

"Cheap Has No Place in Cinema"

Martin Moszkowicz has produced around 300 films; now he presides over the Zurich Film Festival. In this interview with Tobias Sedlmaier, he explains why cinema will need fewer, but better, films in future.

Since this summer, Martin Moszkowicz has been the new president of the Zurich Film Festival. The long-serving head of Constantin Film, where he was responsible for hundreds of productions, is one of the most influential producers in German cinema. His best-known films include "Perfume", "Resident Evil" and "Fack ju Göhte". Since his time at Constantin, Moszkowicz has continued to produce films; he also teaches, writes and speaks passionately about cinema.

Mr Moszkowicz, what challenges does a film festival like the ZFF face today?

One has to say it openly: there is a huge inflation of film festivals worldwide, probably more than at any time in the history of cinema. So you have to stand out. Film festivals have the unique advantage of bringing people together. Around 500 film guests come to Zurich and present their films to the audience in person. That accounts for a large part of the appeal: you sit in the auditorium with the people who made the film. During the pandemic, attempts were made to hold virtual festivals and film markets. That never really worked.

Because the sense of community was missing.

Yes. Films are best enjoyed in a full cinema, together with other people. The experience is what drives cinema: we sell two hours of happiness. That is why, in these times of digital entertainment with its access to anything at any moment, unique live performances such as theatre, opera and musicals are booming worldwide. A festival reflects that. And when, in the best case, both the selection of films and the audience are good, the result is a strange unity of space, time and zeitgeist. You cannot experience that on a phone or an iPad.

But festivals also live off the attention economy; they have to deliver headlines. This year at the Berlinale there was constant debate about the right stance on Gaza, elsewhere about the absence of women. Do festivals need scandals?

I think they are more of a distraction. Every film is political in some way, and if it is explicitly so, there is no need to hide that. But a festival must not be misused as a platform for political agitation, in whatever direction. In Zurich, care is taken to keep the films at the centre. A festival is a place for films and for debate about films. There are other places for campaigns.

Some films, however, are driven mainly by political activism. Do you draw personal lines when the ZFF shows the highly controversial documentary "Naza", for instance?

First, I would not interfere in the selection made by Christian Jungen, Reta Guetg and the team. They do that with a great sense of responsibility and think very carefully about what they invite and what they don't. And second, I believe that everyone can and should be able to say anything,

as long as the limits of criminal law are respected. A good and sensible society has to be able to bear that, even when some political statements are far removed from what a large part of the population thinks. The film is screening in Zurich, and the audience can form its own judgement.

After the pandemic, cinema was often declared dead. Now it is back stronger than ever ...

The summer box office in the US was the strongest in a long time, even above the summer of 2019. What is interesting: by mid-August 2019, around 800 million tickets had been sold in the US; this year it is around 550 million, and yet revenue is higher. That means fewer people are going to the cinema, but they are paying more.

So is expensive premium cinema, which Steven Spielberg predicted years ago, the model of the future?

Yes, I believe that is the road cinema has to take. Prices are basically too low. People are willing to pay many times the price of a cinema ticket for a concert ticket. And cinemas are far from making full use of dynamic pricing: if you go to a screening early on a Wednesday afternoon, it has to be cheaper than on a Friday evening. People are willing to pay for quality. You can see that here in Switzerland at the Swiss cinema complex near the German border in Basel: although it is more expensive than its German counterpart next door, the Germans come over to Switzerland, because the cinema is more modern and better equipped. On price, we will never be able to compete with the streaming services. Cheap has no place in cinema.

Despite this year's great successes with "The Odyssey" or "Spider-Man: Brand New Day", there are still gigantic flops in between. Is too much being produced?

One of the less experienced managers in our industry once said: "We just have to stop making the flops, then everything will be fine." The big studios and media companies essentially run a portfolio business: they put fifteen, twenty chips on the table, two or three of them are really profitable, the large majority sits in the middle, and a few produce losses. The successes have to co-finance the flops, and in a good year that works. Still, I believe we should not go on operating like this in future.

Why?

Because it is simply true: there is an oversupply. People no longer know what they should watch; they are completely overwhelmed. I am in favour of concentration in cinema. The inflation of images is happening on the internet anyway. Today people spend more time on YouTube than on Netflix or any other channel or streaming service. This barely distinguishable entertainment mush will remain, but it is completely irrelevant. My advice would be to make fewer films, to equip them better and to charge more for admission.

Speaking of "better equipped": compared with other festivals, the ZFF receives very little public subsidy.

