

Looking back on 30 years of European Film Industry

A conversation with Paul Pauwels

by Fernando Ramos and Laura Caballero

How has the European Film Industry (EFI) evolved over the past three decades, and how has the concept of competitiveness transformed during this period? What impact have technological, political, and social changes had on this evolution? Belgian film producer and former Director of the European Documentary Network (EDN) Paul Pauwels has offered insights into these questions during a conversation.

On October 20, the partners of REBOOT's second work package - related to the "Diachronic understandings of the 'competitiveness' and of the 'European' in EFI" - met in Ghent to address common goals and methodologies. Representatives from the universities of Ghent, Liege, Warsaw, Jyväskylä and Complutense (Madrid) debated interview protocols, case studies and historical changes in European film governance. The session had at its core a panel discussion with Paul Pauwels. Pauwels has more than four decades of experience in both the public and the private sector, in the areas of film production, project development and financing, and as member of the Flemish Public Broadcasting Company-VRT. Thus, his reflections were central to illuminate transformations and challenges for the EFI over the last three decades.

Many of the materials gathered at the encounter will be presented in one of the deliverables of WP2 about the industrial transformation of European Cinema. There are however a series of key themes that this text would like to highlight, as they contribute to resituate some topics REBOOT is currently dealing with and to showcase the potentialities of a key WP2's method: the in-depth interview with stakeholders of the EFI.

In a conversation led by Daniël Biltereyst, who also organized the meeting with Engelart Willems, Pauwels discussed the changing modes of production. This discussion prompted the meeting's participants to start reconsidering the concept of competitiveness, which should be examined from at least two perspectives: competitiveness related to the financing and creation of a film, but also in terms of considering the audiences and potential outreach of a product. According to Pauwels, who mainly talked about documentaries, audiences today play a pivotal role in the inception of a film project. Compared to two or three decades ago, it is now essential to have a clear understanding of the potential audience before production begins. Since several contemporary documentary productions are today designed as international projects to secure various sources of funding, the need to consider potential audiences introduces an additional layer of complexity to the process. This raises questions about who the ideal audiences truly are, where they can be found, and how films should be tailored to resonate with their diverse contexts.

The way these questions are answered is inevitably reflected in the final product, the film, and this can occasionally complicate the global circulation of local ideas and themes.

In this changing environment, Pauwels highlights that whereas for documentaries the filmmaker used to be driving force, now the producer plays a central role and ensures tasks similar to those of an administrator and facilitator of different interests, entities and powers. The increase, and even inflation, in film production over the last decades has often led to a situation where the total funding is spread among numerous titles, forcing the producer to coordinate projects where the involvement of fifteen companies is the norm.

Pauwels also referred to the ambivalent role of technological developments in transforming film production. On the one hand, the rapid technological progress in the past two decades has facilitated the democratization of film creation, making creative tools and media more accessible than they were just twenty or even ten years ago. On the other hand, this democratization has given rise to heighten competition within the industry. The multiplication in the number of projects facilitated by these new technologies has not always been accompanied by a growth in institutional management and funding support. Some of the challenges for the present and near future are forcedly related to the coordination and adaptation to this new reality. Considering this changing context, the question of competitiveness should in some regard be reframed, as it usually doesn't relate to the competition *within* the industry but to a broader digital world outside it that competes for the same resources (attention, funding, social presence) as the film industry.

The discussion also focused on the influence of the shifting social context in Europe on film production, especially during the last decade, when the Europeanization processes have come under enormous political pressures. The changing political situation has been felt in the funding bodies, typically acting as gatekeepers and exerting greater pressure on content. Although it is difficult to pinpoint a specific event, Pauwels referred to the time around 2016-2017 when things started to change, as control grew and interaction between key players was increasingly reduced.

The conversation changed its focus from the industrial weight of platforms (and their changing role in the European documentary production) to the politization of film funds. The discussion once again emphasized the importance of regarding distribution and exhibition as central pillars in the film production process. Additionally, it touched upon the limited role of crowdfunding and highlighted the need to safeguard the richness of European film history. All in all, the seminar showcased how important it is for REBOOT to rely on interviews and oral testimonies from industry stakeholders to gain an in-depth understanding of the complexities of the recent transformation of our common film industry.

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