

NEW CHALLENGES IN EUROPEAN SCREENWRITER TRAINING

By JOAN ÁLVAREZ ©

Screenwriter, Director of the Fundación para la Investigación del Audiovisual (Foundation for Audiovisual Research)/Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo

1. Towards a new European Cinema

With the globalisation of the modern world, a significant current in cinema created in Europe is seeking to project itself onto the international market as European Cinema.

While it is not yet the main current, and its future is fraught with difficulties, it is a culturally significant, economically relevant and politically transcendent fact.

The growth of a European Cinema, as in the case of European television or press, or to give further examples, European cosmetics or a European tourist industry, has to face an internal obstacle: the extraordinary weight of the national factor, which is felt both within the industries' frameworks and in narrative or aesthetic traditions.

The extant differences between cinema produced in each of the five great film-making countries in Europe (France, Great Britain, Spain, Germany and Italy) cannot be culturally, politically or economically erased.

These differences become more pronounced if we consider the case of Scandinavian cinema (with its own internal contrasts) or the situation in other countries with their own particular profiles such as Holland, Belgium, Portugal, Greece, Switzerland or Austria.

Identity becomes even further diluted when the notion of European Cinema embraces the panorama in other countries that now form part of the new 25-member Europe, such as Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary, each with their own strong, idiosyncratic traditions in the way they make and conceive cinema.

European identity is a long historical process laden with memory. In its present form, which emerged in the second half of the 20th century and was cemented through the construction of the European Union, it is dominated by nations and has no choice but to back an identity forged through methods of political negotiation, and not through chemical synthesis. The same can be said for the area of audiovisual storytelling.

However, as when we refer to other artistic disciplines, or other activities with a healthy dose of collective identity such as gastronomy, the films that are cultivated in the fertile fields of the various European contexts have an unequivocally familiar quality when defined, not individually, but rather in comparison with Indian, Egyptian, Chinese or in particular, North American films.

In this, and in other aspects, Hollywood cinema plays a dual role: it provides us with the best possible mirror for us to discover ourselves, and acts as a huge constraint on our development - the other great obstacle (this time external) to our growth.

Current North American identity, evolved alongside the social change dominated by successive waves of immigration witnessed in the United States during the latter decades of the 19th and the beginnings of the 20th centuries, synthesises and democratises a wide range of traditions, including the creation and consumption of culture and, in particular, the tradition of storytelling and its role in life in modern society.

2. A “non-Hollywood” cinema

It has frequently been stated that the roots of the disparity between North American and European cinema are to be found at its very origin. The invention of cinema was at the same time European, or French, and again North American. According to many experts, this double invention led to the creation of two types of cinema: cinema as art, and cinema as entertainment.

Hence, while “national” interpretations of the European idea of cinema continue to be relevant, they look minuscule when compared with the North American idea of cinema.

The European idea accepts cinema as an industry, even more so following the fierce increase in production, distribution and commercialisation costs suffered in the 1970s. However, above all it continues to be an industry of culture, in other words, one of artistic expression, aesthetic exploration and linguistic innovation.

The North American idea, at least the tendency that falls under the “Hollywood” label, has for the last twenty years considered cinema as a form of mass entertainment, just another piece of the complexly woven expanse of the global mass entertainment industry.

In aesthetic terms, this vital difference indicates that Hollywood cinema is narrative. Most of its stories are grounded in an unrealistic inspiration, far removed from any social context yet intelligently probable. Its protagonists have unlimited resources and a will of iron, and its plots are constructed to carry the hero’s adventures through the astute use of action genres and special effects so that an international audience might identify with its protagonists, stirring up their emotions and moulding itself to an acquiescent taste which is neither critical nor demanding.

For its part, European cinema has continued to cultivate the film as a personal expression of its author, in which poetic enquiry still has its place,

but where most of its films are small budget narratives, without the backing of a star system, that neither renounce the freedom to critically tackle issues of social or human interest, nor repudiate innovation in content and form, even though this may alienate the easy audience or demand active participation from the public in its enjoyment or interpretation of the cinematographic work.

