

Expert Meeting - Bringing European Children's Films to a Broader Audience

Except in their country of origin, European children's films have difficulties reaching a substantial audience. American blockbusters dominate the market. How can European films be made more visible and be seen more often? That was the main question discussed at this expert meeting at Cinekid 2008. Greater presence at schools, less fragmentation and European films as a brand were the most important solutions.

ECFA (European Children's Film Association) works hard to stimulate the distribution of high quality children's films in Europe. In 2006 they co-hosted a seminar at Cinekid on the subject. Four months later nine European distributors from Norway (2), Germany (2), Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, France and Sweden formed an informal grouping. Their goal is to exchange information and experience, but mostly to get greater access to the funds of the European Union for film distribution. **Felix Vanginderhuysen** (ECFA, Belgium), also one of the participants in his role as managing director of Jekino Distribution, gave an update of their achievements (for specifics see appendix 1).

MEDIA PROGRAMME

Twelve films were entered for MEDIA support, but, because of differences in the national markets as well as personal tastes, always in the name of just a few of the distributors. Five of the applications were granted. In cooperation with the Association of European Distributors the ECFA-grouping also formed a lobby to change the regulations of the MEDIA Programme. That resulted in two things:

First there was a change in the selective support system. This works with a point system based on the number of countries that are involved. Because children's films are seldom distributed in a lot of countries, they have a big disadvantage. To change this, two categories were formed, each with its own funds: one for low budget (up to 3 million Euro) and one for higher budget productions. Unfortunately this didn't work out as well as was hoped. Not all children's films are low budget, especially not animations, and on top of that the grants decreased.

The automatic support system, based on admissions, was also changed. In the past only the most popular (visited) films could benefit, but now there is a more sensitive system enabling smaller films to earn part of their money back.

ADMISSIONS

A closer look at the Swedish situation illustrates that it is extremely difficult to distribute European films to other European countries. ECFA-member **Rose-Marie Strand** (Folkets Bio, Sweden) made a listing of the box office results of 2007 (appendix 2), which show that 95 percent of tickets sold for children's film are for (in terms of majority percentage) American or Swedish products. Also remarkable is that animation is more popular than live-action. One of the new strategies used is offering films for the very youngest audience with a maximum duration of 50 minutes.

Data from **Reinhold T. Schöffel**'s ECFA survey of the distribution of European children's films between 2005 and 2007 (details in appendix 3) supports these numbers. As there is no clear definition of what is a children's film, he made his own selection, just as Strand did with her own statistics. They both see Harry Potter (in Sweden the most popular) as an American film, although one could argue that it is also a British film (because it is a co-production). Which would certainly change the percentages.

Three of the ten most popular children's films in Europe are Harry Potter films, while all the others are animation. The distributors are UIP, Disney, Warner Bros and 20th Century Fox. *Shrek 2* had the highest audience with 44.626.897 Europeans.

The top ten of European children's films is lead by *Wallace & Gromit* (co-produced by Dreamworks - so partly American!) with 13.821.063 tickets. Number two, *Arthur and the Minimoys*, got a little more than half of this (7.927.115) while by number ten, *The Wild Soccer Bunch 3*, the visitors counted are down to 2.264.401. The producing countries of these ten movies are UK, France and Germany. Distributors are big internationals, but also independent nationals. Distribution by a major is however not a guarantee of success. Noteworthy is that in *The Wild Soccer Bunch* series, only distributed in two countries, every successor was visited better than the one before. So: sequels work.

The conclusions of Schöffel's survey are that very ambitious, high quality films can be successful and that commercial projects can flop. The most successful European films are generally handled by independent, often art house distributors. Ambitious art house films are sometimes, very successfully, distributed by national daughters of major US-companies.

Schöffel observes that children's cinema loses more and more ground to new media, which is backed by surveys in Norway and Sweden, where especially male teenagers are visiting the movies much less than before. According to Schöffel cinema needs to be as attractive as it can, and the whole spectrum of children's film is valuable in this respect. Art house as well as entertainment is needed. The fact that very ambitious films often win the audience awards at film festivals proves that children not only appreciate the blockbusters. It is also noted that variety also means different children's films for different age groups. Now, overall, the most films are for 12+ and there is a lack of films for the younger age group.

Schöffel also observes a few contradictions. Firstly, cinemas and multiplexes say they cannot find enough children's films, while it remains doubtful if they could screen the films anyway: major distributors demand that their films be shown during all slots and there is therefore simply no room. Secondly, children like art house films but don't find their way to their screenings. Thirdly, there are excellent films available on the international licensing market that are not distributed or broadcasted.

Around 750 European children's films have been produced in the past eight years, but it is very difficult to get hold of complete figures, for example because many films are made but never released. The same applies to all the other statistics: for example, some national databases only go to 100 recorded units, so not all the films made make it into the statistics. And some countries, like Russia, didn't provide exact numbers. The survey covers around 60 European countries, not only EU members.

