

**Text of the talk from the CINEMIX Lecture & Seminar series
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A few years ago, a panel in Los Angeles.

Arturo Ripstein, director from Mexico, said "one of my main goals is cultural independence from Hollywood and global entertainment. I am not out to make products, but to make one film at a time and to hope each finds its niche".

At this point the moderator, editor of **Variety** magazine interrupted: "You know, **NICHE** is a typical Hollywood marketing term, Mr. Ripstein.

There was a long pause, then Ripstein replied.

"Niche is not marketing language, it's French."

OK, so we have a language problem.

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The Cinema has recently turned 100 years old and it has two personalities (a curable schizophrenic?)
multilingual, original.

The other is familiar, planned, executed, and shopped.

I'll skip the art vs. business debate and the art vs. science in film" debate.

Spielberg tells you that making Indiana Jones is a lot more science than art.

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The French and the Americans argued from day one on ownership of the invention.

But they had invented two different things.

The Lumieres made a series of documentaries and comedies for the wonder of communal audiences. A larger than life experience, if you will.

Edison had invented , the nickelodeon, with shows about boxers and ballerinas. It was really a peep-show with early sex and violence.

FBI out to collect fines for copyright infringement.
Runaways found Hollywood, a perfect, permanently lit undeveloped area. short escape route to Mexico, in case the FBI made it that far.

World cinema and "Studio Motion Pictures" are two different worlds.

Can we say:
America makes films about dreams
Europe makes films about real people?
Can we say it? Or is a stereotype?

Can we stereotype American culture just like it stereotypes every other culture?

Japanese visitors took a class in L.A. on how to become Americans. No to stay and work, just to comprehend the symbols: Elvis, Highway 61, Cadillac, Harley Davidson, jeans, GAP, NIKE, Banana Republic.

Why does this concern us, as citizens of another country, as filmmakers of a Swedish region?

You guessed it:
We exist in one, globalized market.

Swedish films are born regional, then become national. If they can leave home and get a job, they become European, and if big daddy hires them for the big time, they go global.

There's not many. a foreign film that makes 5 million is a success.

Then you hear about Life is beautiful and Fat Greek weddings. And then you see that they are Miramax, or that Tom Hanks produced them..

Wenders quote: "America lives a paradox: the absolute sense of superiority over the rest of the world AND an inferiority complex, a sort of penis envy, with respect to Europe and to its complex texture of languages and traditions, to its past of wars and peace, and to its present, strong with not only commercial movies, but cultural treasures, of which the cinema is certainly one."

In Europe, in Sweden, we recognize not only a European cinema, but an Italian, a French cinema, a Czech cinema, a Scandinavian cinema. And so on.

In Europe we tend to **identify cinema with our national cultures and identities.**

Germans gave us expressionism, the

French the New Wave, Italy Neo-Realism. Soviet cinema wrote grammar that Fellini and Bergman colored and stood on its head.

National **European cinemas were the product of experimentation.**

Neo-realism was unique to its post-war time.

French New Wave also a reaction to the invasion of Marshall plan US movies meant for Europeans sick of World War II.

Film became and stayed, entertainment.

Ever wonder why there is so little American realism? Films about beat-up wives in poor families in Ohio?

A director with a vision and a story is, in this scenario, the source, the engine of a project.

In Hollywood the film is rarely a director's.

Write for the fat lady in the back, is a term.

Test-screenings urge anybody who is over 29 to return the questionnaire.

In H-wood, there are no more films for adults made. Kramer vs. Kramer. Then came Jaws and Joseph Campbell and Star Wars, and the blockbuster.

US Movies no longer interested in reality. Reality was branded as boring, and movies as escape from a boring reality.

The American Dream, a real life call that every American has to be a hero and to accomplish an ambitious dream to

justify his/her existence, the shift in the entertainment industry (as it is called) could not have been better timed.

Not so for the European film industry.

After an export bonanza in the 50s, helped a lot by Brigitte Bardot but sustained by the films of the masters, **European films succumbed at the US Box Office.**

Well there weren't any theaters to show them actually.

Was it the subtitles?

The fact that the films remain adult-themed?

Was it the **unfamiliar landscapes**?

It was also the industrial exploitation of **blockbusters** and the invention of the **MULTIPLEX**.