Hollywood as an obstacle is also confirmed in the overwhelming North American superiority in the areas of distribution and commercialisation, and in the astute way Hollywood capitalises on the resources of its industry, from the *star system* to how it seduces talent from all over the world, in order to impose its model as the only one that allows cinema to become a phenomenon of the international, now global, masses.

3. The battle for audience

Two significant details stand out in this game of confrontation between Europe and Hollywood. The first is that, with slight annual variations, North American cinema is preferred by four out of every five European cinema-goers, leaving European films with a percentage that on the whole, rarely goes over 15% (although this may reach 30% in the case of France).

The second is the increasing strength of the perverse but very powerful argument that American cinema is driven by audience alone, while European cinema only keeps going with the help of government subsidies and public funds.

This argument was widely used throughout all the discussions and rows between the North Americans and the Europeans during the battle of the GATT over ten years ago, during which US directors like **Martin Scorsese** and **Francis Ford Coppola** went so far as to demand freedom of circulation for their work, whereas European directors such as **Wim Wenders**, **Pedro**

Almodovar or **Bernardo Bertolucci** energetically defended the right of survival for European cinematographic work.

It has also been used, with self-critical intentions, by several major figures in European cinema such as producer **David Puttnam** who thus expressed the dilemmas of the future: *“We (Europeans) can become dinosaurs, imprisoned in the theme park we’ve made for ourselves, fed on a diet of pre-cooked subsidies, or, we can use our talent and our imagination to go back into the real game, to know, to communicate or even better, delight a viable audience”*.

3. Premises for change

Over recent decades, in contrast to the 1960s and 70s, purely aesthetic proposals (movements, schools, styles) for renovation in European cinema have been scarce. Indeed, only the new realisms, inspired by the proposals of **Andre Bazin** and influenced by the rise of the documentary, occurring in Great Britain, France or Spain, the diffuse national cinemas, although strewn with consequences, as in Spain or Germany, and the singular Dogma 95 movement, have managed to keep their head above water.

Yet a great deal of energy and resources have been devoted to the task of developing European Cinema over this period, in spite of the absence of aesthetic demands, and without arising from the initiative of creators, critics, theorists or producers, but rather induced by public institutions responsible for cultural or film industry policy. This European Cinema has effected a fostering of identity, or a preservation of cultural diversity, and moreover has encouraged a recovery in audience numbers that goes beyond national boundaries.

On the whole, this period has been positive with a good deal of experimentation, testing out and exploration. So much so that Hollywood formula film production (unreal but probable storylines, well defined genres, big stars, unlimited technical resources) has greatly improved. However, it is

obvious that these cannot be more than isolated initiatives, as their momentum can only be maintained with the resources of a large industry and its corresponding audience. Clearly, this requires years of work, the collaboration of the major distributors (at present, North American), and at the same time is extraordinarily risky, as can be seen from the experiences of large groups like Vivendi.

A renewal of nationally based popular European cinema has also been put to the proof, a very stable trend with its loyal band of devotees, as seen in the archetype comedies in Belgium or Germany or the farce in Spain in the 1990s.

At the same time, the top names in European-made cinema, from **Rhomer, Angelopoulos and Oliveira**, to **Wenders, Frears, Loach, Tanner, Lars von Trier** or **Almodóvar**, to name but a few, have continued to reap critical success, and in some cases, audience success, enriching their filmography and the glory of the author as one of the defining features of our film-makers.

In general terms, however, the resource most widely employed by the new generation of screenwriters, directors and producers, and the tendency that has produced the greatest number of titles is that of medium-budget films with attractive storylines. These films, while not abandoning the aesthetic tradition and challenging, innovative character of European national cinemas, and with stars that pull an audience in one, two or three countries, set out to go beyond national boundaries and reach a wider audience. The contribution of national promotion systems and the collaboration of television companies have been crucial in this area.

