

**Miguel Machalski**

***Global Storytelling: Brief Case Studies***

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MIGUEL MACHALSKI: I would like first and foremost to thank SOURCES 2 for inviting me to Graz. Actually, this wasn't meant to happen because I was supposed to be somewhere else, right now. But, as fate would have it, the other event I had to attend was cancelled, so everything fell into place and I was able to come.

Actually I'm squeezing this in between a workshop I just held in Kuala Lumpur and another one I'll be holding in Thessaloniki in a couple of days. Before Kuala Lumpur, I was in Tunisia running another workshop. Before that, I was in Cuba mentoring third-year screenwriting students and prior to that, in Sofia as a workshop adviser. The reason I'm telling you all this is not to impress you with all my travelling, but because it's relevant to what we're going to be talking about: global storytelling.

Before, it might be worth my giving you a quick introduction of myself because it's also relevant to the nature of this exchange of thoughts and experiences that hopefully will come out of this meeting. As you see, I'm avoiding the word 'lecture' all the time. It's not a word I feel quite comfortable with because I would like this to be more of an informal chat from which no gospel truths or major enlightenment are likely to emerge.

I was born and grew up in Argentina, where I carried out all my studies. My mother was British and my father Polish. I then came to Europe, first to Spain then to France. My family then moved to Canada, and I was going back and forth between France and Canada for a while. All this has considerable bearing on the position I happen to be in today in filmmaking.

Thirty years ago I had a lot of answers, though I'm not sure I knew what the exact questions were. Now I have a lot of questions to which I don't have answers, for the simple reason that I don't believe in definitive answers to anything, especially not in a creative activity such as screenwriting and storytelling. Consequently, the PowerPoint presentation I've put together is based on questions we can attempt to address together. For my part, I'll try and give a few pointers and share my personal experience with you.

There's a lot of talk about co-production. More and more countries are co-producing, not only within the same region or continent, but also crossing over from one continent to another. And I think that though there's a lot of talk about how to co-produce, financial aspects, how to set up projects, not much is said about how these mixed cultural projects have an impact on the way stories are told in different parts of the world. Or, from another angle, how the way stories are told in different parts of the world has an impact on the actual filmmaking and storytelling process.

In the last two months, I've been in Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, Latin America, North Africa, Southeast Asia and now Austria. Every time I go to these different places, I get a different viewpoint on how stories are told: the worldview, the various concerns, the specific issues are manifold.

When I was in Kuala Lumpur last week, there was something called the Asian Film Week. It was a five-day filmmaking forum. Of the nine guest speakers invited to talk about different aspects of filmmaking, there were eight Americans and one Englishman. I have absolutely nothing against bringing in experts from American or Anglo-Saxon countries, but it did strike me as rather odd that, in an Asian context, the speakers were all American, with one exception, who was English. There were no Asian speakers, nor experts from any other part of the world.

These eight American speakers necessarily spoke about how films are made and how stories are told in America. Whether intentionally or not, they were looking at it from a certain viewpoint, and I'm not sure that the average Malaysian filmmaker – and even less, the average Malaysian producer – can do much with that information. The whole production model in that part of the world is entirely different. So the kind of Hollywood/American studio approach – or even that of independent filmmakers in the US – is not very useful, to my mind, in the rest of the world. It would make more sense for the Malaysians to invite speakers from Southeast Asia – or even from South America for that matter. There are differences, of course, in how films are made in Argentina, but it's closer to the way films are made in Malaysia than the US.

There's an almost new category or genre we'll be speaking about known as World Cinema. It goes hand in hand with the concept of the 'International Market', but I'm not sure what these terms and concepts really mean at the end of the day. Is World Cinema a way to expose everyone around the world to how other people think, feel, and experience life? Or is it a way to standardize storytelling and a certain 'universal worldview', and export this around the entire globe? I don't have a single answer, but I do believe there's a tendency to try and find a uniform way of telling stories and making films so they can be easily exported all over the world, rather than really gaining knowledge on how people see things in different ways all over the planet.

I think human experience is the same all around the world. But though the basic concerns and issues are the same, priorities change according to context. In Southeast Asia, unlike most of Europe, religion is a core concern that tends to appear in many stories. Though a love story is always a love story, it will not take on the same form in different contexts.

