

The current scene of script development practices in Europe.

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Good morning, I'm head of studies of the Pilots Screenwriting Programme in another part of Spain. And my background is with the MEDIA programmes development agency, firstly the European Script Fund, followed by EMDA, so I was lucky enough to get quite a good overview of what was happening in development over recent years. I thought when I was given the title of this conference, that it might be interesting to reflect a little bit on some changes that appear to me to have taken place over the European scene with regards to development since the start of the MEDIA programme. The MEDIA programme started its pilot year in 1989 which is when I joined the Script Fund.

There have been quite significant changes in the types of stories that people are developing and writing. What's happening is that Europe has, thankfully, lightened up a little bit, there's a bit more fun coming out of some of the stories that people are writing, people are not frightened of entertaining us any more. When we opened our doors in 1989 we didn't get any comedies at all, we didn't get any *rom-coms* either (romantic comedies), we were just deluged with very dull, historical sagas that we were very subsidy-driven projects, they were not market-driven. I'm delighted to note that those days have ended; people are not frightened of genre-driven projects any more.

Genre used to be a dirty word; I don't think it is anymore, people have understood it's just a word to help audiences identify the type of project that they want to see. We never, ever had any action-adventure films in Europe before the nineties, now that's coming up as well and I think we're getting a much greater variety of types of stories, indeed in the structure of the stories as well. We're getting a lot of ensemble group films; we're getting a lot of films that play around with structure in different ways, with time and chronology. And it's maturing; the types of projects we're looking at are growing. There have been, I think, significant changes in the understanding of how the development process works. Writers are a little less innocent than they were, a little less arrogant in

defending this albatross around our neck, of our great European cultural heritage, where we have to reflect Cervantes and Shakespeare and Goethe in our scripts. No we don't. Things have been getting a bit better. I think this has partly to do with changes in the way subsidy is awarded; it's less nationalistic in its criteria and a little bit more commercial. I think it's also a result of the diversity of what's happened in film schools where not everybody is going there to be an *auteur*, just to be a director, but you're now able to go to film school and study editing, camera work, screenwriting and producing, etc.

Training courses like this, and the others that the MEDIA programme and other institutions have been able to do, are certainly having a profound effect on the way people operate. But the biggest single change, I would say, is the attitude of producers towards development, and this probably has quite a lot to do with courses like ACE and EAVE and other ones that have been helping producers to get more involved in the creative process. We are now building up a culture where creative producers are the norm, rather than the exception; producers who are able to participate in the development of the script and have a constructive, creative discussion with the screenwriters, rather than just a financial discussion. So I think that's a significant move. What we are lacking is training for the decision-makers who sign the multi-million Euro cheques. There is still a lack of cine-literacy, if you like, amongst many of the big cheeses, the decision-makers who operate at some of the larger companies. They do not come from a background of reading scripts; they come from a business and accounting background so there is some work to do there. I would love to find a way to encourage the top people to be humble enough to come along to some of our screenwriting courses, they need it as much as the rest of us. That would be nice if we could find out how to do that.

The money's improved a little bit, not much. There aren't enough agents like Julian Friedmann around helping writers to work. There's one or two now emerging in Spain to help that infrastructure grow up; there is a type of standardisation in different countries of the fees that should be paid to writers. But when you look at the Writers Guild of America holding the industry to ransom every couple of years. It was only eighteen months ago they threatened

to strike. I mean the idea of writers threatening to strike is quite extraordinary. In Europe how could we get eleven thousand writers together to join a union and say, "we ain't gonna work,"? It's unthinkable and the power that group has is something for European writers to aim for in the future, but it's very difficult to think that far ahead, where we have a contract with a producer that includes health benefits and pension payments and stuff like that.

We've evolved a system where instead of just projects being developed there is now a culture of slate funding for producers. Which I think is a very positive move in development. Money is allocated to producers to select projects on the basis of the companies having some sort of a track record. It's acknowledging the professionalism and the integrity of the film makers themselves in being able to choose the projects rather than some anonymous committee somewhere deciding which projects should be developed. It's a shame, that we are still lacking any sort of European powerhouse film-company like any of the American studios. I've worked for a couple of them. We've had Rank, we've had Thorn EMI, we've had Canon, we've had PolyGram, which was the closest to a European major that we got, but unfortunately it was eaten up by Universal and then spat out. And then we had Vivendi attempting to be the big European powerhouse, and of course that has collapsed amid much acrimony. Then we had the Neuer Market crash in Germany with Kirch and people like that. Nobody has cracked it, nobody has been able to produce the volume of movies that Hollywood does to ensure that there is a viable industry with major companies having 'first look' deals with the smaller producers to create competence in the financial world to make films go forward. Most independent producers are still one film away from bankruptcy. The American studios understand that it's a hit business and if they churn out a dozen movies a year then probably one or two of them will make enough money to cover all the losses on the other ones. We've never been able to establish that in Europe and it's still something we have to strive for.

