

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Film and Audiovisual Have a Space to Conquer

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To my mind the prime objective of the dialogue between Euro-Mediterranean cultures and civilisations, initiated at the time of the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995, is *rapprochement* and understanding between the peoples of Europe and the Mediterranean basin. This resolute urge for reciprocity in communication between the various peoples of the Euro-Mediterranean region makes it possible to advance the construction of a common future, regardless of the current state of affairs or conflicts. The cultural and particularly the human aspects of the Barcelona Process seek to improve dialogue between the cultures and civilisations on the two shores of the Mediterranean, by putting forward common values such as the cultural diversity of the region.

At the heart of this Euro-Mediterranean movement, from my position as a film producer in the southern region and having devoted nearly all my activities to films and productions created by local writers and directors, it seems necessary to raise three questions, which I will try and answer: Why make productions? How do we make productions? For whom do we make the productions?

And there is another entirely natural question that occurs to me: what interest do certain countries in the north and in the European Union have in financing production and creative work in southern countries?

Why Make Productions?

People who live and work in any of the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean and have a satellite dish, either private or shared with the other people in the building, are able to receive more than a thousand television channels in French, Italian, English, German, Arabic, Turkish, and other languages. The images thus distilled by the cathode ray tubes between these people and the satellite dish are an essential element in shaping our personality, as they are images that are incorporated into and influence our identity. We are besieged by attractive and destabilising images that distort our dreams and happiness, our verve and success, and our wealth and poverty.

In our countries, the intelligentsia see the images produced in the north as a foundation; as an example to be followed greedily, in admiration of their plurality and often of their origin, and of their impertinence toward those in power. Naturally, what ensues in the north and in the south, and in a global manner, is a binary vision of the problem, which has significant consequences on the southern people's sense of identity. It can be compared to Heaven and Hell: Heaven is in the north, Hell is in the south, in Palestine, in Iraq, in Chechnya.

Most of the time, the big and small screens of the north do not show the south except as places of dictatorships and coups d'état, and its peoples as terrorists who attack the peaceful lives of other innocents; or in times of tragedy, with the occasional earthquakes, drought and famine. To a certain extent the south represents the

fringe and the misery of the rest of the world. The temptation to leave Hell at any cost and head for Heaven is strong. There is therefore a need to bring Heaven to the south. For this reason we must produce images of things that we have close at hand, to show that there is, after all, a little bit of Heaven in the south, and also a little bit of Hell in the north.

It is vital for our societies that we make productions in the south. And it is important for the north too, for painting the north as if it were a paradise only weakens the peoples of the south, especially our youth, and turns them into nomads, and is as dangerous for the north as it is for the south.

How do We Make Productions?

It is intolerable for me to think that audiovisual products aimed at either television or the cinema should be made using the resources of the fringe areas in the south, when such ostentatious wealth exists in the north. Modern day consumers of images, wherever they are born, whatever culture they claim as their own, are used to seeing audiovisual material of a standardised technical quality. It is unthinkable that the south should have to resign itself to making substandard productions as a result of its disadvantaged position.

Thus, in order to make productions, we require significant financial resources and a real mastery of the mechanics of production. This necessity leads us to request our media, television channels and above all our governments, for their support of production ventures with real resources and coherent legislation. Providing these

resources means a consolidation not just of identity, which is the cement that unites a people and hence a public; it means also to furnish the public with an image of a country as a true city, in the Aristotelian sense.

Cinematic production means training skilled technicians, assessing the tastes of the public and conveying emotion to them- making them laugh and cry by presenting them with sincere images in their own likeness; mirror images that are strong enough to transgress in the way that is required for this public in order to perceive the difference between such products and the stereotypical formal expression that is characteristic of our media.

For Whom do We Make the Productions?

The experience that I have acquired over my years as a producer has reinforced an opinion of mine concerning the success of an audiovisual product. Whenever I have had a popular success in Tunisia, I have had a relatively widespread and unequivocal success in Europe amongst public and critics alike, as well as at cinema festivals. Similarly, I have been witness to the failure of certain productions that were made, consciously or otherwise, with the intention of pleasing the European public. These films are what I non-seriously termed «neo-Orientalist», which embrace the vision of the peoples of the north, folklore, the jellabah, belly dancing, and so on and so forth.

Today, the concern of a producer or director ought firstly to be that of the audience. This is not an absolute guarantee of international success, but it is an approach that I believe to be coherent, because emotion, sincerity, credibility and the technical quality of the sound and images are the essential elements for success with the public.

I aim my production ventures mainly at the Tunisian audience, or the people in the country where the film is being produced. International recognition will follow of its own accord. I believe it is necessary to avoid the illusion of declaring that a production is aimed solely at the avant-garde intelligentsia, which constitutes the most fickle, vol-

atile and ungrateful audience. I have to produce my films for the man and woman on the street; and that is the best way to win over the intelligentsia and the people with the power.