It isn't just about different kinds of stories, but also about the way they are told. Does Syd Field's storytelling structure really apply in Africa? Because whether or not the key 3-act structure may be valid, it undoubtedly applies more rigorously to a certain type of film, made in a certain part of the world and with a certain goal, such as in mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. Yet wherever you go, the first – and often only – screenwriting guidebooks people mention are those written by Syd Field, Linda Seeger and Robert McKee.

World Cinema is becoming a genre unto itself, though of course it isn't strictly a genre. When you go to see a Colombian film, you have certain expectations corresponding to the tag 'Colombian film' rather 'thriller' or 'romantic comedy'. Of course, most of the films in emerging filmmaking industries that get international distribution aren't genre; they're personal dramas or social dramas, usually addressing social or political issues. More often than not, they are festival movies, generally qualified as 'arthouse' (another label that could be better defined). Only now and again does World Cinema enter the mainstream market.

So because World Cinema falls mainly in the arthouse category, the films are often geared to festival audiences or specific arthouse venues. In Paris, for instance, you have a number of arthouse cinemas, some of them specializing in African films. Many African films will get screened at these two or three cinemas in Paris, at film festivals, and that's about it.

How often do we see what we would call 'straight' genre films in World Cinema? Have you ever seen a romantic comedy from Chile – if indeed you've ever seen any films from Chile at all? Has anyone seen a romantic comedy that's not from your own country and neither American nor European? Have you ever seen an romantic comedy from Africa? There may not be any, but there are quite a few from South America that very rarely travel. And it's not because they aren't good enough; it's because international audiences supposedly will not be interested in seeing a Chilean romantic comedy. What they want to see from Chile, we are told, are things that reflect the socio-political reality of the country. The same goes for thrillers. Sometimes you get a thriller which is arthouse or World Cinema as well as a thriller, but it's not usually pitched or sold as such.

So how often does World Cinema deal directly and exclusively with broad 'universal themes' such as old age, sibling rivalry, redemption, etc.? They do, of course, but not usually exclusively or directly.

Very often context tends to override theme, drama and storytelling. In other words, the context becomes the theme.

Let's try and fine-tune this. When I was in Tunisia, the writers were complaining because most Tunisian films are financially supported to a very large extent by France. Because Tunisia is a Muslim country, they find it very hard to deal with issues unrelated one way or another to religion or fundamentalism. It becomes difficult if they want to tell a story about any of the subjects we just mentioned. Of course, the other theme that is highly in demand is women's equality. Universal stories seem to be the exclusive right of developed or 'First World' countries, or whatever you choose to call them. (In France they use an euphemism: *pays du Sud* or 'Southern Countries').

Most of the Latin American films you see abroad deal with urban violence or corruption. There's no denying these problems are rampant there and some filmmakers do want to talk about them, but not *all* filmmakers want to *all the time*. The question is: Do they have a choice if they want their films to travel outside their own country? Will the international market accept these stories?

I'd like to share a couple of cases I came across in a workshop. One was in Indonesia. They have these motorized rickshaws they call *bajai*. This is the story of a *bajai* driver living in Jakarta, whose parents dwell in a small town about 500 kilometres away. It's the end of the Ramadan period, the Eid festivity, as they call it, it's been a while since the protagonist has seen his mother, and he doesn't have enough money to travel with his family by train.

So the man decides to go and visit his parents in his *bajai*. This was the story as presented, a road movie in a rickshaw. When asked what the point of the story was, the writer answered, "Oh, I think people around the world will be very interested in seeing a road movie of a guy in a *bajai* crossing the countryside to go and see his family."

There were some adventures along the way, but no real dramatic issues, no genuine conflict. It all boiled down to mere context.

As we started getting into the story more deeply, a question cropped up: "Why did he leave his hometown in the first place?". It then turned out that he left for Jakarta in search of a better life. He wanted to find a job as a civil servant, thereby rising in social and economic status. As it happened, he failed and ended up in a menial job as a *bajai* driver. But he never told his family this. So when his mother pleads for him to come and visit her and to see her grandchildren, he's faced with a predicament. He doesn't have the money to go by train, so his choice is either not to go or to travel by *bajai*. But of course when he shows up at his hometown, he will have to reveal his failure and the yarns he's been spinning.

