



Collaboration and Education

Report: ECFA's Conference on the Distribution of Films for Children in Europe at Cinekid Amsterdam 2006

„We hope this day will clearly unveil a line to follow in the future.“ Moderator Mieke Bernink welcomed 25 participants from 9 countries at the conference in Amsterdam. Cinekid brings together a growing amount of international professionals in the children's film industry, making the festival the perfect location for an ECFA conference about 'The (digital) future of children's film distribution in Europe'.

How can the circumstances for distributing children's film in Europe be improved? Collaboration in applying for European funding could be a major step forward. Felix Vanginderhuysen explained briefly about the two most common ways on how the European Union supports the distribution of films:

European Support Systems

1. Selective support:

For a group of at least five distributors, based upon costs for promotion and advertising (P&A). The selective support system takes in account points gathered on a numeric scale: the 'score' raises with the amount of participating countries; children's films get one point in bonus. Selective support in general covers approximately 40 % of the P&A costs, partly as a funding, partly as a loan.

2. Automatic support:

Every recent European film distributed can be taken in consideration, judged upon a quota scale. This funding is meant for reinvestment in future projects.

Discussion: How essential is funding?

All distributors stated that European support, sometimes combined with national funding is essential for survival. Eli Stangeland (Corianderfilm): 'A Norwegian distributor wouldn't even consider buying a film without a guarantee on some form of funding.' Tonje Hardersen (representing Film & Kino): 'Meanwhile the Norwegian government policy was able to 'educate' and stimulate the public. The more titles running in the theatres, the more admissions we have.'

But the co-operation needed for such action is sometimes hard to achieve. Distributors often are individualists, basing their decisions on personal taste and different cultural traditions.

Case Study: Winky's Horse

This case study on the film „Winky' Horse“ („Het Paard van Sinterklaas“, directed by Mischa Kamp, Netherlands 2005) is based upon facts and figures from three countries. In Sweden it is distributed by Folkets Bio (Rose-Marie Strand), in France by Les Films du Préau (Marie Bourillon) and in Norway by Arthouse (Svend B. Jensen). On the day of the conference none of the countries had already released the film.

Sweden: Folkets Bio represented by Rose-Marie Strand

Folkets Bio owns 18 arthouse-theatres, but it was clear that this film needed a release in the commercial theatres.

Negative aspects:

- Dubbing is needed (expensive).
- The way the Santa Clause character appears in this film is not familiar to Swedish children.

Promotion:

- The results of the pre-screenings were positive as children proved they were fully capable to understand the story.
- A poster was designed, careful not to focus on 'the horse', so not to scare off the boys.

Facts:

The film will be released with 10 copies on November 24th, hoping to reach 10.000 spectators plus many school children in the 2nd run.

Norway: Arthouse represented by Svend B. Jensen

Negative aspects: same as for Sweden

Positive aspects:

- The positive experiences with Dutch films so far.
- A successful pre-vision in the Kristiansand Festival.
- The similarities between Holland and Norway, making the film very recognizable and somewhat exotic at the same time.
- The Norwegian cinema system, with 200 cinemas, mainly municipal theatres.

Promotion:

- The title was changed into „Hest er Best“ („The Horse is the Best“), not to connect the film to the particular 'Santa Clause'-period but to make it relevant all year long.
- Horses will line up at the theatres, horse riding clubs and magazines are involved in the promotion campaign.
- There will be tickets and caps to win on 'horse websites'.
- Film & Kino creates an educational dossier.

Facts:

After pre-screenings in 12 cities, the film will be released with 14 prints on November 3rd, one day before 'Cinema Day' (best day of the year, selling approximately 100 000 tickets for 50 % of the price).

France: Les Films du Préau, represented by Marie Bourillon

All numbers are lined up on one sheet, illustrating the smallest details about the French campaign.

Negative aspect:

- The way the Santa Clause character appears in this film is only known to the audience in Northern France.

Promotion:

- The poster was developed in a long 'trial-and-error' process; all steps were presented at this conference.
- Different from the Scandinavian posters focussing on the horse, the French poster focuses on the girl.
- Partnerships were made with a toyshop and with media partners.
- A French dubbed version was found in Belgium (afterwards used in Quebec).

Facts:

50 or 60 prints will be released in arthouse theatres on December 6th. Les Films du Préau is hoping to reach 85.000 visitors in France.

All three distributors confirmed that they had never been in contact with each for a further consultation or exchange.

The Role of the Distributor in a Digital Era

The big screen is no longer the one and only platform for screening films. These days there are a wide variety of formats and platforms; cinema screenings only represent 25 % of the turnover. Therefore today film is no longer a physical presence, but a virtual product. The most urgent needs are now finding a space, a portal to screen your film and making the existence of the film known to the world.

In times of wireless distribution, there is a need for a 'go-between' to deliver the film to the audience: the provider. With this new physical presence in the process, what will become of the traditional distributors' role?

The distributor might become mainly a 'guide', spreading the right information to the right targets, using different subcultures as separate marketing-platforms. (Is that possible with children?) Theatrical releases will be mainly important for placing your film on the market. The landscape of film and cinema will be reshaped rapidly and completely.

Discussion: Can the Evolution towards Digital Cinema be a costs-saving Element?

The rumours are that the process of digitalisation will save costs for distributors but increase costs for cinema owners. That seems to be far from the truth. Film & Kino's experiment with 20 digitally mastered screens in Norway was not yet able to save costs, but it will surely be like that in the future.

Even when costs are decreasing, still distributors are depending on the availability of

screens. How can 'more copies' bring any benefit, as long as every screen is occupied by a Hollywood blockbuster? Programmers should realize that a program schedule is flexible, and not fixed, as it is generally considered.

Children's film distributors should fully use the two points that we benefit from in our field of work: education and collaboration. That is why the last session of the conference was held amongst distributors in small committee.

Collaboration between Distributors

As a follow-up to this debate, distributors from Norway (2), Holland, Germany, Belgium, Sweden and France discussed ways of collaboration. For instance, recent experiences with „Lotte from Gadgetville“ and „The Three Musketeers“ proved that we miss a lot of chances on a European level when we do not come up with our common goals and interests.

All distributors at present agreed to meet on regular bases to exchange information and share interest in various titles or projects. A questionnaire will soon be sent out to agree upon further engagements. The next meeting is planned during the Berlin Film Festival in February 2007.

Note: The first concrete result of this meeting, Germany's MFA Filmdistribution (represented by Christian Meinke) found two necessary partners (Belgium and The Netherlands) to make a European application for „My Name is Eugen“.

Gert Hermans

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