MARKETING

All the experts present agree it is time for a new approach. The biggest problem that has to be solved is how to interest people in European films for children, or to put it in more extreme terms: how to make sure they know the industry exists. Harley Cokeliss (Barzo Productions, UK) thinks independent films should be a brand, just like Dreamworks or Disney, so that parents would know these products are acceptable for their child. You know what you get: fun. The strength of the European film market (variety in languages and traditions) is at the same time its weakness. The problem being the multiplicity of the message. Films from the US stand for entertainment, while European films are more cultural and educational. Can this be used as a tool for promotion?

Marketing and public awareness are without doubt very important to creating an audience, also abroad. **Xiao Juan Zhou** (Delphis Films, Canada) gave a few suggestions as to successful promotion. In general, European films need to invest more in marketing. Cross media solutions and all other marketing tools should be used to make sure the target audience knows the film is coming. For example, You Tube is a great platform to tease people and create awareness of a product. Try to create a hype. Co-producing broadcasters can be very helpful with promotion. As Schöffner said earlier: franchising is very helpful for marketing. When part 2 of Winky's Horse came out, for example, people knew they were buying quality because the first part had been good. The label on the film should depend on the market, so don't use a fixed term "children's film" in your marketing. Sometimes it is better to brand it as "quality family entertainment". And lastly: producers should offer a dubbed version, for instance in English. Then it has a better chance of getting international distribution. Even shooting a double version might be a useful option.

THINK TANK

Henning Camre (Think Tank - On European Film and Film Policy) gave his views on children's film distribution, funding and media literacy. Think Tank recently sent a questionnaire to national film funding bodies across Europe. One of the results was that media literacy is taught in primary and secondary schools at only half of the countries in Europe (in the definition of Think Tank). In these countries, most attention is given to filmmaking for schoolchildren (59%); 48% goes to regular screenings of films for children. Only 31 % of teachers are trained to do this themselves. It's clear that film education should have a higher priority. If we don't teach children to decode film, TV will. Otherwise people will see American blockbusters as the standard for film, not knowing

that there are other ways of storytelling. That art house films can be just as entertaining is not a general message.

Then there is the funding of children's film. This mostly exists of public subsidies. On average, national support is roughly 13 percent of the total for film in general - so it is not a priority at all. At the same time film consumption is changing: parents and children decide how and when to watch film. So another way has to be found to get the money back to the producers – not only through ticket sales. The percentage of the budget that is reserved for distribution is often too small. The most goes into production. This should change.

That brings us to distribution. Access to screens is a big problem: European children's films are seldom shown daily at different slots. In Europe there are a lot of independent distributors for a small amount of films. The result is fragmentation. We should all work together to be ready for the new means of distribution. Steal the secrets of the States, where there are just a few distributors. Of course there is the anxiety that there will be no place for art anymore, but it is the only way to reach an audience. Public policy should work together with the industry, forming conglomerates for production and distribution.

THE ROLE OF FILM FUNDS

According to **Toine Berbers** (Dutch Film Fund, the Netherlands) Dutch distributors are hardly interested in children's film anymore. A drastic change must come before it completely disappears. Questions the fund needs to answer are: what is the budget for distribution, how to find the best foreign films and what is the best way to distribute - is digital distribution a possibility?

The reaction of **Petri Kempainen** (Finnish Film Foundation, Finland) is that other ways of distributing are a necessity. Cinema belongs to the 90s. You can think of special events or promoting the films at international film festivals. A cinema-on-demand platform is a possibility, and screenings at schools are an important way to expose children to European films – although at the moment these screenings are illegal. In Finland only American and national companies have a deal that they get 2 euros per pupil per year.

Just as in Finland, UK broadcasters are less and less involved in children's film. In Germany even the special children's channel KiKa is not participating in film production. According to **Olivier Rittweger** (MDM, Germany) they should have a life in the cinema, at television and in smaller initiatives like film houses, cultural institutions and schools. But the infrastructure is lacking, as was noted earlier said by **Dick de Jonge** (Twin Film, the Netherlands). This should obviously change.

In the UK leading film organisations, including the UK Film Council, have created an extensive film education strategy. Very important according to **Jonathan Davis**.

CONCLUSIONS

US distributors dominate the world. It is nice that there are so many independent distributors in Europe, but maybe the price paid for this freedom is too high. To create a better landscape for European film producers, distributors, cinemas and policy makers, we have to work together at an international level to create more awareness. This is the key: people have to know these films exist. We have to establish European films as a brand. Better film education at schools is an extremely important way to introduce children to other cultures and ways of storytelling in European films. Given the increasingly important role of new media, distributors should be prepared to think out of the box and think of new ways of distributing.

This expert meeting took place on October 25 2008 and was organised together with ECFA and the Dutch Film Fund.

Moderator: Michiel de Rooij (BosBros Film-TV Productions BV, the Netherlands)