So though it was still the same story, the basic theme was about keeping secrets, and the inner conflict arising from the fact of trying to conceal who you really are. That's a very universal issue. The story blended perfectly with the specific context, but the context became background. So if the film ever gets made, and if it gets made the right way, audiences, by rights, should become emotionally involved with this guy's predicament. They will be following not only his journey on the road, but his inner journey as well. Of course, the end of the story is that the mother is very happy to see him anyway and doesn't really care he didn't make it big in the capital city.

I'll give you another example: in Chile – as in many parts of the world – abortion is illegal. The story is about this young couple, about 16 or 17 years old. The girl gets pregnant, and they have to buy an abortion pill on the black market. The backbone of the plot was about all the trouble they have to go to in order to get the money to buy the pill, and then take the pill without any medical assistance. When they find a place to do it, the girl has a haemorrhage, with the ensuing panic of both youngsters. They finally manage to save the situation without any major mishap.

The problem was that it was a documentary 'in disguise'. Although the characters were fictional, there was no specificity to them as people – they were mere illustrations of a social issue, meant to expose all the dangers and difficulties a young couple has to go through if they are faced with this kind of problem.

Once again, we started exploring a more specific dramatic situation. Supposing, against expectations, the guy wants to keep the baby, whereas the girl doesn't, claiming she's the one who'll be saddled with the kid. There is a conflict between them, while the clock is ticking. They have to find the pill while they're still fighting over it. Then at one point she tells the boy the baby isn't his.

Suddenly, the stakes rise dramatically. The guy says to himself, "First of all, would I want to play father to this baby even if it isn't mine?" And secondly, "Is she telling the truth? Or is it a ploy to convince me that we should carry out the abortion?"

So the local specificity with a documentary angle becomes a much more drama-driven story. The problems of finding and taking the pill are still there, but they become background. Instead of the specific issue or problem being at the forefront, it becomes part of a human drama, which is not always there because filmmakers in these countries feel they have to – though I'm not sure they always want to – talk about these local contextual aspects.

The question is whether or not the international market really does demand national stereotypes. In Colombia, there are a lot of problems with kidnappings and violence is rife, so it would seem that the international market requires Colombian filmmakers – or storytellers, let's say – to tell stories revolving around these themes.

Recently an Argentinean filmmaker, Pablo Fendrik, made a film called *La sangre brota – Blood Appears*, about a dysfunctional family. During a screening at a festival followed by Q&A, the first question from the audience was if all taxi cabs in Argentina have yellow roofs. The director replied that that was not really what his film was about. Another comment was: "It's a pity, because we don't see much of Buenos Aires", to which the filmmaker said, "Well, maybe you should buy *National Geographic*." And a third comment was, "Your film doesn't deal with any current political and economic problems in Argentina."

AUDIENCE: Was it in Brazil?

MACHALSKI: No, it was in France. They wouldn't have asked those questions in Brazil.

AUDIENCE: But they also ask in Neorealism where the stories take place. It is a long tradition in European filmmaking to situate the story within a social context. And everyone wants to see what a certain neighbourhood in Rome looks like in a particular dramatic story. It's not such a focus in those films; it's also a tradition in filmmaking, especial *auteur* filmmaking. Because they all want to tell their stories, and they don't think showing the context is very exciting.

MACHALSKI: I agree. I think the problem is when they can't get away from that. I mean, I think it's fine if somebody wants to shoot and show Buenos Aires as it is, or to talk about specific issues. But this director shows a film – and to my mind a very powerful film, not one you easily forget – where he's trying to break away from exactly this kind of stereotype, and he's asked about taxis and cityscapes.

Argentina is actually an interesting case in point. About fifteen years ago, Argentina came up with a sort of 'new wave' in filmmaking. At first this was fine because they realized they were renewing their cinema. But then it became a formula, so that filmmakers in Argentina who want to hit the international market are now making films following a certain pattern. The result, of course, is that the international market – and specifically France because the French funding source Fonds Sud is behind a lot of these films – is growing weary. They're becoming a bit distrustful of Argentinean movies with similar aesthetics and the usual minimalistic approach. Where's authenticity?