So, where does that leave the training and the workshops? Well, it's very tough for the workshops because you can't establish extremely high entry criteria, as the first concern is to fill the places and pay the fees. There's a type of

European course junkie that exists who goes from one course to another without seeming to be very productive in terms of getting films made. That's very good for networking but it's hard to know where it's leading in terms of production. I sort of agonise over this at Pilots because it's extremely expensive to put these courses together when you're paying for flights and hotels and all the costs of putting it together. It's not really economically viable and I sometimes think maybe we should stop doing that and start thinking about digital video conferencing. Then of course you lose all that personal networking and it is still, however much we try and create databases and computer links, it's still a people business, where people have to meet each other and talk to each other. So we have to keep on going with what we've got.

That brings up the role of the script editor which is something that obviously is very much central to this discussion we're having these days here. It's a very sort of imprecise job description that a script editor has, you're not quite sure where it begins and where it ends, and how much your creative input is supposed to give. I think there are some wonderful script editors working in Europe, there are also some rather old-fashioned, stagnant ones who've been doing it for too long and are too distanced from the industry to really be constructive and direct people towards the market place. It's a little like old college professors who've been at university for fifty years and have actually lost touch completely with the real world. At the other end there is also the new input of arts graduates who become script editors without proper training, and of course there are no rules to go by. There are no job qualifications that you have to fulfil, you just have to convince somebody that you're able to read a script and give a good opinion of it. It has led to a lot of people being quite unhappy with some of the development practices that carry on. That's a global phenomenon, not just European. I read an article by David Mammet who famously hates the development process and he refers to the development bureaucracy as a *cold sore* on the lip of entertainment, which is typical David Mammet stuff.

We've also got the confusion of how to organise all these training programmes. When I started in the MEDIA programme there were six and then very quickly

twelve projects in training, distribution, and development, and everybody knew what was going on, & where you went to do something. Now there's over a hundred projects with MEDIA input into them, which is fantastic that that money is there to help, but it's terribly confusing. It's confusing for the MEDIA desk offices in the different countries and it's incredibly confusing for an applicant to know which course they should go to. Why go to Pilots when you could go to Sources or North by Northwest. The Geneva group seems an interesting initiative. It seems to be an attempt to try and impose some sort of common sense on a strategy for these training courses working together. This problem has been extended by the input of the new member states of Europe joining from Eastern Europe, which is fantastic in terms of stories because we've got wonderful, new ideas coming our way. But you do feel a little bit you're going back to square one sometimes, because the projects I'm receiving from those countries tend to be enormous amounts of C.V.'s and qualifications, and very little in terms of story content, despite the wonderful film traditions they have there.

If you read these incredibly pessimistic press releases that come out of the European Audio Observatory, in Strasbourg I think it is, which publishes statistics about what's happening with the audiovisual industry. It seems to get more and more depressing each year, because there is actually less co-production between European countries now than there was a few years ago. There are less European films being seen in each others' countries despite all the support that's been thrown at it from Brussels and nationally. Furthermore there has been a huge failure of co-production to establish itself in the industry, both in film and T.V. We're finding it very hard to cross borders, Pilots, when it started, was supposed to be for international long-running T.V. series, which hardly exists in Europe, unless they are American imports. So we're a little unsure of what the future should be for these workshops with the problems of co-production that we're experiencing. The triumph of European production is of course national, especially in television. Every country has its own national soap operas, which are much sneered at, but actually provide an extremely important social and cultural function for the population, and that has been a huge triumph. I live up in Catalonia which only was allowed to speak its own language since 1976 and now there are six million Catalan speakers and the Catalan

soap operas and mini-series have huge ratings in T.V. In film of course we're still utterly dominated by the global machine of Hollywood. But I think there is a question mark there, as we've seen from these statistics. If an average budget of a film is 102 million dollars to put out, and there's a whole bunch of them that are now 200 million dollars, some of them are working a bit, some of them are not. It's becoming completely obscene, and hard even for those studio movies to get their money back, and survive. Maybe that's heading for an implosion, or maybe DVD will save it and they'll be alright.

I think that television is something that's often left out of these development discussions, and I think it's a shame because there is so much more work available for new talent in T.V. drama. There is now room for experimentation, there's a lot of T.V. movies, T.V. mini-series where new talent is coming back in. It's what they're doing in the States too; you've got Spielberg and Tom Hanks doing *Band of Brothers*, you've got people coming back into T.V. in order to experiment and to be free. I don't think we should treat television as the enemy any longer. It's something that we can collaborate with, especially if we're new to the industry, which has a vast appetite for our work and I believe some of our screenwriting courses should be more aimed towards the television market and try and develop closer ties with them. I think there should be more genuine collaboration between all these different courses we've got over Europe, and some sort of content guidance. I think there should be a way for executive training if you like, of the decision makers in companies so that they can learn to read a script and make decisions that are based on the commercial demands of the marketplace but also involve creative content in their decisions. But most of all we should try and help move towards having the audiovisual process, the understanding of scripts and film, pushed into the education system for kids, for teenagers. As part of the main curriculum so that people are not only reading *Hamlet* and Beckett but they're also reading the scripts of *Casablanca* and having visits from Robert McKee and Chris Vogler and the like. So that it becomes part of the education culture, and so that when people emerge from university and try to become script editors, teachers, screenwriting, producers, they know what a script is and don't have to learn from scratch.

OK, thanks very much.