

Edgard Tenenbaum

The relevance of our stories for an international audience and how to make them travel

Pliezhausen/Germany, 16th April 2016

TENEMBAUM: First of all, I want to thank the Latino Tubingen Film Festival that allowed us to show our two latest co-productions. The first one, a Cuban film by Pavel Giroud, *El Acompañante*. The second one, from Guatemala by Jayro Bustamante, *Ixcanul*.

I was very happy to show these two movies. Both screenings were sold out so for a producer this is really good news, but more seriously, the chance to participate in a Q&A with an audience is really important. I appreciate always this part of the work.

I would like to emphasize the importance of the audience. If we don't touch the audience, all the work we are doing is useless. I was convinced by the people of Sources to do this lecture, but this morning, when I read the title of my lecture "*Relevance of our stories for an international audience and how to make them travel*", I thought "this is really terrible, [laughter] impossible!"

AUDIENCE: You suggested the title! [laughter]

TENEMBAUM: Yes, exactly, and I was going to add that I have to confess that it was *my* proposition! So you see, a producer is not infallible. In Cannes, next month, there will be about ten panels with international experts about how to make our movies travel. But I'm happy to do this lecture because I'm sharing my experience with the hope that there is something useful for you after the long workday you've had.

Both films I showed are coproduced by my company Tu Vas Voir, based in Paris. I was born in Argentina but I've been working in Paris for a long time. I started working in cinema in the documentary field. This was in the mid- end 80s and there was then a lot of freedom. We were young and inexperienced and we tried new things. Now we know those attempts is called *documentaire de création*, but at that time, we didn't know about this term or concept. What was really important for us and unique, I believe, was that we took a critical look at reality, at society. We couldn't imagine doing a documentary on any subject without this critical look. Cinema for us was a tool to understand and confront different countries and cultures. Even when the culture was very close to us but we couldn't see it, we could have the tool of cinema and documentary cinema.

I had the chance to work with Amos Gitai, a very well-known director. At that time, he was a documentary filmmaker. Of course, the Palestinian issue in Israel was already important, but it was a surprise for us that this local topic also interested other people in Europe and in a lot of other countries.

I also worked with other directors, and what was always important for all of us was this critical look at society. That was the way, directly on the field, I learned to produce.

A couple of years later, I received a proposition from ARTE to produce a documentary about Totó la Momposina, an emblematic singer from Colombia. My first reaction was how to do a documentary about somebody we like and admire? Because if we cannot be critical, what could we say? But the proposition attracts us and I accepted. When we started to work with Toto La Momposina, we understood that she was very critical of the situation of the local music. Not just her

music, but all Colombian music. The Colombian younger generation didn't care at all about its own country's music. And this indifference and reject reflected the general situation in the Colombian society. Finally, *Toto* is a film that talks not only about music. It is a mirror of the Colombian society at this particular moment. And this search of reality is always in my approach.

Soon after things began to change in France. The production became more and more standardized and one of the consequences was that we had less and less "freedom" in the documentary field. The paradox was that in the fiction field you could find more space. Then, slowly, I moved from documentaries to fiction, taking along the baggage of these kinds of stories based on the contradictions of reality. As I said before, from my experience, I really believe that our stories are relevant and fiction is also a good way to share them.

Ixcanul, Jayro Bustamante's film, is a very beautiful movie, and of course is the result of Jayro's talent. Nothing is possible without the talent of the artists involved in the production. The film is about a Mayan community in Guatemala, and we've shown it at more than fifty festivals by now. But what I noticed again and again was that "our local stories" are in, a special way, universals. Personally, I've had the possibility to go to four different countries to present the film. People laugh in the same places, and are touched in the same moments. It's really amazing to see how these kind of local stories are well received in the world. It's not advisable for us to copy American stories or try to make some accommodations. Again, we must trust in our stories because we have really interesting stories to tell.