[Reading from PP presentation]: "Doesn't the International Market tend to seek 'universal' stories set in specific, geographically and ethnically 'exotic' environments and depicting 'local' issues?". This is my point when I say people watch these films looking for images, often stereotyped, of Buenos Aires or Bangkok. There's no denying that when I go and see an African film I enjoy seeing some of the environment. But that's not the prime reason I go. And I certainly don't complain if it isn't there.

Is what filmmakers believe is expected of them necessarily reality? Which brings us to another point: Sometimes filmmakers think they have to make these films because that's what World Cinema is about and what the international market expects of them. And it's not always true. This is all part of a situation which reflects a lack of clarity about what's going on.

Another question surrounding World Cinema is: Are they showing us the cultural, political, social or contextual reality in a given country, or is it a way of telling a story? *Slumdog Millionaire* is not what I would consider World Cinema. It's not an Indian movie. It's a European movie in the way the story is told, the way it's structured, the way it's shot. The same goes for *The Last King of Scotland* and other similar films.

I'm not criticizing anything; I'm just raising questions and trying to highlight the fact that a non-local filmmaker might be able to respect the objective facts of a local issue, but not an idiosyncratic form of telling a story, unless he or she happens to be immersed in the culture for one reason or another.

Is everybody everywhere sensitive to the same issues? Don't dramatic stakes differ? In most Asian countries, 'saving face' can be a life-or-death issue, while in Africa, respect for one's ancestors is paramount. These matters are often more important than wealth.

One of the things that is queried when reading screenplays is believability and the 'chance' factor. You know: the 'convenient' coincidence of a character running into just the person the plot was needing. But in Africa they don't have a problem with this because they believe that fate or destiny is a palpable component of reality. And, truth be told, so do I. In real life there are a lot more coincidences than you're allowed to put in a story. But this is Western rationale; it doesn't necessarily mean it's the way things are. Since most of the money that goes into filmmaking comes from the Western world, the governing mindset is Western. But it certainly doesn't mean this is the only way – or the best way – to tell a story.

AUDIENCE: Whenever someone says 'universal,' I wonder, "Whose 'universal'?" I think the use of the word 'universal,' when applied to storytelling, is basically neo-colonial. Would you agree?

MACHALSKI: Absolutely. I always put quotation marks around 'universal' because I distrust the term profoundly. Does 'universal' mean telling the same story everywhere? In which case, as you rightly point out, *whose* story? Or does mean anybody anywhere being able to see and understand the widest possible gamut of stories human beings can tell?

Take ghosts. In Asian stories they have a different meaning than in the West. People are frightened of them, but they aren't necessarily scary stories. They believe ghosts are everywhere. You can have a family drama in Asia with ghosts but it's not a 'ghost story.' In *Billy Elliot*, a film I worked on as an analyst and which is definitely not a ghost tale, the mother's ghost appears, but it's a rather unusual scene for that kind of story in a European film. It wouldn't be in Asia.

In Southeast Asia, a woman who offers sex to a foreigner for money is not necessarily a prostitute the way we think of it. They see it from a different angle. It's difficult to explain this. Intuitively, I have developed the capacity to understand things I'm unable to explain in words because it's a complete shift in mindset. The terms I have for a woman who does that – whore, hooker, call girl – are all inappropriate, but though I understand why this is so, I can't find a suitable word.

AUDIENCE: I have a very short question: Are going to tell us *why* World Cinema is like this?

MACHALSKI: Well, like I said, I have the questions, not the answers... But maybe I can say something I've noticed about films made without money coming from culturally alien sources. If you have a co-production between Argentina, Brazil and Chile – unfortunately not as frequent as it should be – the films tend to be more 'authentic'. These regional co-productions are difficult to set up, although they are happening more and more. In Southeast Asia, for example, if Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand pooled resources, they could easily raise the money to make a film. Because another thing that happens is that when there's

foreign money – i.e. mostly European – , the budgets are blown up way beyond proportion. In Malaysia or Argentina, you can make a film for 300,000 or 400,000 Euros, sometimes less. But as soon as foreign money comes in, the budget may double or even triple.

I'm not sure whether I'm answering your question. I mean the problem with World Cinema is also a production issue, and if countries could co-produce regionally more often, things might take on a different visage.

AUDIENCE: You've thought about analogy between World Cinema and its development, where authenticity is destroyed and then 'rediscovered'. To the point that you can't get certain films, though I say you can. If there's a Turkish minority in the city, you can go down and get all the Turkish films. If there's a Russian minority, you can get the Russian gangster films. I'm sure you can find those Asian adventure flicks in the video shop if there's an immigrant population.