Much of what has occurred here is linked to the setting up of a series of financial and legal policies (essentially from the EU and the MEDIA programme, but also from public and private institutions within EU member countries) devoted to spreading awareness of the need to rouse this new

European cinema. This has gone side by side with an ambitious, complex and interesting movement of educational renovation and the promotion of new generations of talented professionals capable of working creatively to the new rules. These may be known as the policies of a New European Cinema.

4. Story renewal, script transformation

The right strategies to encourage a cultural and industry change of the magnitude aspired to had to recognise the impossibility of pointing to just one or various factors of those involved in the creation, production and circulation of a film as being responsible for its success, or expressive or communicative powers.

However, with this precaution, the analysis that has sustained, and continues to sustain, the policies for a New European Cinema set off from the very beginning from the reasonable hypothesis that the nature, the destiny and the potential of a cinematographic project is moulded at the writing stage. Moreover, the values of the script can determine the values of the film and the entire cinematography, thus enabling captive Hollywood audiences, or those coming into the market for the first time, to be won back.

One of the key factors in this script renovation in Europe has undoubtedly been the situation created by more than 25 years influenced by the policy of the author, which has impoverished the screenwriter's role vis-à-vis the director-producer relationship.

The second, and even more important factor is that the script is no longer considered as an individually created work, to a greater or lesser extent literary, and is now regarded as a decisive element in the development stage of a cinematographic project.

5. More and better development

When we speak of “development” in most industries we are normally referring to “R&D” (research and development).

In the film industry, development is a vital stage in the life of a project, during which the screenwriter and the producer (together, on occasions, with the director) work on a script and improve it so as it becomes a quality piece of work or it is adapted to the needs of the project. Generally speaking, development is the work that begins with the purchase of intellectual property and ends with the production script, ready to be filmed.

This stage has long been considered as highly important in the United States. It has been taught at university level since 1910. A great deal of money is invested (some 10% of a film’s budget, compared with around 2.2% currently devoted to this end in France) and numerous executives have specialised in this area.

In the middle of the 1980s, the development process in the European industry was, in contrast, a poorly defined, secondary element in the film production process. This was partly due to the lack of financing needed to carry through the entire development and treatment of the final versions of the script. This inevitably led to a situation in which the producer was catapulted towards the production and screening of “immature” films.

As late as 1994, an EU report on the structural defects of the European industry pointed out that, *“in the creation stage, European projects are burdened by a lack of development. This is a crucial stage in which the original ideas must be reworked and directed towards bigger audiences. This creation/development stage is crucial because even with the most sophisticated distribution mechanisms, if audience taste and demands are not taken into account, the European film industry will never be competitive”*.

David Kavanagh, then head of the EMDA (European Media Development Agency) calculated that there were some 3,000 full-length

feature film projects being developed in Europe, with a production output of 600 films.

For many, one of the basic issues in the improvement of a script throughout the development stage is linked to the relationship between the writer and the audience. **Tony McNabb** wrote that the writer's primary relation is with *"the invisible, unknown individuals who will see his or her film, in other words, the audience. To leave them out of the equation is to invite failure"*

The Hungarian film-maker **Istvan Szabo** put it another way: *"If we want to tell interesting stories about our experiences we have to find another method because the ones we have chosen up to now are boring. If we want to tell real stories about fascism and communism, we have to reach people. This demands research. It is very important to tell these stories of extraordinary European experiences, but we have to find a new idea to do so. On a superficial level, we can put forward any story. But finding contemporary stories that really travel needs a philosophy on life"*.

An assessment of MEDIA I suggested that writers who had followed their training and development projects had managed to become more aware of the commercial demands of the market. Many had brought a new perspective to intellectually unappealing but commercially very attractive genres such as comedy, thriller or fantasy.

