

FROM SURVIVAL TO REVIVAL

Experts and artists reflect on the challenging times of 2020 and look forward to solutions for a re-engineered European film industry for 2021 and beyond.



Mark Cousins



Agnieszka Holland



Kirsten Niehuus



Thomas Vinterberg

The coronavirus has been labelled the biggest global crisis for three generations, and like every other industry, the film world has been shaken to its core by the events of 2020.

As we look towards a post-pandemic future, EFA convened some of Europe's most passionate voices to discuss re-structuring, re-engineering and re-aligning the European film industry in the wake of the pandemic.

The online roundtable – entitled *From Survival to Revival: Building the Post-COVID Future* – invited filmmakers Mark Cousins, Agnieszka Holland and Thomas Vinterberg to join Kirsten Niehuus, CEO Film Funding, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, to share their experiences of launching films in 2020 and discuss what lies ahead. The discussion was moderated by Wendy Mitchell, journalist and editor of EFA Close-Up.

Some highlights of the discussion are condensed below. The full roundtable will be streamed on 8 Dec at www.europeanfilmawards.eu, kicking off the EFAs at Eight events that will run until the Grand Finale Awards on 12 Dec.

EFA Close-Up: Agnieszka, you premiered CHARLATAN at the Berlinale, which now seems like the final days of normalcy. What happened to the film since then, and have you had creative energy during the lockdowns?

Agnieszka Holland: In Berlin, which was the last normal big festival, the film had a good response and it was sold to several countries. So far, most of the countries are holding on releasing. It was released in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland – in the Czech Republic (the film is about a Czech faith healer in the 1930s) it was a huge success. It did better than we expected, it hit this middle ground between the two waves of the pandemic. I was quite lucky. The Czech Academy submitted CHARLATAN for the foreign Oscar, which was very generous because I am not Czech.

I was supposed to be shooting now a new series for Apple TV in France, in Paris, but it was stopped because of the situation. So for the first time I don't have plans, or a schedule, except for a lot of Zoom meetings!

I have been watching the movies for the EFA selection, but the reality is so new that watching the news is like following a reality show. The pandemic and the Polish presidential elections, the situation with the women's strike, and the US presidential elections. For me, reality is winning over fiction right now. To follow the news is also to try to understand what it means for the future. Also the future of cinema but more widely the future of our societies and the future of the planet. We are living in a pivotal time.

Mark, you launched a 14-hour project, WOMEN MAKE FILM; is lockdown the best situation to watch it?

Mark Cousins: It's been shown in Brazil and the UK and Spain; it's done pretty well, mostly streaming. It was planned to go to cinemas but of course that didn't happen. But I think people in lockdown felt like they needed to monitor the moment, but also, have a kind of long-form experience as well. It felt like time stretched like mozzarella. The idea of an epic moment of storytelling, in this case 14 hours, became attractive. I'm sitting in my edit suite and we have completed three edits in lockdown, with my editor 50 miles away. We've made a film about a great film producer Jeremy Thomas and I've made a film about looking ... at how we look. So it's been a fertile time.

Even though you've been very productive, have you missed the connection with audiences?

Cousins: The net has been cast wider in some ways. I've connected with cinephiles in India, in Russia, in Japan, in Brazil and all over North America and Europe. That common language – that commonality of emotion and desire and longing for cinema – has been quite unifying.

Thomas, how has it felt launching ANOTHER ROUND in such a strange year? You couldn't go to Toronto or San Sebastian for the screenings there. What's it like putting out a piece of work remotely?

Thomas Vinterberg: It's highly unusual. And even in my country here (in Denmark), we were very nervous about sending out this movie in times of confinement. A movie about four drunk men, celebrating alcohol, we felt we could go under the radar. It could have felt slightly irrelevant, but somehow it was the opposite. People are storming into the cinema and they come back many times.