MACHALSKI: Oh, yes, definitely. I'm not saying they're impossible to find. I'm just saying that they won't easily find distributors on the international market.

AUDIENCE: I really appreciate what you just said about 'World Cinema,' because it's kind of the story of my life. Because in Belgium, which is not very far away, it's exactly what you've said. In maybe 80 or 90 percent of the films which are made in French-speaking Belgium, it's exactly like that: You have to depict the social background.

You'll never be able to make a thriller, for example. People will laugh at you. For years, I've been trying to make genre films in Belgium. For a long time, I've been trying to understand why it was like this. I've been asking people.

One of the answers I've got is that during the 1960s there was this kind of *auteur* cinema in France, with Godard and Truffaut and people like that. After that, toward the end of the '60s and the 1970s, some other people said, "Look, this is art," and, "We want cinema to be art, not an industry." So they made this new invention of the 'author.' Your story must be a bit sad and a bit social to make it look like 'art.' Do you see what I mean? You are a prisoner of this. And that's one of the little answers I've found along the way about why I haven't been able to make a genre movie in my country.

MACHALSKI: This is also a marketing question. South Korea, for example, is not in this situation because they have a very strong system that defends their own filmmaking. The number of screens that show local films versus the number that show foreign films is very high.

AUDIENCE: What about the educational market?

MACHALSKI: There's also an educational factor, of course, but it's more complicated. In fact education is a key factor, but we won't go into that now. What I'm saying is that in most parts of the world, for every local film you will have five, six or more blockbusters. And with the promotion budget alone of one blockbuster, you could make a hundred local films. In most parts of the world the local product is crushed under the weight of American blockbusters.

AUDIENCE: You mentioned South Korea. The film industry is thriving, but the Americans are fighting it with the new agreement of the World Trade Organization. They've succeeded in having this regulation overruled so local films don't get distribution. In five to ten years, I think the good example of the South Korean film industry will be gone.

MACHALSKI: There you go. So that's another country down the drain. [Laughs]

AUDIENCE: Let me get this straight: Most countries can't even distribute eight foreign movies per year.

MACHALSKI: Yes, this is the reason why people complain local audiences don't go to see local films. But it's also true that in many cases the films aren't around enough to be seen.

AUDIENCE: Can I just make a point about this idea of the 'international market'? Basically, the international market is made up of acquisitions executives, really, in production terms, in industrial terms. And the acquisitions executives I know – I've worked for distribution companies and know quite a few – don't have a set of expectations. In fact, it's quite the opposite. I mean, you meet them at Cannes and they say, "I've seen that Colombian film. It's just another Colombian film about violence. Why can't I find a Colombian romantic comedy, for God's sake? Then I could sell it!"

So I don't think the international market is stomping on things. Basically, they're human beings who want to be entertained and told stories, or moved, or made angry or whatever it is. But unless those stories are somehow being told – not according to a formula, but really effectively – then they're not going to work, you know? I don't think the international market is necessarily a body. Basically, it's just people who want to be entertained.

MACHALSKI: Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to say they're the 'bad guys'. And you're quite right: they're people, not an abstract entity. But despite their alleged good intentions, I'm not sure how free they really are to choose. I've been to Colombia. They do make romantic comedies, and some of them are not bad. Why is it we never see them? I don't mean to criticise acquisitions executives, but they ask, "Why don't we get a Colombian romantic comedy?" and then when there is one, they seldom if ever pick it up. Almost all Colombian films we see do deal with violence. So where are those acquisitions people who are so keen to promote other types of films?

It's a question, a genuine question. I don't know what the answer is. When a Colombian filmmaker has a romantic comedy, he doesn't go to Cannes with it because he believes these acquisitions executives are looking for the stereotypical thing. Maybe it's all a misunderstanding, a communications breakdown on both sides.

AUDIENCE: Just a couple of points about the Argentinean film you told us about? The family drama. We saw a very good Spanish film early on in the week. There is a problem that if you don't have a proper budget, you cannot go outside, you cannot open the window, you cannot show Buenos Aires. So the question from that festival audience member may have been stupid, but it's still a relevant question. There's no way you can show where you are unless you go outside, and going outside costs a lot of money, as we know. In the Spanish film, it really bothered me. They could never, ever open the window. I could never see a shot where the window is open and somebody looks outside into the street because it would have cost a fortune.

