

A Long Tail for *les marches*?

As the Cannes Festival celebrates its 60th edition, it seems a good moment to raise a delicate question: what opportunities do the members of today's public have to see the films screened at the Festival since 1946? Who can claim today to be able to see the Danish film De Røde Enge (The Earth Will Be Red) directed by Bodil Ipsen and Lau Lauritzen, the first Grand Prix mentioned on the 1946 honours list or the Portuguese Juventude Em Marcha (Colossal Youth), one of the films included in the 2006 selection whose conditions of distribution have since been a bone of fierce contention in France?

When I refer to the public, I do not mean the happy few from professional circles who have access to film archives, to cinemathèques and to festivals, but the ordinary cinema-goer, the *cinéphile de province*.

For *De Røde Enge*, I can give at least a partial answer to my question: data provided by the Danish Film Institute shows that 3 862 people have seen the film in a cinema since 1976. And that's about it. As for *Juventude Em Marcha*, the film was released in Portugal in November 2006 and attracted just under 2 000 spectators; its French release is announced for May 2007, a full year after the screening in Cannes. Again, that's about it.

After *les marches*...

Of course, I have chosen two very extreme examples here: measuring the effective public access to the films screened in Cannes during the first 59 festivals would require a considerably more detailed study.

Later access opportunities are, it goes without saying, related to initial success. The table opposite shows the wide disparities in the subsequent fortunes of the films which have received the *Palme d'Or*. Cumulative cinema admissions in Europe vary between the 250 000 admissions or so registered by Imamura's *Unagi* and the 9.4 million tickets sold for Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Differences are evident not only in the level of success, but can also be perceived in the life cycles of these films in cinemas: *Fahrenheit 9/11* registered 99.9% of its European admissions during the first calendar year of release, whilst Angelopoulos'

Mia eoniotita ke mia mera (Eternity and a Day) clocked up only 40.8% of its European admissions in the first year of release, followed by 45.9% in the second year and a further 9.2% in the third year. This is a slower than average career but also a relatively short life. Taken as a whole, the *Palme d'Or* of the period 1996-2005 registered 79.2% of their total admissions during the first year of release, 19.9% during the second year and 0.8% during the third year. From the third year onwards the number of tickets sold is minimal. This rapid obsolescence of films on screens is an economic characteristic familiar to distributors and exhibitors and is a far from recent phenomenon. The general consensus is, however, that the rate of obsolescence is accelerating due to the pressure of the increasing number of films on offer. Inflation in the number of prints for leading films compounds the difficulties faced by smaller films when it comes to staying on screens. In this context, preserving diversity is of growing concern.

...the "Long Tail"

The basic problem with theatrical distribution is that it does not allow a film to take advantage of what is now qualified in the digital world as the "Long Tail" effect. For those of you not yet familiar with Long Tail theory (translated in French as *longue traîne*), let me remind you that the phrase was coined in October 2004 by Chris Anderson, editor of *Wired* magazine. Anderson argued that products that are in low demand or have low sales volume can collectively make up a market share that rivals or exceeds the relatively few current bestsellers and

Admissions in Europe and North America for films which have won the *Palme d'Or* | since 1996

Year of <i>Palme</i>	Original title	Director	Admissions est		
			in Europe	in US and Canada	in the country of origin
1996	Secrets and Lies	Mike Leigh	4 693 618	2 950 611	549 574
1997	Unagi	Shohei Imamura	242 820	~	~
	Ta'm e guilass	Abbas Kiarostami	421 779	~	~
1998	Mia eoniotita ke mia mera	Theo Angelopoulos	443 443	1 719	~
1999	Rosetta	J.P. and L. Dardenne	1 253 462	38 739	184 157
2000	Dancer in the Dark	Lars von Trier	3 791 324	755 907	202 782
2001	La stanza del figlio	Nanni Moretti	2 748 024	~	1 154 241
2002	The Pianist	Roman Polanski	8 739 120	5 231 024	1 767 715
2003	Elephant	Gus Van Sant	1 211 518	208 520	208 520
2004	Fahrenheit 9/11	Michael Moore	9 399 079	19 181 158	19 181 159
2005	L'enfant	J.P. and L. Dardenne	729 976	~	151 505
2006	The Wind That Shakes the Barley	Ken Loach	2 410 382 ⁽¹⁾	~	802 210

(1) Provisional figure.

