

Between Zurich, Politics and Hollywood



Martin Moszkowicz sees cinema, so often pronounced dead, riding a wave of success.

Martin Moszkowicz, the new President of the Board of the Zurich Film Festival, talks to tachles about the state of the cinema market, his plans for Zurich, the debate over the Middle East and culture, and the AfD's gains in Germany.

tachles: In recent years many people have talked about the end of cinema: first the streaming platforms, then funding cuts and strikes in America. Where does the international film market stand?

Martin Moszkowicz: I'm an optimist by nature, otherwise I would never have become a film producer. People have been saying for more than a hundred years that film is on the brink, and so far it has never come true. This year in particular has seen exceptional box office results. In America it is one of the best box office years ever, and the festival lineups in Venice, Toronto, San Sebastián and then Zurich are terrific. I even think that at a time when social media floods us with interchangeable content, cinema is gaining a special position, because people are looking for something out of the ordinary again. The industry has changed, in streaming even more than in theaters. But the theatrical market is proving robust.

You have now entered a contested market yourself. Festivals have long been a competitive business too, especially with Locarno in a country as small as Switzerland. You want to turn Zurich into a global brand. What does that mean?

First of all, I'm very honored to have been offered this position. As a producer I always liked coming to Zurich, often with my own films. Zurich sits perfectly in the calendar: after the summer festivals Locarno and Venice, before the winter festivals Sundance and Berlin, at the start of awards season. What I have always liked is the strong focus on the audience, which gives Zurich a unique position in Europe. Over the years I kept getting approaches from the festival world and turned them down. But this festival has particular potential, not least because it is largely privately financed, which matters more and more as public money gets tighter. What I want to do is help make Zurich a worldwide brand, strategically. This is not about creating new competition; Zurich should simply position itself even more strongly internationally.

Zurich relies heavily on American stars. Would you like to see more focus on European film?

Switzerland lies in the middle of Europe and is one of the most internationally oriented countries there is. Personally, I have always liked the strong connection to Hollywood. It matches my own career, too: all my life I have made English-language films as well. And one shouldn't think of Hollywood as purely local. People from all over the world work there, and it is the only film center with truly global relevance. At the same time, European cinema has enormous innovative power. Many Swiss filmmakers in particular showed that before they went on to work in Hollywood, like Tim Fehlbaum or Marc Forster. I would certainly like to see even more European productions in the spotlight in Zurich. But the team is already working on that.

You have spoken about your family history again and again. What is striking, though, is that since October 7 you have become more pointed and more prominent: with your own story, with your concern, with criticism of how the debate about the Gaza war is being conducted. Does this discourse need a space at festivals?

The Zurich Film Festival (ZFF) has a reputation for being apolitical. I would put it more positively: the films are at the center. That is also true of Cannes, the most important festival in the world, which very skillfully keeps any interest group from taking over the platform. I would not have joined an overtly political festival in any capacity. That is one level. The other: the way antisemitism and anti-Zionism present themselves today literally keeps me from sleeping. Five or ten years ago I could not have imagined this kind of international hatred. Israeli artists are being canceled around the world simply because they are Jews, or Israelis, and mostly these are the very people who are politically nowhere near the current Israeli government. I have no understanding for that whatsoever. What American filmmaker gets canceled for being American because people disagree with Trump's policies? This troubles me enormously. Right now we are fighting a wave of rejection and hatred that is very hard to counter.

But when a film like “No Other Land”, which set off the big debate at the Berlinale two years ago, is programmed, you have the discussion in your own house whether you want it or not.

It would be naive to think cinema isn't political. It always is, in some form. At a festival, every film that convinces on quality should have a place, regardless of the political stance behind it. What I object to is the publicity a festival generates being misused for a political discourse that no longer has anything to do with the films themselves. Inviting a controversial film is wonderful, I think, and so is the discussion about it. We need to talk to each other more anyway. You can't shut politics out, but you can keep it tied to the films.

We are speaking one day after the elections in Saxony-Anhalt, where the AfD is celebrating successes at the level of government. Your father was an Auschwitz survivor, your maternal grandfather a high-ranking member of the SS. How do you look at these days?

It is too early to draw conclusions, because it is unclear how the formation of a government will play out. Regardless of that, I find it dreadful that a confirmed right-wing extremist party could suddenly take on government responsibility in a German state. But you have to put it in context. Germany is a big country with very different developments: there is a Green mayor in Munich, a Green minister-president in Baden-Württemberg. I am skeptical of doom-mongering. What I would like is for the established centrist parties to finally come up with an answer to this discontent. Taking it seriously does not mean endorsing the party, but you cannot push aside the people who voted this way out of protest. What I miss in the federal government is any kind of charismatic political vision, something like Macron in France just under ten years ago.

You stress that the ZFF is privately financed. You yourself come from an industry that depends heavily on subsidies. With the AfD gaining strength, that is likely to come under additional pressure. Should American conditions take hold, where subsidies hardly play a role anymore?

I believe the German film funding system needs renewal. It cannot and should not go on like this, and I have written about that many times. The system needs a massive overhaul, and not only because funding is being cut. The problem goes deeper. At the same time, I think it is right for additional sources such as private equity to play a role; internationally that has long been standard. But for that you need structures in which it can pay off for investors. Anyone who puts money into a German film today is usually the last to get it back. Why would they do that instead of investing in real estate? That is exactly where we have to start. And we do not need several hundred German theatrical films a year, a large part of which are relevant neither in quality nor commercially.

You were long associated with Constantin Film, which today belongs to Bernhard Burgener of Basel, or rather to Highlight Communications, and which, one reads, is under pressure. Is that an example of the private equity model not working in the German context after all?

Only this much: Highlight is not a private equity investor but a publicly listed company. So the example doesn't work as a counterargument to my point. As a former executive of the company I cannot comment on it. But I am following developments closely.

Your first festival as president begins in two weeks. Where do you want to set your own accent after Doris Fiala?

First I would like to thank Doris Fiala warmly for what she has done for the festival. As a film producer I have a somewhat different, very international perspective, and that is the accent I will bring. I have never represented a festival before and am curious myself what exactly it will ask of me. I am not involved in operations and not responsible for film selection; that is in established hands. My part is to bring in contacts and help on the strategic side. Above all, though, I'm looking forward to eleven days of great films.

But you are really a film producer. What are you working on at the moment?

I have around a dozen and a half projects in development, including an adaptation of Daniel Kehlmann's "Tyll" and a Romeo and Juliet film that goes into production next year. I am also involved as executive producer in a film version of Yasmina Reza's play "Art". All in all I will produce two or three films next year. I am no longer responsible for releasing 12 to 15 a year. That is very comfortable, and I enjoy being able to set my own pace.

That is probably the best proof that you are the right president: many talk about films, few make them.

I very much hope so.

Yves Kugelman