It's the way some films are made today. This is the reality, but again, I would love to see an Argentinean family drama. But we're talking about films. We have tons of Latin American romantic comedies, for God's sake, on television all over Europe. I'm talking about my poor mother, who's not around anymore. These ladies and other people watch soap operas from Latin America. They're number one.

MACHALSKI: I don't think television is governed by the same rules.

AUDIENCE: Okay, it's not features, granted. But what I'm trying to say is that they do exist in some form. It was just what I wanted to say about the budgets, because I believe a film has to be local.

MACHALSKI: Does that happen in an American film? In an American film, if it all takes place indoors and it's in New York or Washington or wherever, it doesn't bother you ...

AUDIENCE: Well, it depends on the story, you know?



MACHALSKI: Well, that's my point. If your film is a family drama and your story is really good, why do people focus on the fact that you're not seeing Buenos Aires? Because it's Argentinean. If it were American, the question wouldn't arise.

AUDIENCE: First of all, I wanted to ask you what is 'Bollywood' cinema? If there is a big industry in a country, they have a chance to get out and create a form of proper local cinema, which actually is bigger than American cinema. There was a wave of Germans running into those Bollywood films. So what is that? Is it World Cinema? Or is it genre cinema? It's not influenced, for sure, by the American market. So what is it? It's powerful cinema. That's my question. We're discussing if you need the view out of the window and those *films d'auteur* from Buenos Aires. Is there audience interest in *not* seeing a genre film made in Hollywood or everywhere? Or do we really want to be story-oriented to make it? Okay, you tell me a love story is a love story is a love story everywhere in the world. But what about a love story with the ghost father in bed, talking with the young lady about whether someone is the right guy for her? A real ghost in her bed could be interesting, and you say, "It's an African story" because there is her father, as a ghost in her bed. So do we need to see the African village around to understand that this father is only a ghost?

MACHALSKI: No, I don't think so. That's exactly my point. Let me just come back to what we were saying earlier. Although you don't see Buenos Aires, these people are very definitely Argentinean. But for other, more subtle reasons. Because of their character, because of their behaviour pattern, because of the relationships between people. They are definitely not European. So the big question is: Do you need to see Buenos Aires? Do you need to see an African village to have this local flavour, or doesn't the story itself – because of the way it's narrated – suffice to portray the local culture and idiosyncrasy?

AUDIENCE: Are we interested in seeing only faces, or is the story created like that? Is it enough to see two people talking?

MACHALSKI: That's a consideration we can extend to films anywhere. Take a film like *Sleuth*. Basically, it's two people in a single house, talking. Could this be 'World Cinema,' given had equal screenwriting quality? Maybe, but somehow it doesn't seem to happen very much. It could, but it doesn't. There are undoubtedly exceptions – there always are –, but that kind of generally doesn't meet expectations concerning World Cinema. Because there *are* expectations, very strong ones, and the question is: are they also limitations?

AUDIENCE: I just wanted to make a few comments about what we have been discussing since the beginning. I believe you are a bit pessimistic because I believe there are still things that are travelling.

For example, you take a good thriller from wherever. It can make it to the audience. Whether it's *Nueve Reinas* or *Infernal Affairs* from Asia. To get a critical mass of people to see it, you generally have to wait for the remake. But at least it's been travelling. So that means you can have pictures, very well-done films, travelling between countries. That's the point, at least with genre films. When you see *Nueve Reinas*, it doesn't speak about the Argentinean situation or whatever.

The second point I wanted to make is about romantic comedies. I've seen *El Hijo de la Novia* [*Son of the Bride*] It was distributed in Europe. It wasn't in many theatres, but it was distributed. I liked it even though it didn't work very well. Except in Spain. But it was very Argentinean. So there's something for the people of Europe that they're not so used to. They're close to us, but the Argentinean people are not as familiar to us in Europe. We're familiar with the people in New York. For thirty years, since we were very small, we've been seeing series that make us as familiar with New York City streets as we are with a city street in a town just fifty kilometres from our town.