With going abroad, we couldn't go to Cannes, we couldn't go to San Sebastian. But I found a lot of bravery in these places anyway. It is so super important that they kept going. They kept doing these festivals in a time when we have to remind people that there's still a cinema somewhere at the end of all of this. Aside from that my life is simple. I'm writing and I'm taking care of my family, so for several private reasons, I can find advantages in not having to travel so much.

Do you think you will keep some of that spirit, even when we can fly around again as much as we did before?

Vinterberg: I think if the pandemic would stop tomorrow, life would be normal again in one and a half years. It takes more than a pandemic to change the world.

The experience of sitting in a cinema and witnessing moments, characters, situations that you'll never forget, together with other people, and hear a gasp in the room, or laugh in the room – that's a sensation. We have to be reminded of the grandness of this common experience of sitting in a movie theatre, because it can be quite nice and quite comfortable to sit back home and stream things privately.

Kirsten, how has Medienboard been managing the crisis, have your funding levels changed? Are you able to help projects who have been in trouble or needed an increased budget this year?

Kirsten Niehuus: With my colleagues in Germany from other funds, we pretty quickly came up with a plan to help the productions, to cover the extra costs because of COVID. All the funds in Germany united and helped them – that might sound like a small thing to the rest of the world, but with these federal states, and a lot of money in the different regions, it was a great step for us.

Thomas, I hope your vision doesn't come true regarding the German funds, I think it great if we could stay a bit unnormal and be more collective in the future.

Then we had the chance to help the cinemas in the first few weeks of lockdown, we gave awards for the cinemas in the region around Berlin and Brandenburg for artistic and very engaged programmes for the year before. We could triple these awards – it's cash and you find the check in the mail – it's probably the least bureaucratic way of helping that we could offer. And I think that helped a lot of cinemas. It's for arthouse cinemas and cinemas with a programme that is very carefully curated by the cinema directors. I think that was a great help.

When June came, we started to focus on our core business of funding again, and what we can still see is that there were not a lot of cinema films shooting in that period of time. Usually summer, like in many other countries, is the main season for shooting films. Shooting on location wasn't happening much here, except for TV films, because I think television offered to pay for any financial losses due to COVID. We didn't have the insurance fund in place at that time. And so the city was much more quiet than before. And a lot of films have been postponed to be shot in 2021.

What about public funding? I've heard one analyst say public funding for the arts could take a huge hit, starting in 2021. Because if you have to build new hospitals, then movies move down the list of priorities. What do you think, can filmmakers adapt if public funding decreases?

Holland: Without public funding, European independent cinema is just dead. It will be even more dead because of the COVID situation, and I'm not as optimistic as Thomas is that it will pass without a really big trace. But it asks us a lot of questions, which actually we've been asked for a while. Now is the time to wake up and to figure out how to renovate exactly our approach to the financing of cinema, to distribution, and to the content and creativity of our films in the first place. If we see the collapse of distribution companies and cinemas, the situation becomes worse, because part of the financing for the production actually is coming from those sources, it is a kind of ecosystem.

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Agnieszka Holland

With the Federation of European Film Directors (FERA) and EFA, we are fighting for the implementation of the new laws about streaming platforms and new incomes for filmmakers. This trend didn't start with COVID, it's been visible for several years already that the [platforms] are growing in place of [traditional] distribution and production, so we have to figure out what to do about it; and how we have to defend what is our homeland, the theatrical releases of our films.

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Thomas Vinterberg

Mark, how are you feeling about public support for film? The UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak infamously suggested artists retrain for other jobs.

Cousins: Public funding comes because of market failure. If the market delivered everything we wouldn't need it. But as we know, it doesn't. For me, it's a kind of public health issue or a social health issue. We see societies that don't have any public sector funding for their cinema, like the US, and we can see all the weakness that comes from that lack of understanding of your own society. Ousmane Sembène, the great Senegalese filmmaker, said “a nation without cinema is like a house without mirrors.” This public funding – which isn't a lot of money – helps us as individuals, and as a society, to recharge our batteries. We're all feeling a bit depleted, I think, the battery level is going down and died because of the pandemic, and we're drawing on our inner reserves to stay positive and stay connected. Public funding can actually help us recharge our batteries. The case for public funding is stronger than it has ever been in my lifetime.