For example, when I think about German movies that have impacted me in the past years, I think of *Good Bye Lenin!*, *The Lives of Others...* Those are examples of films from a big country like Germany that "travel". So when I start thinking about what to produce, I think about how cinema can offer us a small window that you can open to face a reality that is unknown to us. I like Kiarostami's work. Iran, for us, is like the moon. But in his films we can see how people live there. It is a kind of miracle! Last year I saw a beautiful Israeli film. *Gett, the trial of Viviane Amsalem*, by Shlomi and Ronit Elkabetz. It is the story of a woman that wants to divorce but can't get it because of the community she lives in. From a simple story like that, you can understand a lot about people and Israeli laws and society.

When I look for new projects, what is important for me is authenticity, which is a very delicate concept. You can feel it but it's very difficult to define. From a production standpoint, every movie we begin is a new adventure. It is impossible to repeat what we think we learned before.

When I worked on *The Motorcycle Diaries* about the young Ernesto Guevara, the director was Brazilian. Ernesto was interpreted by a Mexican actor. The film was financed by the UK and coproduced by American producers. At the end, this movie is the only movie that I've worked on that doesn't have a clear "nationality". But, undeniably, the movie has something really authentic and the audience, everywhere, appreciated it.

What are those elements that made it a success for a general audience? When Walter Salles directed the film, Che Guevara was not so much an icon like he is now. The film is about a young boy who will later become the Che with a lot of ideals, full of energy, deeply concerned about other people. We can see the awakening of this idealist encountering the injustices in the world. There is here something more than an anecdote. This moment in the life of this young boy can resonate in a young boy anywhere in the world, regardless of his origin or the local character of the film or event that it happen in a different historical moment.

Ixcanul is a film about María, a 17-year-old Mayan woman, who lives on the slopes of an active volcano in Guatemala with her parents. Probably, you could see several subjects in the story. One

of them, very strong in my opinion, is maternity, the relationship between the mother and the girl. Everywhere this relationship moves people. A common value such as tenderness helps this story to travel. The other subject universal as well is injustice.

In *Good Bye Lenin!*, I had the feeling that I had learned a lot about an important period in history. But the core of the story is universal and already treated in cinema and literature. How to find these elements to make the stories understood anywhere is the work I think we have to do. I believe deeply in historical and cultural frameworks. This is what attracts me. Every country has his particular and crucial moments in history.

You can also see here in Tübingen the film *El Acompañante*, about a Sidatorio in Cuba in the midst 80s. I read the first draft and that was my discovery of this story. When I read it at first, the script was not enough developed, but the story was so unique, that I decided to work on it.

In Cuba in the 80s, when AIDS was first being discovered, the first victims were not junkies or homosexuals. They were the Heroes of the Revolution: the soldiers who had been sent to fight in Angola to help the revolution in this country. When they returned to Cuba, some of them were sick with the virus.

In Europe, at that time, we didn't care about those "poor sick people." In Cuba, they cared. They opened a treatment place for AIDS, called "Sidatorio", and brought everyone who was sick there. As I've said, I didn't know about this situation. The conditions in the Sidatorio were good and good food was served, the hic was that the patients couldn't go outside. They were, in a way, like in a kind of prison.

After a while, the authorities realized that they couldn't keep the sick people without going outside to see their families. They decided that they could go outside once a week with a companion. The title film is *El Acompañante*, *The companion* in English.

The companion, in our film, is a big, black, beautiful boxer. At that time, people were really afraid of AIDS because we didn't know exactly how the virus was transmitted. You didn't even want to approach someone who had the virus. In our story, the companion was one of the biggest boxers in Cuba. Boxing and generally sport in Cuba is really important for the regime. The boxer was taking drugs to improve his resistance but he was caught. He was denigrated and to humiliate him, he was designed to be a companion in the Sidatorio.

Finally it's a story about the relationship between the companion and one of the heroes of the Revolution.

For me, this story is also about one of the major contradictions in Cuban society: "I will take care of you but under my conditions, because I don't trust you, and I will tell you what is allowed to you to do." I like working on these kinds of stories.

Working on the script was not easy, because we had two strong characters and we needed to tell both stories, the hero and the companion stories. We worked on that a lot, at least two years of work. If the story isn't good enough on paper, you cannot produce it. I just received the good news that *The Companion* won best screenplay award in New York FF!

The script is the base for everything: to understand and define the narration, but also to do the budget and its production.

