

Reinhold Schöffel about 50 years BJJ

“The modern media generation needs to re-discover film culture”

In 2020 the German youth film association BJJ celebrates its 50th anniversary, which should have been a reason for year round festivities. But when I speak to BJJ manager Reinhold Schöffel he is not absorbed by the past, but thinking about the future, more specifically about a film which was to become the showpiece of the anniversary celebration: the Canadian documentary YOUTH UNSTOPPABLE.

Due to the temporary closure of cinemas, Schöffel has to come up with a new distribution plan. “The release has been postponed, which is such a shame as this film perfectly embodies BJJ’s vision on cinema.”

In what sense?

Reinhold Schöffel: YOUTH UNSTOPPABLE is a documentary about activism. Slater Jewell-Kemker was 15 when she started the project, now she is 27. We follow her as she is getting politically engaged. When she loses her trust in politics, she goes her own way as an activist. This powerful film addresses young activists but is also

discussed among older generations remembering the activist days of their youth. It’s all about empowerment, and launching dialogues between different generations. This is a perfect example of how we understand film culture: motivating people to communicate, discuss and make a stand.

BJJ (Bundesverband Jugend und Film e.V. - Federal Association of Youth and Film) has been promoting film culture for young people since 1970. Back then the cinema landscape for children was a wasteland. Schöffel: The film club movement was established in post-war times by the allied forces, especially the Brits. Our roots lie in the so-called re-education campaign of Germany. Film clubs were booming until the mid-sixties when television came up. That’s when the young people’s film clubs in Germany founded their own association from which BJJ was born in 1970, working with a collection of 16 and 35mm copies of film classics and titles from the new wave of German cinema in the sixties.



The cinema truck

The development of a specific young audience film culture was not yet taken for granted.

Schöffel: Film clubs soon discovered children as their most important niche, but there were no films, except the Disney titles and some old-fashioned German fairy-tales from the fifties. Clubs started looking across the borders and found plenty of well-made titles in Czechoslovakia and the

East German Democratic Republic. At the same time in Scandinavia a tradition grew from the PIPPI LONGSTOCKING films; though made on a small budget even the Astrid Lindgren-based TV productions were so strong that they still stand till today. Re-discovering children as an audience had an impact on the entire national film industry and motivated cinema owners to organise screenings



for kids. A small but lively German production for children started with *A DAY WITH THE WIND* (Haro Senft) and the first films by Arend Agthe. For that new tradition the path was paved by the film clubs.

In many countries the churches were among the early adopters of film culture.

Schöffel: The churches soon discovered the strong impact of film on the moral values of young people and wanted to prevent them from bad influences by organising their own “clean” screenings. While for us it was more about cinematography. We don’t distribute films that are made for didactical use; we look for excellent films and then will inform people on how they could eventually be used in an educational context. We want German children to see films like *BINTI* in youth clubs or schools, that we carefully inform about the many educational possibilities they might find in a film.

Does BJJ itself function as a distributor, or do you prefer cooperating with established distribution companies?

Schöffel: On DVD or through our on-line platform we distribute films to be screened in classes, youth clubs and

local cultural centres. Media centres might supply the schools in their own region. We are always on the lookout for co-operations with ambitious arthouse distributors, with festivals like Schlingel or Filmfest Munich, with the public children’s television KIKA, or with other partners supporting our ambition: to bring the best titles for



YOUTH UNSTOPPABLE

children to Germany. It might take years to find the right partner, but in the end we usually succeed. For *RAFIKI* (by Christian Low) it took us five years to convince KIKA to broadcast it – and with their help we finally got access to a German dubbing for our distribution.

Do these commercial partners correctly estimate how important BJJ can be for their film?

Schöffel: They like it when we grant their films a longer lifespan. The biggest challenge for a distributor is estimating the right budget. The art of distribution is about having a clear view on what to invest and what to

on a substantive and technical level. Despite this commitment, he has his eyes fixed on the German market.

German production of young audience content has seen substantial growth over the last 10 years. Does the growing number of domestic films have an impact on BJJ’s position?

