

The sleeping giant, the European Film Industry: REBOOTing right questions and daring answers

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One of the pressing questions in the film industries across the world has historically been how to best protect national cinema and how to make it competitive. Europe has been returning to this question over several decades now, sometimes through policies, sometimes through refocusing its research agenda. This question is not new. It has also not had any definite answers.

Across many national and regional film industries, the underlying concern is that the Hollywood engine remains unbeatable in the box office and even threatens the viability of national cinema. It is not a coincidence how Hollywood came to inhabit every daily mediated experience across the western world, to say the least. It is almost omnipresent in the cinemas and streaming platforms, in the market as merchandise, in the news media in the form of interviews with or gossip about celebrities. Certainly, what we witness is the end result of a sophisticated system promoting the interests of the US American film industry. It does so not only through an oligopolised system of distribution channels and stardom, but also through a historically long and systematic pursuit of bilateral agreements globally, and on the EU level since 1993. Hollywood is clearly a dominating actor globally. And clearly, this is not simply because it produces better products than anyone else.

When we, therefore, ask what Europe can do to be more competitive, often the underlying question is what Europe can do to compete against Hollywood. During the course of this project, I have had several times the opportunity to talk to journalists and the media about our work. There is a great interest in what we do, but there is also a widespread cultural ‘fixation’ of prioritising the perceived need to compete against Hollywood. Funnily enough, even when I say that, to my personal opinion, this is the wrong question if we want to enhance the competitiveness of the European industry, newspaper titles claim exactly that!

So, what are the right questions to ask and what has REBOOT done to answer those? To set the scene, we need to take a sober look at the social and political and cultural historical legacies and today’s conditions frame European societies. A starting point is to consider the fact that European traditions and innovation in culture are distinct and derive from a history of difference and commonality translated into a most diverse spectrum of cultural practices. From languages to ways of life, everyday social systems and political cultures, Europe has been a hub of human centred legal frameworks, philosophy and vocation across the arts and sciences, crafts and service. It is characterised by the historical reign of public service institutions and their provision, free at the point of service, such as education and health care. At the surface, all of these traits can be easily framed as losses and weaknesses in a market driven economy. This is the case, if the market driven economy prioritises concentration of ownership and is regulated as such. In other words, this is the case when public policy prioritises the interests of a few.

A second point is to define exactly whose interests must be pursued under public policy for cinema and the film industry. Universally, culture is the domain where the building blocks for Aristotle's Eudaimonia, the 'Good Life' are built: humanistic, planetary friendly and aware culture transforms imagination to vision, allows free expression and experimentation, provides the stage for innovation and tackling crises, enhances and reinforces human bonds and social cohesion, provides mental and psychological support and generally, makes life worth living. When looking at the European experience in particular, drenched with conflict, but also amazing cross-national living and loving, we can easily understand that culture for Europe, not just the EU, is and should be the pivotal geopolitical 'moment' for the preservation of meaningful democracies, social integration and cohesion and for the 'Good Life'.

From these two fundamental factual starting points, the questions to be asked are what REBOOT sought to research and answer over the three years. An incredibly complex and rich tapestry of research and outputs was crafted by more than 60 researchers and an advisory board of protagonists in the film and audiovisual sector and hundreds of others, stakeholders as we call filmmakers and music producers, policymakers and young professionals through interviews, in depth analysis and archive and desk research, focus groups and workshops. Thousands of children and young people, over 5000, across Europe talked to us and helped us with their incredible sophistication and passion to reimagine and realise and reposition all these questions, once and for all.

We asked through many different ways and formats, what are the weaknesses of the European film industry, what remains underutilised or neglected, what is its greatest contribution and, given all that, what does competitiveness look like and what does the future of the European film industry look like?

Again and again, we were told, in no uncertain way, that European films are authentic and speak of truth and life, precisely because they come from all possible places. They tell a mosaic of the human experience and paint all colours of human existence. Concepts of diversity and democracy are not decorative lip service but a true goal across the board, from filmmakers to young audiences, from policymakers to global industries to public institutions. This does not mean everybody sees the film industry and European film as a nonprofit organisation, for some profit-making is more important and authenticity in storytelling is considered secondary to box office success. To a certain extent, coproductions have occasionally diluted the taste of commitment to diversity of nations and human experience to fit economic prescriptions. Yet the overwhelming response from 5000 children and young people is clear: fatigue from and aversion to blockbuster logic, repetition and 'cheapness' of stories. *If the film industry in Europe wants to resonate with future audiences, then it must open its creativity box and invest in distinction more strongly, not less.* It must invest in original film soundtrack and in compelling storytelling.

Public institutions in Europe have played an enormous role in historically investing in the creation of know-how, educating and funding the making of storytelling in films. They have a central role in crafting spaces for newcomers, independents, marginalised groups and themes. However, they can be notoriously hard to navigate bureaucratically and downright exclusive to young filmmakers. Special trends need to be created for filmmaking connecting not only film

schools, but also young people outside those into a larger mentoring and supporting hub of possibilities.

Measures must be taken at EU and national levels to break down the barriers of filmmaking by introducing core courses in film studies as humanistic centred subjects across basic primary and secondary education, with a coordinated effort for common modules across university education. Film educates, inspires and creates lasting impressions of science, for example.

All of these are responses to address some of the weaknesses and optimise some of the strengths found in the European filmmaking landscape. Truly, a sleeping giant, the European Film Industry within and outside the EU needs more internal, cross-institutional, cross-national and cross-regional coordination to open up entry points and create sustainable futures. More, and not less, distinctive content, a plethora of genres, and authentic storytelling are the markers of the recipe for success for all. As Artificial Intelligence is being rapidly used and entered our lives, the real storytelling and the pattern prediction dominated storytelling must be further apart if we do not want the annihilation of culture for future generations.

This journey of exploring the right questions cannot be told in a few words. As coordinator of this truly humbling exploration, I am grateful for the teams I have led here at the University of Vienna and for my dream team collaborators across 16 countries. We brought society and the knowledge communities collective experience and knowledge from over 5000 children, 360+ industry professionals and over 750+ strategic documents and policies reviewed. Yet, the outputs we have produced and we are still continuing to work on do not end here. The time for the conversation to develop has just started: our 2,371 followers in social media and their 70,000 visits across social media and website attest to that.

**To those caring and providing for the storytelling of our societies,
to the nomads bringing the stories,
to the fire-keepers making sure the stories remain alive while keeping the fires burning
for our communities,**

**involve our expertise and knowledge and help us support you. Read, debate and
examine our work, tear it apart and reconstruct it, disseminate it, use it.**

Stay in touch.

Katharine

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