The Compulsory Euro-Mediterranean Alliance

The history of human interchange between Europe and the southern Mediterranean region is by far the best illustration of what is at stake in the Euro-Mediterranean process, and provides us with all the arguments for why we ought to combine our forces in cinema production. The establishment of a real human Euro-Mediterranean forum would be unable to succeed without the materialisation of cultural ventures in co-productions. However, the battle for our identity, in order to avoid the pressure of immigration and the disastrous consequences created by such pressure, and to limit the invasion of American productions on our screens, should drive the Euro-Mediterranean toward a greater solidarity and a closer alliance. The short-sightedness of the ratings war means that few productions from the south are shown on screens in the north, which is a highly deplorable situation. However, television could play a significant role in the dialogue between civilisations.

Given impact that television forms on mankind today, it could be a means that would make it possible to break through the prejudices of the people living in the north against those of the south, and lead to improved mutual understanding amongst the peoples in the Euro-Mediterranean region, with a view to improving the images they have of each other. To defend cultural diversity is to defend European expression, thereby preventing the flooding of European screens with American productions. The imposition of original cultural identities is not only an obligation for the defence of freedom of expression, but above all for the purpose of encouraging the south and the north to work together to protect the specific characteristics that are proper to us. It is not a question of aiding productions in the south on the grounds of some unilateral logic, but

first and foremost of producing work together, supporting each other and the reciprocal broadcasting of each other's productions.

Moreover, the efforts to implant the Euro-Mediterranean partnership would be in vain if the actions that enable the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean to gain access to new technology and to organise professional bodies did not materialise in joint production or co-production initiatives, because only at this stage can we truly talk of partnership.

The Intervention of the European Commission

The European Commission is the source of a number of initiatives for the development of the Euro-Mediterranean alliance, which were raised in three panels of discussion in Barcelona: politics and security, economic and financial issues, social and cultural relevance. All the programmes that have followed the Barcelona Declaration are financed by the MEDA programme of the European Union, which has already poured €10 billion into the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, over a period of ten years.

As a follow up from the Rhodes Conference in 1998, the Euromed Heritage programme was the first to be financed within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Its aim is to help the twenty-seven countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region to maintain and promote their heritage sites and to enable them to use their cultural assets to the advantage of their economies.

Moreover, as it is not possible to promote the movement of goods and capital while restricting the free movement of people, the Euromed Youth programme represents a priority action aimed at young people. This programme, which was launched in 1999, makes it possible, to a certain and as yet only limited extent, to extend the benefits of the Erasmus exchange programme to students in the Euro-Mediterranean region. If the programme is successful in the long term, it will make a considerable contribution to the shaping of a «sense of Euro-Mediterranean citizenship» amongst

young students in the Euro-Mediterranean region, once again in accordance with a logic of reciprocity. However, we are going to pay particular attention to the third programme set up by the European Commission, Euromed Audiovisual.

**Euromed Audiovisual:
a Regional Programme to Promote
Cooperation in Audiovisual
Production within the
Euro-Mediterranean area**

For the countries of today's Europe, the co-production and distribution of an audiovisual production from the south not only means offering their audiences a touch of the exotic, but above all implies the defence of their own identity, in order to erase differences and learn about others, and often to promote the transfer of knowledge and technology. The main objective of the Euromed Audiovisual programme is to establish new cooperative ventures between European and Mediterranean operators in the audiovisual sector. The programme enables projects within the fields of radio, television and film to be sustained over a number of years.

A direct and happy consequence of the Barcelona Conference in 1995, this initiative is the result of the agreement reached at the conference be-

tween the twenty-seven governments of the Euro-Mediterranean partners which was held in Thessalonika in 1997. The objectives of the accord were established as follows:

- to promote the development of the audiovisual sector, particularly through cooperation between European and Mediterranean operators
- to encourage the exchange of technology and expertise, and to encourage cooperation between radio or television broadcasters and the distribution of their programmes
- to encourage the promotion and distribution of films made by Mediterranean partners and European Union
- to promote new appreciation of the audiovisual and cinematographic heritage related to the Euro-Mediterranean region
- to facilitate investment and the creation of jobs and wealth within the audiovisual sector

Most of the projects selected in the framework of the Euromed Audiovisual programme have already made it possible for progress, however small, to be made by the Euro-Mediterranean audiovisual landscape. The Europa Cinemas project, for example, has supported a number of activities, including the initiative aimed at the co-

ordination of distribution and operations in the countries of the Maghreb, which has made it possible for us to witness from today onwards a clear improvement in the diversity and contemporaneity of the programming between the Maghreb and Europe.