Thomas, do you feel like Denmark is looking after its creatives well with public funding?

Vinterberg: A movie about child abuse (THE HUNT) or a celebration of alcohol (ANOTHER ROUND), would never have existed, obviously, without public funding. Public funding allows us to be on thin ice, allow us to be artists and allows us to make personal movies, which I think people are yearning for.

But the real pandemic in our business started before the pandemic. The real pandemic started with the streaming platforms and the algorithms of the internet. And without public funding, there's no chance that we, and all the others of our comrades, can make personal artistic challenging movies to withstand that. I think what happens on these streaming services is the sneaking laziness of the audience. That's a cultural pandemic that we should take seriously.

Niehuus: Of course, we as funds are strategically and politically trying to get in position, because, we are also expecting that the state budgets will be rearranged in 2022, after hopefully the pandemic is over. It costs so very much money in any country that has had the pandemic. This money has to be sort of re-earned, or cut back in the coming budgets, so we can already start lobbying for that.

Vinterberg: Everyone knows Churchill's famous words from the Second World War, where he was asked if he was going to cut back on cultural subsidies because of the war, and his reply was simple: “Then what are we fighting for?”



Let's talk about the big platforms. As all of you have said, the platforms started changing the film business years ago, not just during the pandemic. Can Netflix and Amazon co-exist with the traditional European arthouse funding model, the release model, traditional windows? Can we thrive together?

Holland: It started way before COVID, but COVID has reinforced this tendency, especially among the younger generation. We started losing the younger generation a long time ago. The internet is their main connection to reality and other people ... If the habits are changing so deeply, it will be very difficult to convince them again of that desire to be together in the theatres. The platforms anticipated this tendency and started to produce a lot of the content that cinemas are not giving audiences. Netflix is really interested to do content for young adults.

We will be colonised as Europeans if we don't create the platform that responds to our cultural needs. To influence the market you need to produce the content and you need to have enough money and power to impose yourselves to be really attractive for the wider audience, and we don't have that in Europe.

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We have to make better movies. When you watch what we are doing in Europe, we are doing a lot of decent movies, we are doing a lot of okay movies, we are only doing a few great movies. We're not attracting people to come to the theatre with mediocre films. We have to come out from our comfort zone, to be more courageous, to be more connected to what's going on in people's lives deeply, not only on the surface. To be artistically more courageous. That we can do.

"WE HAVE TO SING IN A DIFFERENT VOICE THAT STIRS THE IMAGE, WE HAVE TO DO THINGS THAT MAKE PEOPLE WANT TO GO TO THE CINEMA, BECAUSE THEY'RE SEEING SOMETHING ELSE. AND THAT KIND OF CHALLENGE WILL ALWAYS BE HEALTHY. IT'S DIFFICULT, BUT IT'S HEALTHY."

Thomas Vinterberg

Vinterberg: I have to agree with Agnieszka's great point. The only way to attack this huge challenge we have in front of us is to consider the challenge. We've been singing with a certain voice for a while in the arthouse business. Even at the finest festivals in the world, you can find a sense of a recipe. We have to sing in a different voice that stirs the image, we have to do things that make people want to go to the cinema, because they're seeing something else. And that kind of challenge will always be healthy. It's difficult, but it's healthy.

It is possible to get young people to the cinema. I find it incredibly important to reverse this into a challenge and not an oppressive sense of film depression. There are so many great filmmakers in Europe, and all over the world, who would be capable of doing what Agnieszka calls leaving their comfort zones. It's exactly the same when we ask our actors to go out there where the ice is thin. That's going to create curiosity and that's going to make people want to go back to the cinema.

Mark, EFA is giving you a new award for innovation in storytelling. Do you see enough filmmakers taking risks, as Thomas said, skating on that thin ice?