Why Hollywood makes so many flops?

To flood the market, fill the studio pipeline...

A day with a product placement guy at CBS. And he was placing small products, like soda. The bigger products, BMWs and Jewelry had been fit into the picture from the outset.

Can national cinemas preserve strong internal foundations?

Or is the oil-spill of formula films going to engulf young directors? (before they can learn a cinema language that is their own)

OK, 70 percent of European films are in English.

Any form of Americanization is welcome.

Hyphenation in particular. Italian-American, Swedish-American, Greek-American.

Stereotyping one's own national, or regional culture sells.

Why?

Maybe because it is easily recognizable.

It is also how that culture is known there.

Look at the **Italian films** that won **Oscars** in recent years. (**Mediterraneo, Cinema Paradiso**)

An Italy like that does not exist. But one that fits the prevailing image.

It is phenomenal that in Swedish cinema, there have emerged directors who are not engaged in dynamic reality that SWEDISH people can recognize. And the vision of the director and the power of the characters break through the need for stereotyping.

What's even more stunning is the ability of regional producers to develop and support films by young directors.

Yes, Experimentation produces unfamiliar results. It creates the new without prior knowledge. Whereas the markets like predictable, stable output and story.

Everyone loves "Blair Witch", but only after it's done.

demand for similar teen-horror stories.

Follow what did well last year, is the industry strategy.

This is were national cinemas in Europe can be different. And regional cinemas.

Including bottom-line planning? Yes, the more successful a project is and the more regional films will follow.

We are proud or ashamed of our countries recent exploits or weak output - as a nation.

This follows perhaps the history we have of state-funded cinema. You write a proposal, you submit, you get some money, you get some money, you see what happens. You win a festival, you get money to make another. More or less. So our idea of cinema is often inclusive of a cultural landscape, more or less broadly defined by language, history, common culture and inherited film history and traditions. I am from Italy, and I can safely say that Italian cinema has - for good or ill - still to resolve the matter of its neo-realist umbilical chord. Great film tradition, very tough act to follow. You need another world war... well I guess there is hope for us then. Sweden and Bergman. Look at that. Enormous director, so huge in fact that a lot of young Swedish directors will swim up the

river before they are caught doing a "Bergman-style" film. It's an enormous cultural inheritance and again - for good or bad - it must be dealt with. Maybe that's why Swedish filmmakers want to make American style movies today...

So you can have a place like Sweden, or an area like Scandinavia, caught in between its **cinema-past and its future**. And it must resolve this dilemma in the present. It's a Zen proposition.

Who is Swedish cinema going to model after? We know about our two main options. But the better question may be: does it have to model after someone at all? Can it find an identity of its own?

The answer is YES.

What if we could take "emulation" of American cinema out of regional cinema? What if we could make **unique** (iconoclastic?) production choices? Is that possible or does it determine suicide - from a market standpoint. Can a region or a country sustain its own visibility by supporting and encouraging the production of films which are, yes, aware of audience interests, but at the same time chart new ground, explore new territory, a territory that belongs primarily to the new directors and NOT only to studio strategies and bottom lines?

The answer is YES.

Is it easy?

No. Because, ideally, production choices would not be top-down imposed. **Regional cinema is director-driven**. Studio films are driven, ordered, operated and owned by executives. In Hollywood a director is hired for a film just like other key players: DOPs, stars etc, and the director is not necessarily the most important of the lot.

The script is bought by a studio as a "vehicle" for a star. Stars read coverage, 2-3 page synopsis of stories and indicate which ones they are interested in. Agents push writers' scripts into studios using the system of attachments. You attach names to projects and then you go to market. First step is TV sales etc.

To set up production structures that permit individual directors to carry out their vision is part of the challenge for Swedish regional cinema. But visionary producers have already emerged here. Look at Film I Vest.

Their production process takes an original route. Scripts are not bought for directors to make them for profit.

Scripts are considered part of a director's own vision, a phase of a director's own preparation work

So, what should be learned from the studio model, so central to American industrial film production ?

Several things:

- a) **professionalism.** To know how to make films, and to have the confidence that nothing is impossible to have on screen reveals and reinforces confidence at all levels.
- b) **clear paths within the industry.** A film will be made, if forces get behind it and support it. The industry is visible and guilds and associations exist to support smaller players.
- c) **Commercial strategies.** Hollywood is master at getting "asses in the seats".

