

BIG - CONTEXT CINEMA

A Strategic Partners Keynote by Roger Frappier

The world is getting smaller, cultures are changing one another, the audience's concerns are evolving

As an independent producer, last year's runaway success of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Danny Boyle's Mumbai-set drama, is a source of joy and inspiration for me. This turning-point film made with a 15-million-dollar budget raked in receipts of three hundred and sixty-two million dollars worldwide, and it won a multitude of prizes around the globe, ending up, of course, with the final apotheosis: eight Oscars, including one for Best Picture. But this film is telling us something else: the world is getting smaller, cultures are changing one another and the audience's concerns are evolving.

Nowadays, to state that we are living in the era of globalization and instant communication on a planetary level is simply saying something that everybody knows.

We all take this for granted. A simple, ordinary piece of understanding, yet we are slow to draw the conclusions that flow from it in our area of work: the film business.

When I started to produce movies – that was about three decades ago – our country's cinema was like all the other countries' cinemas: we went about our business in our closed little world.

Which meant this:

** Finding our stories and inspiration in our own storehouse of dramatic works, be they historical or contemporary.

** Essentially exploring themes and issues inherent to our own political, social and cultural history.

** Creating an esthetic code in phase with our artistic and industrial level of development and our limited financial means.

What a large segment of the population looked for in its country's cinema was, essentially, a reflection of its aspirations, films that, by soliciting emotions, thoughts and the celebration of its qualities as well as the mockery of its weaknesses, would help it define itself *specifically* and assert its cultural and linguistic identity.

That was how things were back then, at the heart of the concerns of the times.

That was then. This is now.

Today, the world is getting smaller, cultures are changing each other and the audience's concerns are evolving.

Today, we are in constant and continuous contact with the rest of the world. We can all but watch in real time as a demonstrator dies on the streets of Teheran. We are drowning in information about the only-child problem in China. We all know the difference between a chador and a burka.

Every day, international subjects are part of page-one stories in the papers and on the TV news: an attack in Afghanistan, a brushfire in Los Angeles, riots in China, Obama's speech to Congress, an ecological disaster in Brazil, a staggering fraud on Wall Street, a hostage-taking in Russia are all part of our daily lives, no matter where we live on the planet, no matter what language we are getting our news in.

Our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters preside international tribunals looking into genocide in the former Yugoslavia, they are building skyscrapers in Dubai, studying in London, Stockholm and Paris, inventing the next generation of biological memory computers in some Silicon Valley firm, working for NGOs in African and Central American countries, designing in Montreal and building in Germany transportation systems meant for Thailand.

And we're communicating with them, often on a daily basis, through voice and images, over the Internet.

Our major enterprises – Bombardier, the Cirque du Soleil, SNC Lavallin – work all across the globe. And we attract, be it to Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver, companies that create special-effects software, 3-D animation and video games that come from all sectors and that, in turn, are designed to conquer the five continents. And they're doing just that.

Our readers get excited about novels written by Swedes, Indians, Catalonians, Senegalese, Vietnamese, Finnish and Haitian authors – and some of them become bestsellers. Not very long ago, these national literatures were known only by a few academic specialists.

To put it succinctly, today everybody knows that a butterfly's wings beating above the Atlantic Ocean can set off a hurricane in the Pacific.

All citizens of the world, all peoples of the earth know they are interdependent. In large part, they are facing the same problems, be they social or existential.

Global warming, the H1N1 flu pandemic, the economic and financial crisis, the shortage of non-renewable energies, but also intimate and family relations in an era of runaway individualism, are all questions that concern all of us – in terms that are quite similar.

This is true whether we live in Shanghai, Rio, Amsterdam, Berlin, Dublin, Vancouver, Kuala Lumpur – or Halifax.

The audience's concerns are evolving: they are becoming global as well.

Have we really thought about what that means for us?

Small-Context and Big-Context Cinema

In an essay published in 2005, the Czech writer Milan Kundera described the two basic contexts in which we can situate a literary work:

** Either in the history of a nation, which he calls the Small Context;

** Or in the supranational history of its art, which he calls the Big Context.

He then eloquently speaks of the reticence of many writers from small nations to fully enter the era of globalized literature, by creating a *big-context* literature.

He points out that small nations naturally tend to inculcate their writers with the ideology that they belong only to those nations. They let their writers know that it would be pretentious – or even insulting towards their own people – for them to cast their eyes beyond their borders, or dare hope to measure themselves against the greatest nations, or take on issues that are not specifically national, rooted in their own country's history, bogged down in its references.

Kundera calls this attitude the “terrorism of small contexts.”

This terrorism is carried out as much by ordinary readers as by critics, publishers and public institutions.

I hope I may be allowed to say that in Canada, this *terrorism of small contexts* – which was very perceptible when I started producing films – is still too powerful today, in my opinion, in the audiovisual field in general and in cinema in particular.

Yet elsewhere, *big-context* cinema is developing.

For small film-making nations, it is developed mainly through international co-productions.

We can mention *Slumdog Millionaire*, or *Babel* by the Mexican film-maker Alejandro González Inárritu, whose synopsis reads like this: “Four interlocking stories all connected by a simple gun converge at the end and reveal a complex and tragic story of the lives of humanity around the world and how we truly aren't all that different... Combined, it provides a powerful story and an equally powerful looking glass into the lives of seemingly random people around the world, and it shows just how connected we really are.”

This film, produced with money from Mexico, the United States and France, shot in part in Japan and Morocco, featured, among others, an Australian actress, an American actor, a Japanese actress, with original music composed by an Argentine and special effects created in part by a Toronto company.