Cousins: Around the world, there are people reinventing cinema a lot. LEVIATHAN used GoPro cameras on fish. Wow! Look at what an Apichatpong Weerasethakul is doing in Thailand. SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE was one of the most innovative films that I've seen. There are filmmakers like Lucile Hadžihalilović, Radu Jude, Roy Andersson – around the world there are loads of innovative filmmakers. The question is, how many do we need? How do we make sure that they don't get lost, how do we teach the values of that? It's film school, and teaching film in school, teaching the excitement of cinema to 10-year-olds, so that they get the lust for the desire for cinema.

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Mark Cousins

Part of this conversation could have been discussed in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood. It's always been a struggle between the formulaic and the conventional, and the original and the innovative, and the ice skaters out of their comfort zone.

I don't blame Netflix and Amazon – I'm grateful to Amazon Prime, because I can see Indian films of the '50s there that I would not see anywhere else. We can love cinema in all sorts of ways. In the religion of Islam, you have your prayer mat to use when you worship, but then you have your Friday mosque, when you go and worship with 1,000 other people, and we as movie lovers, can have our prayer mat, which is our home way of seeing cinema, and also the Friday mosque.

Let's talk about that mosque. Cinemas have hugely struggled in 2020. What can we do to save cinema culture?

Niehuus: As we've seen in many developments in the past years in many ways, things change, and the situation of cinema will not stay the same. I would totally agree I like that image of the prayer mat that Mark just introduced. I think that's about the mix, and I think people should have the freedom to decide whether they want to go to the cinema, or whether they want to watch something at home.

“I THINK PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE THE FREEDOM TO DECIDE WHETHER THEY WANT TO GO TO THE CINEMA, OR WHETHER THEY WANT TO WATCH SOMETHING AT HOME. I DON'T WANT TO BE FORCED OR TO DO ONE OR THE OTHER. I THINK REGARDING CINEMAS, AT LEAST FOR THE ARTHOUSE FILMS AND ARTHOUSE CINEMAS, WE HAVE TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION TO FUND THEM LIKE WE DO WITH OPERA HOUSES OR WITH THEATRES.”

Kirsten Niehuus

I don't want to be forced or to do one or the other. I think regarding cinemas, at least for the arthouse films and arthouse cinemas, we have to take into consideration to fund them like we do with opera houses or with theatres. Then we will have a fully subsidised product from beginning to end. Meaning production, distribution, into the cinemas and to provide the cinemas with the money they need to be ready for the audience. Why not? We do it with music. We do it with theatre. Why not with cinema if we consider cinema as an art?

The arrival of platforms and platform productions has given chances to many people in the film industry, young directors, young actors who would have never had the chance to work with a big budget before. I think the appearance on the market of Netflix, Amazon, and the others, opened a Pandora's box in many ways, but also in some good ways.

Vinterberg: The platforms themselves are not the problem, those are just grocery stores where you can buy the product. The problem is a creative laziness by the audience and those who make the movies. You have to educate people to want to see interesting, great movies, challenging movies. Those platforms have given space to a lot of very, very interesting hours of material. They have supported young filmmakers, I agree. So, it's the current under the platforms that we have to talk about and what has been revealed by these platforms: conservatism, mediocrity, artistic laziness. That's what we have to challenge. There's a comfortable way of leaning back into a certain arthouse way of looking at life. And I totally agree that that has to be shaken and stirred.

Do you see TV as a threat to cinema culture, or is it just another great place to tell stories?

Vinterberg: I thought it was a great cinematic experience watching BABYLON BERLIN, which happened to be on television. It's not that simple. It's a complicated question, How will we save the cinemas? Some of the most visionary cinema people have appeared on television, which will now also be platforms. It's all a bit confusing. The most problematic thing is the algorithms which sell and support the laziness of a population. It's very, very difficult to pinpoint.

Michaela Coel's I MAY DESTROY YOU, not commissioned by an algorithm, was some of the most interesting storytelling I saw this year – braver than most films I watched. So I agree it can be hard to say, 'This is all bad. This is all good.'