**The Euromediatoon - Viva Carthago
Example**

Euromediatoon-Viva Carthago is one of the projects that have been maintained. Its goals are to establish an animation cartoon studio in Tunisia through a partnership set up between various companies and countries in the Mediterranean region (Tunisia, France, Belgium, Italy, Algeria, Morocco, the Lebanon and Syria), to train young professionals from these countries in the skills required to make animation productions, and to produce a cartoon series of twenty-six episodes on the history of the Mediterranean and its peoples and civilisations, as seen from the countries on the southern shore.

Thanks to the Euromed Audiovisual programme, this project is widely recognised and an exemplary partnership has been established between nine companies from eight countries around the Mediterranean basin. At the dawn of the Euro-Mediterranean era and with the support of the Euro-

EUROMED AUDIOVISUAL PROJECTS IN PROGRESS

EUROMEDIATOON - VIVA CARTHAGO

Co-production of a series of cartoons of twenty-seven episodes which will deal with historical characters of the Mediterranean. Participating countries: Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Belgium, France and Italy.

EUROPA-CINEMAS

Aid to the distribution and circulation of films from Europe and the Mediterranean countries throughout the Mediterranean partner countries, and the distribution and circulation of films from Mediterranean countries in the EU. Participating countries: Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and France (Europa-Cinemas Network present all over the EU).

<http://www.europa-cinemas.org>

CAP-MED

Conservation and restoration of audiovisual archives from the television channels of the Euro-Mediterranean partner countries. Creation of a database of references of these archives.

Participating countries: Algeria, Palestine, Cyprus, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Tunisia, Spain, France, Greece and Italy.

<http://www.01communication.com/>

<http://www.cap-med.net>

CINEMAMED

Mediterranean Film Festival. Promotion of Mediterranean cinema through a travelling festival devoted to Arab and Mediterranean cinematography. In addition, the organisation of training modules and film restoration. Participating countries: Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon,

Morocco, Tunisia, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

<http://www.cinemamed.org>

ELLES... AUX ABORDS DE L'AN 2000

Co-production of a television documentary series of twelve episodes on the lives of Mediterranean women who have played a significant role in their societies, either because of artistic or literary talent or their relevant political role. Participating countries: Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Denmark and France.

MEDEA

Support funds for the pre-production of films in the process of being co-produced. Financial support will be accompanied by training courses. Participating countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Spain, France and the Netherlands.

pean Community, Cinétéléfilms Tunisian production company, the origin of Euromediatoon - Viva Carthago and the delegated producer of the project, has forged close co-production links with audiovisual companies on the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean: La Fabrique (France), La Lanterna Magica (Italy), Sofidoc (Belgium), L'Autre Rive Productions (France), A.T.A. (Morocco), Télécinex (Algeria), Crystal Films (the Lebanon) and Dunia Films (Syria).

The project also includes the production of a series of cartoons, as well as setting up the infrastructure required to generate an exchange of technology and knowledge. Similarly, the audiovisual operators in the Euro-Mediterranean region included in the project need to respond to the conditions in the animation market, which is experiencing a period of over-production, by offering a marketable product adapted to the current demands of the audiovisual market in general, and in particular of the animation market by including a southern sensibility that is supported by ever more effective European technology.

Euromediatoon - Viva Carthago has until the current time administered nine training cycles, enabling 110 professionals to learn the skills required for

producing animated films, which include set, production, storyboard, layout, animation, décors, painting, and composition. These training cycles have been organised thanks to the experience of the partner companies from the northern shore of the Mediterranean, and have been managed by experienced professionals.

Furthermore, trained students on work experience are now gradually being incorporated into the production chain, working on the Viva Carthago series, which is now in progress. However, the objective of such a project, which would have been impossible to accomplish without the support of Euromed Audiovisual, is to encourage others to join the profession, with a view to ensuring that Euromediatoon continues after the Viva Carthago series by means of the emergence of a new generation of artists and creators in the south. Today we can state that thanks to financing from the European Union, a studio of international standard has been set up for the creation and production of animation work relevant to Europe, that is capable of making animated series and films either sub-contracted by Europe or as co-productions. This studio is also a bridge that needs to make a name for itself in television channels and cinemas on both

shores of the Mediterranean in recognition of its production and distribution of both European and southern Mediterranean productions. This will avoid the need for European producers, who currently sub-contract a large proportion of their animation productions to countries such as China and North and South Korea, which then make long and arduous journeys around Asia. Tunis is just two hours from Paris and one hour from Rome. It has the potential to become a neighbouring studio that operates at reasonable prices, and the partner of choice for numerous European, Euro-Arab and Euro-Mediterranean cartoon production companies.

Europe needs to defend a diversity on its own screens in order to defend its audiovisual culture and its identity, and its technological and industrial development. It is through this wide-ranging diversity of broadcast productions that it will be able to instil the notion of «free choice» into the minds of the audience, and to defend itself against the American format, which has spread the Americanisation of the television and film jargon used today in languages that have their own magnificent history. This is the history of peoples and their literature, poetry and art, in which we all take great pride.