Nowadays, it's impossible to produce a film without a very good script. There are thousands of films produced every year now. In France, every Wednesday, between eighteen and twenty new movies come out in the cinemas. We need unique stories. We must have something special to say.

In France, we have a huge audience, maybe one million people available to see good art movies. *A Separation* by Ashagh Farhadi, the Iranian film, had one million spectators!

My work is to be some kind of go-between the author and the audience. We try to know what is possible, especially if we want to have support from Europe and we know what kind of stories have the chance to be appreciated. Generally, I like to work with directors who are close to their stories. If the story is from Cuba, it's Cuban; if it's from Guatemala, it's Guatemalan. But of course proximity is not a question of nationality!

All the time there are the exceptions. You decide something and maybe then you don't follow that decision. For me, the idea, the script, is very important. But sometimes wishes to produce a film could emerge from a short film we've seen. Like in the instance where I saw a short film by a young Israeli filmmaker and I told him I was willing to work with him on whatever he wanted. He told me he wanted to make an Israeli comedy in Georgian language. And we made it. The actors were Israeli and they learned to speak Georgian, only phonetically. They practiced during several months. This was the first comedy in Israel that we had to subtitle. I'm talking about authenticity, [laughter] but we must re-adapt all the time. The film became the most successful comedy in Israel. It was a miracle. But we also worked a lot on that story. That point never changes. The title of the movie is *Late Marriage*, a very beautiful film.

The market is changing all the time and those changes are not favorable to the kind of productions that we like. I think we all agree on that. Last month, I received three scripts from Argentina. The level was good. The stories were solid and well-constructed. They were a sort of romantic comedies, very well written, with good actors attached. But from my experience I know (guess) that with this kind of proposition it would be almost impossible to interest public or private investors in France (and Europe)

AUDIENCE: There's nothing specifically Argentinian that would attract a European audience?

TENEMBAUM: *Ixcanul* is a really local story but it contains many universal things. But Argentinian middle class looks very similar to any other middle class in Europe. To find support for that kind of story you need a well-known director (Lucrecia Martel) with a very personal point of view about society and cinema.

Argentinian movies are distributed in France, almost always it is a small distribution. The big exceptions: *El Secreto de sus ojos* by Juan Jose Campanella and *Relatos Salvajes* by Damian Szifron. Those two films have very unique stories!

So how do we make our stories travel? The market today is really rough even for big countries like France and Germany.

I also produce French films but to do that I need co-producers!

Co-production is a strong way to make our stories travel. Nowadays all of us must learn to co-produce. In this way they have a better chance to be shown in other countries.

Pavel Giroud *The Companion* was co-produced with Colombia. It wasn't that great for business but for showing the movie in another country and offering some support. In Germany, in the last fifteen years, this model has grown.

It is best, of course, to find a partner from the beginning. I believe very much in building a team.

It is important to present our script and project to world sales.

The figure of the world sales is very important. He is the closest one to the market. We need to confront the market at all times and to see how the market is reacting to our stories.

We don't always know what we have in hand, really. If our project is good.

There is an Icelandic movie called *Rams*, I don't know if you've seen it. It's a small movie, a simple story, very well done. It went to Cannes. I was talking with the producer and he's now a very happy

producer because the success of this film was like a miracle. You have to choose the timing very carefully because there is usually just one chance to share a script. Often world sales agents say NO. But the sales agents and distributors are waiting for our movies. If they don't have movies, they have nothing to do. If they decide that the project has a potential is a good indication for us.

Another good way to have stories travel are the festivals. It can be said that they are the theatrical distribution for our movies. Here in Tübingen, for instance, I was so happy to come. The screenings were sold out and the audience was pretty young. If we don't have this kind of audience, we are dead. There are some countries that are in a very bad situation with the audience. Germany, Spain and Italy are really devastated. For *Ixcanul*, we have theatrical distribution in Japan, but we don't have it in Mexico, and not even in Spain. I try to convince festivals to play the film longer than a week. Festivals are good for the director and the movie but they should pay more to have access to our films. Festivals, like I said before, became our distributors. This is an important issue.