Everyone is more familiar with these places. When you go to New York for the first time, it's like being in a movie because you've seen it so many times on television and in movies. So it's a question of familiarity.

MACHALSKI: Yes, I agree. But our familiarity with New York is merely a matter of American supremacy, totally unrelated to any qualitative consideration. The 'informational' factor of what a place we don't know looks like should not be a storytelling imperative.

AUDIENCE: To finalize my point about comedy: Comedy is very local. You can take the best comedy in Spain, the best comedy in France, the best comedy in Argentina. It doesn't do anything. *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* [*Welcome to the Sticks*] is going to work as a remake by Will Smith. But this is an exception. I'm saying, in general.

I wanted to make one last comment. We're talking about budgets. It's also a matter of production value. When someone has 5 million Euros to make a movie, whereas in a small country you have only 500,000 Euros to do it, of course you have better production value. And this is what people want to see when they go to the cinema. They want to have a return on their money. They want to see big images, big things, and that's what people in America do better than we do. I believe it's something that they invest in: the production value of the movie.

MACHALSKI: It depends on the kind of film. If you consider it as a visual spectacle, perhaps. But a film can be something else. You can have modest production values in wonderful films with great stories and unforgettable characters. Conversely, a lot of US mega productions are very poorly scripted in terms of both plot and character development.

AUDIENCE: I'm also working in intercultural education. Do you have some of the models to explain some of your questions. One might be the 'iceberg theory' of culture? The idea that culture is like an iceberg and what's on top is easy to see, and what's underwater is harder to see? So maybe films really work when they use the things on top, like familiar landscapes and cities. And if they work 'below the water,' it's more difficult to understand?

MACHALSKI: The problem is if they *only* show the tip of the iceberg, which also happens sometimes. But I'm not as pessimistic as I might seem, actually, because otherwise I wouldn't even be here attempting to find answers. I believe things change all the time. And, fortunately, not always for the worse.

But for the record, think of those World Cinema films that are turned down by foreign subsidizing committees because they say, "They're not representative enough.". If they say, "We're not interested; the story's not good,," fair enough. But saying they're "not representative enough" implies they know better how a nation should represent itself than the nation itself.

I'm just going to show you the first few minutes of a few films, just so you can get a feeling of them. The first is a film called *Jade Warrior*. I worked on it as a consultant, going through a number of drafts and exchanging notes and thoughts on it.

This is basically a Finnish-Chinese co-production, but as you see, there are other countries involved, including Estonia and the Netherlands.

[Machalski shows clip from *Jade Warrior*]

MACHALSKI: How did this film do in Estonia, by the way? Not very well, right? I don't think it did very well anywhere. It had some problems, though the production values are there. One of its problems, I believe, was that it didn't have a very clear identity.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: It's like a Finnish Kung Fu film.

MACHALSKI: [Laughing] Quite so! I think there was also this strange feeling of, "Why should we watch a Finnish Kung Fu flick when the Asians do it so much better?" I know the question of identity was also a problem in the development process: "Whom do we base the characters on? Are they essentially Asian or Finnish?".

The following is another film I worked on. It's a French-Georgian production.

[Machalski shows clip from *Since Otar Left*]

MACHALSKI: This did well for the kind of movie it is. It stayed on screen for much longer than expected. The word-of-mouth was good. Apart from the festival circuit, it did quite well at the box office – for the kind of film, as I said.

I think the reason for its success was that it had a specific identity, as well as a very good story. There is a Georgian grandmother, her daughter and her granddaughter, all very Francophile, which is why they speak French, mixing it with Georgian.

Most of the film was shot in Georgia. In the story, the son goes to Paris seeking a better life. I won't tell you the story, in case you get to see it some day. At the end there's a part that's shot in Paris, and although the filmmaker and the writers are French, the film takes place mostly in Georgia. The French part is more 'as seen through the eyes' of Georgians, thereby reinforcing its Georgian identity.

I wanted to tell you something about another film, which is still in post-production so I couldn't bring a copy. This is an Argentinean production for which I wrote the screenplay. It's a thriller, a genre movie. The back story, however, combines two things from Argentinean history – the Falkland Island War and the military dictatorship in the 70s. Despite this, it is not a political film. These real events are only mentioned as back story because they are relevant to who the two protagonists are in the present day.