Holland: Visually innovative TV series came out of the mediocrity of the movies. In the '90s cinema became very lazy somehow. And, also the star system maybe made it very expensive and afraid of risk. And independent cinema deserted the audience ... It was a vacuum, and television came and filled this vacuum with really innovative, storytelling and innovative stories. Americans had series like THE WIRE and THE SOPRANOS. Europe was behind and only had isolated cases [THE DECALOGUE, HEIMAT, THE KINGDOM, some Israeli and Scandinavian TV]. America built their success, they took artistic and commercial risks and they succeeded. Only now do we start to do interesting series like BABYLON BERLIN, years later. Our cinema is paying for that as well ... for cinema to travel it needs the popularity of the actors. When you look at Europe today, you see our European film stars are in their 60s, 70s, or 80s ... or dead. If they are well known it's for acting in an American TV series.

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Mark Cousins

Cousins: I think I’m a different person when I go to the cinema. When I go to the cinema it’s closer to going dancing or swimming or climbing a hill. It’s a surrender to the experience entirely. I say to the filmmaker, “Here are two hours of my time, do something with it, I’d give it entirely to you.” At home I don’t do that. I’m the boss, I’m in charge so I can stop it and rewind it and watch it tomorrow.

Why I’m more optimistic is that I think that we human beings have it deep in us to want to submit to lose control, to be out of ourselves, not to be in charge, not to be in our domestic environment all the time. That’s why I think the idea of cinema which addressed that precociously 120 or 130 years ago will survive because we as human beings and especially under COVID and lockdown, we need to lose ourselves and cinema does that. It’s more immersive than anything else.

Vinterberg: The life of the uncontrollable is something people don’t understand anymore. They forgot that getting an idea is something we get from somewhere, it’s not something that we can buy on the internet. So I support your fight for the uncontrollable.

Niehuus: I totally agree that the product that is displayed in the cinema – the films – needs to be attractive. For a long time we were in a situation where filmmakers felt that they had a birthright to be there, and it was always the same prayer that’s been repeated. But that didn’t suffice because we knew that there was better storytelling somewhere else, for instance, on the platforms. I think people still have the urge to go to the cinema, and I don’t doubt that cinema will survive, but maybe not every cinema and not every film.

We certainly can’t turn back the clock. But like Agnieszka said, we can really try hard to provide the audience with more interesting storytelling ... it’s about diversity, it’s about different characters.

I am going to try to force a happy ending here. What gives you hope or excitement for the next few years? For me, it’s seeing the world open up to more non-English-language content, more voices from previously marginalized communities. And less of that mediocre stuff in the middle.

Vinterberg: The arthouse scenes will survive this Darwinistic turn of times in moviemaking, we have to adapt and have to change. And hopefully we’ll land on the other side with strength, curiosity, with a sense of aggression towards great stories and great storytelling. I hope and believe so.

Holland: I am very much about diversity. I believe in women’s voices, which have been practically muted – only 6-8% of films made by women and we are half of humanity – that is not right. I see more and more consciousness about it. I see the openness of women to communicate, and the same with LGBT communities and different minorities. Also, for example, Asian cinema. It felt very important to me to see PARASITE win the Oscar. The appetite is not just politically correct, it is a real curiosity, which can be encouraged by the quality of the storytelling. That’s my optimism.

Niehuus: I totally believe in creativity. And I don’t think that the algorithms will rule the world, I think they will part of the world but not all the world. I believe in diversity in society and also in how we consume content, films and series. I believe we’re about to turn over a lot of regulations that have been set in stone in the past, and this stone is crumbling and that’s a great chance.

Cousins: I think as we’re talking today, there will be people who are born with a natural, visual expressive talent, and if they were born 50 years ago they would probably have been excluded from the film industry because they were the ‘wrong’ class or gender or continent. Now they’re less likely to be excluded. And these future citizens of cinema can tell us about the mountaintop and the Valley of Tears and everything in between.

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