In France, we have still an audience. I went to ten different screenings all over the country to present the film *Ixcanul*, and thanked sincerely the audiences because without them, our work is impossible. But sometimes these are older moviegoers. It's difficult to renew the audience.

I had the possibility to visit one of the groups here for an hour and I was very happy because I didn't know about these workshops where you critique one another's scripts. It's very important to listen to criticism of your work. It's difficult but it's also generous.

AUDIENCE: What made you want to work with that Israeli filmmaker so blindly, just from the short film you saw?

TENEMBAUM: Probably his short movie. As I said, sometimes there's this magical thing where you feel wanting to spend with somebody (project) two or three years of your life. It's not the normal way I work. I saw his short film, his graduation film, in fact. There was just a father and a child, and the father wanted to punish the child because he did something wrong. The punishment was to cut his hair. That was it. So there was the face of this child and the attitude of the father. I cried! The director was so precise, so talented. When he sent his feature script, there were these same qualities. All the descriptions were so precise – "He takes his glass with his right hand", etc. I asked Dover, the director, why was so detailed. He answered that it "happen" was exactly like this. [laughter] Okay! There are directors like that. There are other producers who are much better than I am. They have intuition with directors. I am more focused on stories and scripts.

AUDIENCE: I think that producers make mistakes. You're talking about the ones that don't. But there are those who do. By mistakes, I mean they see a stunning short film and they think that this is a great storyteller. They confuse what makes a good storyteller and what makes a good filmmaker.

TENEMBAUM: Yes, that's true. I want to tell you about the biggest mistake that is so easy to make. It's when you do something that works and you try to repeat it. But that's normal to try to do that. You don't really learn from your mistakes. It's better to make new mistakes, not the same one over and over. The work takes years, so it's very important to try to choose a good team and good people to do this marathon with. The key point for me is: Believe in your stories.

AUDIENCE: When you get a suggestion for scripts or a project, what is it, for you, that makes you say yes?

TENEMBAUM: I participate in co-production forums. I read a lot of scripts. If I like the story, that's fine. But there are also the practical aspects and I have to know if it is possible to produce the project.

AUDIENCE: But you do watch the former films of the person who sends you a script, no?

TENEMBAUM: Yes, and that sometimes makes me change my mind. Sometimes I watch first and then read. There's no formula. A good director can make a bad movie.

AUDIENCE: Sometimes you understand the script once you see other work. You have another point of view.

TENEMBAUM: We spend a lot of time discussing the script. We don't put the same amount of energy into discussing *how* the director will do the movie. Without a good script, I cannot finance. I cannot do the beginning of my task. Sometimes I get money and then we don't know how we're going to shoot.

AUDIENCE: That was my experience with Branco. He read the script and said "go", and the next day, no one knows how to proceed.

TENEMBAUM: Yes, this is a problem. At some point, everything starts to move very fast. The director has been waiting and waiting, and then bam, things start.

AUDIENCE: Can you talk a little bit about the production of *Ixcanu*? It's an amazing film. If you don't mind, I would like to show the trailer, so people know what it is.

[projection of trailer]

AUDIENCE: Wow, you saw the film?

AUDIENCE: Yes, it's incredible. It permanently breaks your prejudices about this culture and this world. This girl is supposed to be married to someone. There is this worker and she sleeps with him one night. She likes him but he's no good. But she gets pregnant and the way the family deals with it is so unexpected. You see a lot of rituals that you've never seen before to keep the child. It's really special.

AUDIENCE: So my question is how did you make this happen? How long did it take? How did you sell such an unconventional story to the funders?

TENEMBAUM: In Guatemala, there is no industry at all, no cinema laws and no possibility to make a co-production. And it's a first feature. The project had a lot going against it. But we had a team with a lot of solidarity. It was a first feature for the whole crew. They are all Latino, but they were from Paris or different places in Europe. Jayro lived in Paris at the time. He developed another script for over three years. He was told the script was fantastic but at the end zero financing came through. He was exhausted from that process. So he wrote thirty pages about the story. He used his own money to go and try to find the actors, especially the lead actress. Then a private investor appeared and invested a small amount that allowed Jayro begin shooting.

AUDIENCE: What is a little bit of money?