Quite naturally, myself being a French citizen and the film needing a French lead actress, the producer wanted us to contact a French producer and get him on board. I went see a couple of French producers, and they read the screenplay. One of them was keen on entering, but he intended to apply for Fonds Sud funding.

Now, as many of you probably know, Fonds Sud gives funding for projects from countries in the Southern hemisphere, mostly in Africa, Asia and Latin America. A lot of projects that come from these parts of the world seek co-producers in France, and the co-producer gets the funding mostly from Fonds Sud, which has a certain 'editorial line' – fairly constant though subject to change according to who presides.

The French producer's prognosis was that in its current state, the project wouldn't get Fonds Sud subsidising. I agreed – I didn't think it would either at that time. Maybe it would today. I don't know.

This producer wanted us to place more emphasis on the part about the Falkland Island War and the military dictatorship. I groaned internally because that was not what the story was about. But I agreed to see what the Argentinean producer said about it.

Fortunately, he said, "No way! That's not the film we want to make. We want it to be an Argentinean psychological thriller, not make political statements. The existing back story is there to explain why the protagonists are the way they are. If we start elaborating on these themes, it becomes much more of a political issue, and our local audiences are not interested in that." The upshot was that he decided to go ahead without French money. For whatever it's worth, we made the movie we wanted to make, without anyone telling us how we had to do it.

The other excerpt I want to show you is basically a Senegalese production, though they call it 'pan-African.' I'll tell you a little about the story in a minute. First I want to show you some images.

[Machalski shows clip from the film *Ramata*]

Let me just tell you something about how this came about, and how I came to be the writer for an African film, not being African myself. This film is based on a book, over 500 pages, which was quite tough to adapt.

“Are you sure that you want me as a writer?” I asked the producer. “I’m not African and I’m not completely French.” “That’s exactly why I want you on board as a writer,” he said. “If you were French, you would have too much of a colonialist view on Africa. And if you were African, you would take too many things for granted.”

He also liked the idea I was Latin American, lived in France, and could write in French. I felt it was an interesting challenge so I agreed.

We picked out the main story lines from the book. There were a number of options, of course, so I chose something I felt I could deal with culturally. The book covers a wide range of subjects, but it’s essentially about a 50-year-old woman who’s still very beautiful, and in a way a victim of her beauty.

The characters are largely people from the Dakar jet set who dress in designer clothes from Europe and drive BMWs. Apart from one part where we see an African village, it is set in Dakar. It’s almost like a Shakespearean tragedy, a story without any conspicuously ‘African’ themes.

The producer also said that it would be quite interesting marketing-wise to highlight the fact this was an African story written by an Argentinean.

I won’t go into the whole story, but the *Making of...* is almost as interesting as the film itself, which went through a lengthy production process and was eventually shot in December 2007, and it was eventually made.

The lead actress’ name was Katoucha Niane and she was a well-known top Yves Saint Laurent model. She really was the age of her character, and still very beautiful. In the film, she goes crazy. In the screenplay, I had her die in the hotel courtyard where you just saw her standing. When they shot the film, they thought it would be more dramatic if she drowned in the sea.

Katoucha Niane lived on a riverboat. Three months after the shoot was over, she fell into the Seine and was found dead a month later. Though a tragic story, it gave the film considerable momentum. Katoucha had never acted before – this was the first and last film she’d ever be in.

The film started doing the festival rounds, and the producer and director realized that it wasn’t good for the film to talk about an Argentinean writer. It was meant to be one of the rare African films produced almost exclusively with African funding. “It’s an African film,” the producer said when I queried him. “If we start talking about an Argentinean writer, they’ll say it’s not authentic.”

This film took a long time to produce because, once again, the producer was counting on having a French co-producer who could help us get Fonds Sud. But they decided the story ‘wasn’t what Africa is about’ – though an all-African committee, the Fonds Image Afrique, green-lit it by unanimous decision. The producer managed little by little to raise the money and shoot the film. Then he got some more funding money for post-production. He still hasn’t found a distributor because he keeps running out of funds – again, because he doesn’t have a French source behind him.

So what is World Cinema really about?

Another unanswered question, I’m afraid. But I hope all this has at least been thought-provoking, even though more questions have been asked than answers provided. Hopefully we shall have some in the near future.

Thank you very much.