In a regional context, a main problem is how to connect and coordinate people in the film community.

If a writer writes a script that is not intended for the writer to direct. Then what path is available?

It is a very lonely profession for young talented writers. There is no guarantee of success and little incentive to go against conservative, conventional choices, such as those that often lead to TV shows, sitcoms, etc.

The existence of regional centers for not only making films - but to develop ideas for films is not just a utopian radical suggestion: it could be a step in the expansion of a base for more regional films. One wonders if disconnecting scripts from directors, however, may not go against the traditional view of what a film is, in Scandinavia. Would there be advantages in pooling writers

with directors, to make "Scandinavian projects?". This I a question open for discussion.

Perhaps regional centers could focus on the education of younger film writers as well as directors. Local sensibilities supported by regional centers could flow into the wider pool of films with funding chances.

In Europe a country's cinematography is often looked at as a whole. In the United States this cultural notion does not really matter. Imagine a title on the Hollywood reporter: "American films in 2003 betray tradition of John Ford". Films are judged by their box office. Each studio is on its own. Individualist culture, individual score. Very few American films deal with core American issues, of the recent flops I remember only "The Patriot" with Mel Gibson. Otherwise topics are very story specific.

In Europe, I can again quote from my experience in Italian cinema, where one almost feels that every film carries the burden of somehow representing all of Italian culture. This is the shortest way to stereotypes: this character represents the bourgeois class, the other one the working class, etc. The bigger the story - in the sense of its desire to represent a country's culture as a whole - and the higher the risk of stereotyping oneself. This is one reason why I believe in "local" story, and why I believe in regional.

The global market place for movies loves stereotypes of national cultures. America has millions of immigrants from all over the world and they have airplane-loads of movie going kids. There are Greek-Americans, Italian-Americans, Irish-Americans, Indian-Americans and so on. What's important is the - (the hyphen). There exists in America a hyphenated version of every nationality in the world, and it is not exactly identical (to say the least) to the original. Italian-Americans are different from Italians. Very different. But the version of Italy that exists in the America of Italian-Americans is the one America wants to see. Any Italian film that supports that stereotype has a better chance of getting distribution. A film about Mafia? Sure. One set in the 50s in Sicily with allied soldiers everywhere? Bring it on. A film about Italy in 2000 with kids shooting heroin in the street? Not a chance in hell.

To reiterate: National cinematographies that make films for export that sustain the national stereotype America has of that country will have a better chance of making it there, i.e., get global distribution. Does "My Fat Greek Wedding" have a lot to do with Greece? It made 300 million \$ so who cares, right?

Does the Italy of Giuseppe Tornatore's "Nuovo cinema Paradiso" exist? Of course not, but that look and that lighting and that period feeds the American cliché' about Italy, and it sells, let alone the Oscars.

My question to you is then: what cinema can we make in Europe, and in particular in this country, once we have understood some of the cultural patterns at play?

In the Varmland region, there hasn't yet been a single feature film made. Ever. But there have been films making fun of Varmland, the accent, the cows etc. But seriously, what is it that prevents regions with a relatively active population of filmmakers, to develop local feature films. Ok, we've already talked about the brainwashing of American films, so there is a higher chance that a Karlstad first-time director will make an American Vietnam movie with werewolves instead of one about his grandmother. We could blame the isolation factor. Scandinavia is separate from Europe, it's cold, people get depressed, they drink. Ok. More important perhaps is exposure to a certain kind of cinema. You must educate yourself.

But one factor is: who will care about this film? If it isn't American-paced, and in Swedish. Who will care?

This brings us to the notion of what films to make, how to develop regional films.

America is a virtual concept, not a physical one. **And so is Hollywood**. When we say "it is a Hollywood movie, we don't mean "it was shot in Los Angeles". Maybe one day we did. But now we mean that the production has what it takes to be considered major league: major stars, production values (from visual effects to Robert-Redford type hairlights), etc...

It also makes a film "Hollywood" to be front-wheel driven by market savvy management. To plan product placement, distribution timing, Oscar awareness etc is a big part of the Hollywood bottom line game, the only game in town.