A further problem indicated is the need to promote and become used to long-term team working. This process, *mutatis mutandi*, has precedents in the European cinema of the second half of the 20th century in the teams made up of a director and a screenwriter, perhaps the most famous being that of the Spaniard Luis Buñuel and screenwriter Jean Claude Carrière. However, at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, this situation is far more conditioned by the circumstances of the industry than by creative working routines.

It is not so much that two sensibilities are more productive than one, but rather to start operating as a team capable of successfully resolving all, or

almost all the numerous and heterogeneous problems facing the film company. In this vein, the *Trainspotting* writer-director and producer team provides a very interesting model.

The perspective of the team approach as an alternative to that of director-author has taken on a new importance in many of the training programmes to emerge during this period.

6. New training needs

The renewal of the script and the introduction and improvement of the development stage in cinematographic projects have required, and continue to require, financial resources, a change in attitude, new working habits and therefore new organisational patterns in the film company. At the same time, all of these factors have demanded an extreme effort in bringing training up to date. This has not been an easy task due to its negative beginnings. For almost a century, the teaching of screenwriting and the training of screenwriters have been neglected areas in European cinema.

In this vein, even as late as the 1990s, the acclaimed author **Robert McKee** stated, somewhat inaccurately, but emphatically that in Europe the prevailing notion was that writing could not be taught, saying that “*Creative Writing has never been included in the curriculum of continental universities*”. With a certain imprecision, he explained that the teaching of screenwriting had only appeared in the Moscow and Warsaw film schools.

Concerning this, it should not be forgotten that although screenwriting as a specialisation came onto study programmes in North American universities quite some time previously, the teaching of screenwriting according to the model by which it is now understood, only became widespread, even in the United States, during the 1980s.

Ken Dancyger succinctly explains what happened as follows: “*In the 1970s, ideas about screenwriting were generated out of the work of a numbers of playwrights*”

*who became screenwriters. All of them paid appropriate allegiance to Aristotle and his ideas on drama. Two events coincided to influence scriptwriting and its pedagogy, the release in 1977 of Star Wars and the publication in 1982 of **Syd Field's** book Screenplay. Between the commercial success of Star Wars and Field's book, an industry was born—the "how to write a screenplay" industry.*

The 1990s saw the arrival of this new wave of screenwriting studies in various European countries. Certain ideas were shared. Firstly the script is regarded as an unfinished work, written only for the screen, and in this sense, is of a completely different nature to literary or, depending on the case in question, theatrical works. Secondly, the screenwriter's training should be non-academic and linked to production needs. Thirdly, trainers should not come from the world of academia, but rather from the professional field, and they should be valued not so much on their teaching capacities, but rather on their experience, which in many cases is the equivalent of how successful their films are.

In addition, to a certain extent the language used to analyse creation and to attempt to communicate experiences took, with slight variations, the model codified by authors like **Syd Field** or **Linda Seger**, and other gurus of the speciality, from manuals and more ambitious theories such as that of the almost legendary **Lajos Egri**. The theories and teachings of the Czech filmmaker living in the United States, **Frank Daniel**, have played a particularly significant role in this area.

Clearly screenwriter training programmes have had a major impact, and continue to do so, but the universities, industries and institutions in the various countries have reacted differently with a variety of results. Even now, within the EU these programmes are far from homogeneous, and communication and exchange of experiences is still poor.

As late as the mid-nineties, **Stephen Cleary** stated that *"if Europe wants to have a valid industry, it must have a philosophy, an aesthetic, a vision, a dream, a history*

of its own”, in other words, “we need our screenwriters to know the principles and foundations of the European story, which are not necessarily those used by Hollywood”. Cleary continues: “The idea is not to make everyone European in the way that Hollywood makes us all Americans. We have to find and write stories that accommodate difference, and understand this not as an obstacle, but as a good way of launching pan-European and cross-border campaigns”

An idea of what result has been achieved can be seen in how amongst many industry professionals, especially producers or business executives, there is still rife prejudice which believes that the best scripts are due to the talents of certain individuals with a special innate instinct for imagining, structure or dialogue.