Schöffel: There were times, not so long ago, that we didn’t have any German films to distribute at all. Nowadays we can choose and raise quality standards. It feels as if such titles belong in our catalogue.

Which German titles worked well for BJJ?

Schöffel: We just released *TOO FAR AWAY*, we had *RABBIT SCHOOL* and the *WINDSTORM* films are very successful with our target audience, well made and with profound cinematographic qualities. We always include the audience’s opinion in our decision-making process about films to distribute.

How do you keep in touch with that audience?

Schöffel: By seeing films in festivals together with the young people, which is what I very much missed this year. And the FBW Youth Film Jury,

get in return. That is where BJJ can make itself useful.

BJJ holds a key status in the international ECFA network. Reinhold Schöffel once launched the ECFA website and Journal and he is a permanent support to ECFA’s communication



organised by Bettina Buchler, is yet another way for young people to set film quality standards. I am very proud that YOUTH UNSTOPPABLE got their five stars, the highest possible score!

The old cliché of 'bringing films to the people' is actively implemented by BJF. In 1995 probably their biggest project to date was launched: a traveling cinema in a 200 seat circus tent was sent on a tour through 31 cities. Five years later a mobile cinema truck was taking films to places where young people had little access to cultural life. And within the Movies in Motion concept, BJF promotes film projects that strive for equal opportunities through cultural education.

All such projects aimed at finding and serving an unserved audience.

Schöffel: Our films are sent to villages and suburbs, to youth clubs or church associations in every small town. I visited clubs where youngsters had built small cinemas themselves, with a stage, a projection room... like one I saw in an abandoned factory building, the teenager's own theatre.

In an article you wrote how DVD "put an end to the crackling sound of the 16 mm projector". Did the coming of DVD offer BJF the chance

to serve people in the privacy of their own homes?

Schöffel: Our ultimate goal is always to make people come together to watch a movie. That is cinema culture. Serving them in their own homes is media consumption. During the pandemic, we launched the online BJF Filmclub, a platform where clubs could screen films for their regular visitors. Even when watching the film individually (or sometimes simultaneously) at home, still the clubs afterwards could provide Zoom discussions. The coming of DVD for us was mainly a practical solution for the heavy 16mm equipment and prints that had to be sent by mail throughout the country. Luckily those days are over. Back then we used to invest 80% of our distribution budget to laboratories, while now we digitally distribute films through our own online channel. These are new opportunities to embrace, for instance for the distribution of short films.

Are you one of those types with a 16mm nostalgia?

Schöffel: When everyone else had stopped 16mm screenings, we still continued; the last 16mm release was LAURA'S STAR in 2004. We still facilitate 30 or more 16mm screenings per year, often for nostalgic reasons. We



Reinhold Schöffel

never worked with VHS. If you have ever seen a VHS projected on the big screen, you'll understand why. Every projection should meet our quality standards.

It is time for the ultimate anniversary celebration: imagine spending a whole day watching films together, which people would you invite and which films would you programme? Schöffel: That would be LA PETITE BANDE (Michelle Deville), one of the first screenings I organised for children in the early eighties, WADJDA

(Haifaa al-Mansour) and YOUTH UNSTOPPABLE. Those are landmarks in BJF's history. And I would invite teenagers, and twenty-somethings who have just finished their studies as teachers or social workers, and should become our mediators. The modern media generation needs to re-discover film culture. I just spoke with a social worker who was involved in our Cinemanya project for refugee children. Together with the Goethe Institute we offered suitcases with films and study guides for screenings with young refugees. That is how she discovered what films can do for her target group: to spur communication and build up communities among rather isolated groups of people. Now the project is over, she didn't want to return the suitcase. "I'm still working with it!" Media education over the last 15 years was mainly focussed on the use of computers and Internet safety, which has pushed film culture into the shadows. Now we need to push it back into the light again.

Bundesverband Jugend und Film e.V.; Frankfurt/Main, mail@BJF.info, www.BJF.info

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Gert Hermans