We can mention *Blindness* by Brazilian film-maker Fernando Meirelles, adapted from the novel of the same name by the Portuguese writer José Saramago, who won the Nobel Prize for literature, an adaptation created by Toronto screenwriter Don McKellar and co-produced by an Italian (Andrea Barata Ribeiro), a Canadian (Niv Fichman) and a Japanese woman (Sonoko Sakai).

Today, international co-production is not only an *economic necessity*; it's become a *cultural necessity*.

It is not only indispensable in order to bring together worthwhile budgets, it's also essential in order to respond to the interpenetration of cultures and the evolution of audience concerns in a context of globalization.

Because, in case we need reminding, we are making these films for the public. We're telling stories for them.

Making films that are part of the *big context* is the *ethical* and *esthetic* responsibility that falls to us *today*. That responsibility has been given to us *here and now*. It's our lot and it should be our ambition.

If we want our voices to resonate beyond our borders and, most of all, if we want them to be heard and listened to, we must not remain stifled by our *small contexts*, in narrowly national references, patterns of cinematic writing drawn only from our national film history.

We must openly and resolutely create a *big-context* cinema that brings together global concerns of large movie-going populations.

The Cirque du Soleil has had such great success because it was able to recruit circus artists and compel them to work together, though they come from the four corners of the earth. The Cirque dared to associate itself with the greatest names – here, I'm thinking most notably of the Beatles. It has been able to design shows that are absolutely original and intelligible, and that can be appreciated by audiences in America and Europe, but also in Asia, the South Sea Islands and the Middle East.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that *small-context* cinema no longer has a role, and should disappear. Far be it from me!

There are small-context films that, due to their inventiveness and creativity, succeed and will continue to succeed in the work of crossing borders. From *Seducing Doctor Lewis* to *I Killed my Mother*, from *Crazy* to *The Barbarian Invasions*, our national cinema often uses its intelligence to reach the universal through what is most particular about it.

I am simply saying that we have to *also* develop a *big-context* cinema, to eliminate the obstacles that slow its emergence, and fully recognize its legitimacy, and put a stop to the *terrorism of small contexts* that still lingers among us.

This cinema should hold sway over the brand that simply adapts a proven recipe – an often worn-out though established formula – to the *small context* at hand. The kind of brand that just trots out, for example, the teen flick formula and produces a local version of it for local consumption, with no future.

We need to stimulate international co-production in Canada

Unfortunately, I still have the feeling that, in Canada, the rules of the game are still urging us, and not too subtly, into the *small-context* corner. This is true not only for wholly national films, but also when we're working in international co-productions.

I get the feeling that the public institutions still want us to make films that "will explain Canada to Canadians and the rest of the world."

Which is, as you certainly know, the mission with which the Canadian government entrusted the NFB when it was created in 1939.

Seventy years later, perhaps it's time to look for a new model and move onto something else.

It's time that we be allowed to look beyond the fence, and contemplate the vast expanse of the planet, and take on, as freely as we wish, the entire world's concerns, including those of Canadian audiences.

Our directors should be allowed to propose their vision of the world, and not just of Canada. To seek inspiration from other cultures, to benefit from the diverse experience of authors, actors and musicians from all cultural horizons. *Together*, to develop a *big-context* cinema.

Essentially, our co-production agreements continue to reflect the situation and the concerns that existed in the 1960s and 1970s.

While we are modernizing and adapting on a regular basis the fiscal tools that are designed to attract foreign film shoots to Quebec and Canada – which is very good, of course – we remain extremely timid when it comes to reviewing the international co-production agreements that would help us not only finance ourselves more easily outside the country, but also to draw on a talent pool of creators, technicians and artists who would *enrich* our vision.

This diversity produces cultural wealth. By combining and allowing cultures to act one upon the other, we will be able to respond to audience expectations.

Currently, our “old” co-production agreements are sometimes able – but not very often – to adapt to the demands of current cinema, as well as they can. But to do that, often we have to bend the rules and appeal for more or less arbitrary exemptions.

We need to rebuild the foundations of these agreements, and negotiate them based on new premises in synch with the current global climate. The way the Europeans have started to do. The way several small nations are doing too.

We have to stop basing everything on our atavistic, unreasonable fear of Americanization that supposedly threatens us.

For the last forty years, especially in English Canada, people have been convinced that if we don't impose a basketful of rules and regulations to keep our cinema narrowly Canadian, it will simply turn American.

Our fear of the Hollywood giant has taken on gigantic proportions that have begun to suffocate us.

Who can seriously believe that François Girard's *Silk*, Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* and Deepa Mehta's *Water* are Hollywood-type films?

Today, for Canadian cinema, there are other ways of opening up to the world than Americanization. More fertile and attractive ways, as films like *Babel*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Blindness* are showing us.

It is essential that additional new resources be allocated to international co-production so that we can fully engage in this new way of seeing.

We have to stop drawing on the resources allocated for *small-context* and *big-context* cinema from the same envelope, constantly placing the two in unequal competition, and subjecting them to similar rules.

If we want our cinema to really count, if we want it to make its mark in the current global climate, we must quickly move to create two distinct funds:

- ** a fund for entirely national productions;
- ** a fund for international co-productions.

With their own resources. With distinct rules and objectives.

This way, the public institutions active in financing will be able to choose from the *best projects* in *each category*.

Currently, with the rules and obligations in place, it is extremely difficult – particularly in Quebec – for these institutions to support international co-production, no matter the intrinsic quality of the project, over a film shot entirely in Canada, using only Canadian human and technical resources, with an eminently Canadian subject and having a strong potential for success with our national audiences.

The competition is unequal.

By creating two separate funds, we can re-establish a healthy balance.

That way, we will be recognizing that the world is getting smaller, that cultures are changing one another and that audience concerns are evolving.

And they are globalizing too.

To meet their expectations, we need to develop, right here, a *big-context* cinema.

Roger Frappier, Sept. 16, 2009