Yes, in that respect the ZFF is a prime example. Especially from a German perspective, where one is very dependent on culture being funded almost exclusively by the public sector.

The question is how much longer ...

In Germany we have to prepare for the fact that this will not stay as it is. The money is no longer there, and there are political groups that have no further interest in subsidies. You cannot simply say, well, let's give up then; you have to look for alternatives. International film financing in the independent sector is already impossible today without equity investment. That has not really sunk in yet in Germany, nor in Switzerland. In Zurich the public share is small, and yet we need more support, particularly from the city. Work with young talent can hardly be financed through sponsors; that is what the public purse is needed for.

You have the experience of some 300 productions behind you. What makes a good film?

That is of course an endless subject (laughs). I find cinema in its entire range so fascinating as an art form that I like every kind. The cinema I make has always been a commercial one. That is why I compare it to a meal: first and foremost, it has to be nourishing. Beyond that there is a higher form of eating, haute cuisine, which is high art. Cinema is similar: first of all, audiences have to want to see a film. Building on that, you can then create a better menu. And sometimes, often by chance, a marvel comes off. But the intention behind the films I have made was always to be successful and to reach as many people as possible.

Series like "The Studio" reveal a certain inner conflict in the producer: he wants to bring ambitious masterpieces to the big screen but has to milk popular cash cows. Do you know that feeling?

I ran a large company, and in that role I was part of all sorts of things without standing on set in rubber boots. Whole teams are always involved. Of course there were films among them that were not to my personal taste. But success is always fun; you don't question it (laughs). I always tell younger producers: once you have made a film that had 5 million admissions in Germany or grossed 100 million dollars in America, it is an indescribable feeling. Not because you enrich yourself personally, but because you were part of something that millions of people think is fantastic.

Success, as everyone knows, can hardly be calculated, but how can failure be minimised?

I cannot say that we in the film business act like gamblers. We think very carefully about what we do and how we invest. The great art in our industry consists in this: on the one hand, audiences want to know more than ever what they are letting themselves in for. Nobody does any more what people used to do on a Friday evening, checking what is on at the cinema and then spontaneously going to any one of the ten films on offer. People choose their films deliberately; they want to know what they are investing their money and their time in. At the same time, though, they don't want to see exactly the same thing again that they have already seen a hundred times. That is a very fine line.

Besides the two blockbusters already mentioned, "The Odyssey" and the new "Spider-Man", two films by YouTubers were successful this year: "Obsession" and "Backrooms". Made by a visually trained generation that has had a camera in its hand practically since birth and gets by on the smallest of budgets. Does that change classic production strategies?

Yes, absolutely. What is happening there is fascinating. Some producers are now asking: why don't we make "Obsession", which cost less than 1 million dollars and grossed over 400 million? It isn't that simple. The companies behind these surprise hits are of course established, and the studios have recognised the potential. But both films arrived with an audience already in place, from their YouTube fan base; they did not have to start from zero. And the success of these films points to a problem of many large media groups in Europe: they lack an entrepreneurial vision of how they want to run their business over the next ten years. And now, with AI, comes the biggest disruption of all time, and some of them stand there and say: let's hope it passes. That is the wrong approach.

On AI in particular, many in Hollywood are very alarmist. You are not?

I am fundamentally an optimist, because as a pessimist you cannot produce films; that would be self-destructive. However hard it is to predict, I am nonetheless convinced that the sum of AI's advantages will outweigh its disadvantages. Of course jobs will disappear, which is always tragic for the individual concerned. But that has always been the case in our industry. In the time I have been working alone, many professions have ceased to exist.

With AI tools you can now shoot films cheaply at home, and the technology is becoming ever more convincing. Do you think your own job will exist much longer, when anyone can complete a film by themselves for a few hundred thousand dollars?

Production processes will change massively, and production costs will fall. Then, as always, there will be 90 percent rubbish, and 10 percent will hopefully be great. I believe that people go to the cinema looking for the extraordinary. What is created by hand, with craftsmanship, will be valued even more highly than today. Everything will change above all in mass-produced goods such as daytime television.

What material that you have never realised do you dream of?

The Epic of Gilgamesh. I have wanted to film that my whole life. One of the greatest stories in the world, and partly true historically. It tells the beginnings of civilisation as a legend. If Christopher Nolan doesn't take it on next, I'll do it someday.

Pull quote: "I am fundamentally an optimist, because as a pessimist you cannot produce films."

Photo caption: Fewer films, but of higher quality: for Martin Moszkowicz, the future of cinema lies in the premium segment. Photo: Karin Hofer / NZZ

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