDA area. Yet this number must grow. Private initiatives can contribute to such growth, such as Cinéma international. Created in 2001 and based in Cannes, it works with the local region, Europe, Mediterranean countries and Africa. Its aim is to foster the fields of filmmaking, events organisation and continued training. To this end, it offers archives containing film materials and documents for rent or sale.

Associations can also be highly useful bridges. By way of example, Ecumes is a reference in the sphere of decentralised cultural cooperation in the Mediterranean region. This association is at the head of a large network of cultural actors in fifteen countries, coordinating international cooperation networks established within institutions of higher education in the arts. Not content with simply adding the 7th art to that of music and drama, Ecumes is working to create a network of cinema schools.

The Vitality of Festivals... and the Risk of Globalisation

Festivals continue to weave networks in the Mediterranean countries. The biennial International Mediterranean Film Festival of Tetuán, Morocco, which has only existed as such since 1999 (when it replaced the Rencontres cinématographiques de Tetuán, created, in its turn, in 1985), was not held in 2006. It was nonetheless a hallmark year: the establishment of a Foundation for the International Mediterranean Film Festival of Tetuán on 14th April 2006 should effectively allow this event to gain a professional nature. Once the foundation is consolidated, the festival could become annual as of 2007. The Montpellier International Festival of Mediterranean Film, which held its 28th edition in 2006, in which 22 Mediterranean countries were represented, remains, in the meantime, the festival of reference. Nonetheless, Montpellier’s reputation should not overshadow the high quality work done elsewhere. In Italy, for instance, the Mediterranean Film Festival (Giornate del Cinema del Mediterraneo) of Cagliari was held from 26th October to 4th November 2006, as well as the 11th MedFilm Festival of Rome, which focussed on exile. Although somewhat beyond the Mediterranean geographic area, Brussels asserted its role here as well. At the 9th edition of the Mediterranean Film Festival of Brussels, from 23rd November to 2nd December 2006, films on emigration and a selection of documentaries were screened, in addition to the *Yacoubian Building* (Egypt) and a variety of Moroccan films.

Documentaries were in the foreground at the 4th edition of the Mediterranean Short Film Festival of Tangiers, from 11th to 16th September 2006. 37 films from 17 countries were presented there, in the same city where a cinemathèque has been functioning since the month of December 2006 (the inauguration was to take place on 24th February 2007). Documentaries were also an important facet at the festivals of Cagliari as well as Civitavecchia, where the 11th edition of the International Award for Mediterranean Documentary Filmmaking and Reporting was bestowed. The emergence of these specialised film festivals is a significant adjuvant for consolidating a Mediterranean cinematic area. Take, for instance, the Agadir Cinema and Immigration Festival in Morocco, organised by the association “Initiative culturelle”. At its 4th edition, from 12th to 16th December 2006, the topic of migration was

explored from the cultural as well as the political angles. The Festival of Amazigh Film, launched in Algiers in 1999 and gaining official backing from the Ministry of Culture in 2005 will hold its 7th edition in Tlemcen in January of 2007. A likely means for establishing ties among the different Maghreb countries and even serving as a bridge between the northern and southern Mediterranean countries (the 2002 edition was held in Bobigny, on the outskirts of Paris), this initiative should by all means be pursued.

In 2006, the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute, Paris) organised the 8th Biennial Festival of Arab Film (from 7th to 29th May), fortunately expanding to include Marseille as a location for the third time thanks to the Aflam association. In the Southern Mediterranean, on the other hand, the 13th European Film Festival of Lebanon and the 7th Film Festival of Tripoli took place from 30th November to 10th December 2006, despite the very difficult political climate in Lebanon. Yet, as the titles indicate, none of these events has the direct, primary goal of fostering Mediterranean cinema. Whether it is the Biennial of Arab Film or African Film Festivals taking place in the northern Mediterranean (Festival of Milan, now joined by the Festival of Tarifa, with the mission of fostering and disseminating African film in Spain and Latin America), or the European Film Festival of Lebanon, the focus is one-way and the Mediterranean region is not the important factor. Even though Tarifa, where the Arab-Berber invaders

once disembarked on the Iberian Peninsula, is a highly symbolic location.

Isn't the Mediterranean Region simply neglected at times? The least one can say of the creation in 2006 of the Festival of Rome, which will act as rival to that of Venice, is that it has not contributed to creating a more conducive climate. The Presidency of the Languedoc-Roussillon Region and the Montpellier Conurbation Community having declared that fostering Maghrebi cinema would not suffice to make the Festival of Montpellier a "major, internationally recognised festival," we can even speak of an attitude of closure. Though the festivals of Cannes and Venice are making room for films from the southern Mediterranean in some of their sections, we mustn't delude ourselves: it is a time of globalisation and internationalisation rather than regionalisation. As a sign of the times, two festivals whose scope goes well beyond the Mediterranean region took place almost simultaneously in southern Mediterranean countries. The Marrakech International Film Festival held its 6th edition from the 1st to 9th December 2006, while the Cairo International Film Festival celebrated its 30th anniversary from the 30th November to 8th December. In addition, the Carthage Film Festival, a highly emblematic, long-standing event which celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2006, created parallel sections dedicated to Asian and Latin American films, announcing their intention of turning towards these "cinemas of the south," which the European Union is now supporting.