Source: OBS (Lumière database: <http://lumiere.obs.coe.int>)

blockbusters, if the distribution channels are wide enough. By offering broad access to vast catalogues, the Internet retail business is considered as the model of the Long Tail theory.

Purist proponents of the belief that “films should be seen in cinemas” find it hard to admit that digital technologies and the new forms of distribution associated with them, such on-line retailing and video-on-demand, represent a historic opportunity to benefit from the Long Tail effect. A study recently published by the UK Film Council⁽¹⁾, gives clear factual evidence for the existence of this opportunity. It attempts to quantify the extent to which the demand for independent UK and specialised films (a concept used in UK to qualify what would be called *films d'art et d'essai* elsewhere) has been left unfulfilled by the limitations on traditional forms of distribution. These limitations are not only physical (shelf space in video shops and screens in the theatres) but also commercial. The study shows that there were 521 UK and specialised films released theatrically in the UK during 2003 and 2004. Of these films 352 (68%) were available through mainstream retail outlets but just 108 (21%) had had a traditional video rental release. However, 407 films (78%)

could be rented on-line, thus demonstrating the larger capacity (and the longer exposure) available through this kind of distribution. It can be supposed that this situation prefigures a similar one in video-on-demand when this form of distribution reaches maturity. The larger exposure provided by on-line rental also has a direct impact of the level of concentration of the market. The top 25 films released in 2004 registered 65.9% of cinema box office revenues, but only 17.8% of DVD rental revenues in video shops, 15.9% of retail revenues and a mere 1.9% of on-line rental revenues. Of course, it can be argued that the on-line rental business is tiny and reaches only a limited public. Nevertheless, the study shows that the average ratio between on-line rental and retail for UK and specialised films is 38%, demonstrating clearly that on-line rental constitutes a real second chance.

Another recent study on the development of video-on-demand in Europe illustrates the rapid emergence of this new kind of distribution. At the end of 2006 almost 150 operational services have been identified in 24 European countries. Of course most of these offer chiefly the usual US blockbusters and popular domestic titles. However

(1) Screen Digest and Lanterna Magica, *Feasibility Study of a Digital Platform for the Delivery of UK Independent and Specialised Films to the Home*, UK Film Council, June 2006, <http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/get/?doc=164>

a number of services have been created with a focus on independent, art house and experimental films: in France by an association of independent producers, in Spain by two copyright collecting agencies, in Norway by the national film institute. The UK Film Council study mentioned here makes interesting recommendations that would no doubt be of interest to most of the public and private organisations involved in the promotion of film diversity. The MEDIA Programme of the European Union and Eurimages, the co-production, distribution and exhibition fund of the Council of Europe, are currently studying possible initiatives to encourage the wider circulation of European films through video-on-demand services.

Of course it is not yet clear when you will have the chance to catch *De Røde Enge* or *Juventude Em Marcha* through a VoD service, if you missed them in Cannes or if your favourite local cinema never programmed them (both highly plausible hypotheses). Nonetheless a concrete prospect now exists that these films will eventually become accessible in the on-line universe. It is a prospect that should render obsolete the doubtful concept of “festival films”. Though not, of course, the festivals, nor the importance of theatrical exhibition in the value chain.

And while we are waiting, *Mesdames, préparez vos longues traînes et Messieurs, vos queues de pie!* Ladies, prepare your long dresses, and gentlemen, your tails!

André Lange

**Head of the Department for Information
on Markets and Financing
European Audiovisual Observatory**