TENEMBAUM: Eighty thousand euros. It was not enough but it was a step. Meanwhile, in Guatemala, there was a blight of diseased coffee plants. Jayro said we need to shoot now. The film

was shot for EUR 150.000. Everyone was paid, but very badly. What's possible today is to edit very cheaply. So we edited the material and the rough cut, although very rough, had magical moments. Jayro is a really talented director. With this in hand, I could really begin working. Wherever I showed the rough cut, people wanted to be part of the project – Hubert Bals, Cinémas du Monde, a world sales agent, Ile de France Region.

In San Sebastian FF, they have a program called Films in Progress, and we were chosen there as one of six finalists. If you win this prize, you have all the post-production covered from Spain. We didn't win. But in September, I received propositions from the Rotterdam, Sundance and Berlin film festivals. They all wanted to have the movie.

Sometimes you are lucky. Now we are doing Jayro's second film, *Temblores* also to be shot in Guatemala. It's a completely different story that we will produce in a completely different way.

AUDIENCE: Is the director from Guatemala?

TENEMBAUM: He is, but he learned film in Paris and Italy. Now he is back in Guatemala. *Ixcanul* has a normal distribution in Guatemala. The film was shown in neighborhoods where the people aren't Mayan and have to read subtitles. Now, they are showing the movie in Mayan communities, which is a lot of work. Rigoberta Menchú, the Nobel Peace Prize recipient, tweeted about the film after she saw it, and that helped a lot. Jayro is not Mayan, he is mestizo but he grew up with this community. So there is much authenticity in the story. He worked "constructing" this family over three or four months and he was re-writing with them, especially the dialogues. He's a really fast writer, but they would let him know when he wrote something that they would never say. It's interesting to work with other cultures and to mix people.

AUDIENCE: We feel like we are not getting important information from producers. It's like we are writing into the blue and then we turn up somewhere with our projects and we hear that yes, we already have one love story between aborigines. There's no platform to communicate that we shouldn't be writing about an Argentinian love story that has been done so many times. [laughter]

TENEMBAUM: No, no, no! I disagree. The only important things are *your* stories. There must be some urgency. I mentioned before the very popular Argentinean film called *Relatos salvajes - Wild Tales*. It played in Cannes and it was a very commercial film. It's a comedy but very dark so we need to find a way to make it different.

AUDIENCE: But the more different it is, the less likely it is to sell, no? If I make a musical about gay cops, for example, I will not sell that.

TENEMBAUM: You don't have to exaggerate. [laughter] Which country are you from?

AUDIENCE: Germany.

TENEMBAUM: Well, in Germany, that's possible!

What we know in France is that important commissions don't support comedies; they don't appreciate much comedy because they don't have a sense of humor [laughter]. For years I was member of these commissions. .. What is true is they prefer heavy stories. The comedies (in France) are based always on an important casting – with big budgets.

In order to do a great German comedy, you need the right casting and several other elements.

What's really difficult to finance are completely atypical movies, mixed genre films, for example. But maybe if it's so crazy, maybe it's interesting for somebody, maybe a producer from Luxembourg will be interested! Especially if it's your first film, if it's complicated like that, it's going to be difficult.

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No one wants to take such risks. Sometimes I can read a script and tell you that this is not your next movie. You have to put it away and work on something else. A producer must say that, to save that person many years of work.

AUDIENCE: Michael Haneke had to wait ten years to make *Time of the Wolf* because the script was so special, he could not find financing.

TENEMBAUM: Yes, I think Margarethe von Trotta also waited ten years to make *Hannah Arendt*.

AUDIENCE: Yes, it was the Germans who said that nobody knows who she is. Some others said that an audience didn't want to watch a thinking woman. Crazy.

TENEMBAUM: Remember also that *Good Bye Lenin!* was not in any big festivals at the beginning. But it was a big, big hit in France; it made millions. The legend tells that the French distributor bought the movie without seeing it for maybe ten thousand because the Germans who were selling it, told him that they had this movie about an old woman who is a staunch member of the Socialist Unity Party. He was sure no one would be very interested in that. Of course is a beautiful legend. Thank you very much.

APPLAUSE