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Jacques Toubon: “Europe must improve its film distribution”



Interview (20.08.2004)

In an interview, Jacques Toubon, President of Eurimages, explains that the aim of the Council of Europe’s cinema support fund is to stimulate the production and distribution of European films, and promote co-operation between professionals.

Question: Eurimages is 15 years old. A good chance to look back and take stock. Do you think the Fund is doing its job?

Jacques Toubon: Only a fool would ever claim that a cultural aim can be 100% realised. It’s necessarily a question of trying all the time to do what one sets out to do, and trying to do it better. That said, Eurimages has done its job, and is still the only European fund to which producers can go for help with films which, quite simply, would never get made without it. As for co-operation between professionals - yes, we are certainly contributing to that, and I think our newest members are very keen to find new opportunities for co-operation. Distribution is still the weak point, and I feel that working with the Media programme is the only way of getting the impact we need to ensure that Europe is really steeped in film culture.

Question: 2003 was reform year for Eurimages, which switched from two schemes to a single aid programme. How did the changes affect professionals, and how did they react to them?

Jacques Toubon: You’ll have noticed that most reforms get a two-stage reaction: great hopes to start with, and disappointment - the “was that all?” feeling - later. We have managed to escape some of that, since professionals see that the reform makes sense. It’s also, in a sense, a cultural reform, since dividing films into two categories - likely box-office successes and the ones politely called “interesting” - is profoundly discriminatory and, to some extent, anti-cultural. So I can say that professionals have reacted well to the changes, even if some of them feel - often without saying so - that something should have been made to cut the red tape, the screening for eligibility, the deadlines, etc. I’ve already managed some large budgets in the jobs I’ve had in my own country, and I can tell you that, when public money is involved, one can - and must - insist on proper supervision. The Fund gets its money from the member states,

and we must give them every guarantee that it is being well used. Here, I must say that I appreciate having the administrative structures of an institution like the Council of Europe behind us.

Question: European films (films co-produced and distributed in several European countries) are increasingly being talked about. You must be very pleased about that, but professionals are also complaining that distributing European films is hard, in the face of competition from the omnipresent US cinema. What should be done - what can the Fund do?

Jacques Toubon: That's a difficult question, because the situation itself is difficult. It's true the struggle is unequal, though I wouldn't really use that word myself: I recognise the quality of US films, and I do not believe that anything can be gained – ever - by trying to censor other cultures. That's my position, and I sometimes get criticised for it. All it means, as I see it, is that we have to do as well ourselves. And, if we really want to get results, that means putting in as much money. Can we, are we willing, to do that? When a European film has one scriptwriter, a US film has fifty, with as many researchers behind them! Here, of course, we are getting away from the Fund's real role - even if we are helping to get more European films made.

Question: *Does rapid technological and market change (DVDs, piracy) mark a turning point for Eurimages? Surely the time has come to adjust?*

Jacques Toubon: As things stand, that applies far more to distribution than production - particularly with films on Internet and the rise of video on demand, not to mention the DVD boom you mention. The impact of these developments on production is less obvious at the moment. One example which has struck me: far more producers come to us with animated films. That's an area where computerisation has brought huge changes – the old hand-drawn frames are out, and it's all computer-generated. Is that worse, is it better? It's hard to say, but I am convinced that, at a time like this, when the pace of change has increased so sharply, we cannot let the old anxieties cripple us. You're right, we need to adapt, but not too quickly. We need to keep up with the changes - not run ahead of them.

Question: *Given its relatively small budget, can Eurimages compete with the big US studios, at a time when promoting Europe's cultural identity is more of a struggle than ever?*

Jacques Toubon: You're right about the Fund's relatively small budget. We not only have no big studios, but our attempts to create mini-versions come to nothing, because the "real" big ones buy them up. Europe is progressing slowly, sometimes too slowly, in this area. I am thinking of the big central and east European studios, which we could not help sufficiently when they rejoined the mainstream economy – with the result that they went to US buyers. As a European, I obviously find these setbacks distressing, but I still believe that cultural Europe is really on the move, and I am very happy to be president of a fund which is contributing to the process - even modestly.