Once the impact of television on the relation between the script, the filming and the production during these years had been assimilated, a second stage was reached. Here it was recognised that not only should new screenwriters be trained, but that this training should also include the relation between the producer and writing, and a new vision of the cinematographic project as a prototype that would demand reasonable investment in the initial stages, with a view to avoiding the many failures, nearly always due to the haste imposed by profuse and perverse subsidy timetables, the demands of the stars’ agendas, or the wide ranging yet pressing desires of the director.

7. A new model, new trainers, the TEST proposal

Against this background, the Tools for European Screenwriters Training project has emerged, a project to up-date and diffuse the best Training Tools for new generations of European Screenwriters.

TEST is an initiative designed by the *Fundación para la Investigación del Audiovisual* (FIA) (Foundation for Audiovisual Research), in Valencia, Spain, and by the Foundation for Professional Training in Cinema and Audiovisual Media, in Lausanne, Switzerland. It also has the academic backing of

SOURCES in Germany, PAL in United Kingdom, and ECAM and ESCAC in Spain. It is aimed at the professionals responsible for training new generations of European screenwriters.

TEST is a training programme for trainers based on the lights and shades of the New European Cinema. In terms of both content and methods, this form of screenwriter training through development workshops has involved a radical change and has led to an increase in pedagogical complication.

Closely related to the spread of new training situations that break away from the classic teacher-pupil relationship, it comprises a complex transmission of teachings, or experiences, articulated by a team of trainers, and destined for another team, one of professionals, who also have their own views on the matters in question.

Likewise, the concepts and techniques traditionally considered appropriate for the invention of stories, the dramatic organisation of material, writing and their presentation have also been extended.

Further changes also involve the incorporation in the initial stages of the writing process of variables far removed from invention itself, such as production demands (including taking into account the profile of the new script reader) and a knowledge of audience and commercialisation strategies.

The significant work undertaken by the institutions and training programmes specialised in this form and operating in the European context leaves no doubt that training through development is a very specific teaching experience with scarcely any precedents.

There are no precedents within the perspective of teaching theory or training, as it is not academic training that may be tied to a curriculum or the transfer of a set of easily defined knowledge.

Neither are we dealing with professional training in which an arsenal of solutions is applied according to a series of relatively well-defined suppositions.

Rather, what we are looking at is a unique training process in which a number of prestigious professionals transmit their experience by opening the eyes of those interested to the possibilities of improving the contents of a project, already underway, on the basis of notions, concepts and solutions that must be changed yet nonetheless have been accepted as good by the authors.

Moreover, all of this takes place without losing sight of the commitment to a cultural identity and the reality of the industry, in other words, to a European Cinema that must have ambitions on a global level and to distinguish itself from its great competitor, Hollywood.

TEST proposes to set up a platform for professionals in the industry that will allow for the exchange of experiences, methods and specific policies while at the same time developing and disseminating creative tools and strategies.

The three binding nuclei of the TEST project are:

- 1) The various narrative identities set in motion in both Hollywood and Europe as revealed in the routines for the development of projects according to the formulas used by North American studios and European development workshops. From a practical point of view, here will be included the analysis and elaboration of tools related to the incorporation of realities and references from European Cinema that go beyond the fascination of Hollywood, beyond national inertia, and with its sights set on the audiences in a global market.

- 2) The study plans, referring amongst others, to issues such as the repertoire of useful methods and strategies for the transmission of experiences, the improvement of techniques to analyse and understand a script written by a different author, the working methods of a screenwriter as part of a screenwriter-director-producer team, the updating of case studies, or

the setting of certain references that enable the dramatic and communicative potential of stories and tales to be understood and analysed.

3) The relations of trainers as intermediaries between the demands of the industry and screenwriters who are unable to completely give up, at the expense of losing their potential, a tradition that regards the script, and cultural work, as an expression of an exceptional sensibility, an intellectual and creative effort, and the manifestation of a free and critical vision of society and the human condition.