

DG/2004/080
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

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on 'Cultural Diversity: An Ethical Challenge?'

Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen, 2 June 2004

Mr President of the Cultural Committee of the Danish National Commission for UNESCO,
Members of the Danish Film Institute,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to be with you today and share with you some thoughts on the issue of cultural diversity as an ethical challenge. Let me begin by thanking the Danish Film Institute for this invitation. It is an ideal setting to address the topic of cultural diversity because, as Danish policy-makers and politicians have well understood, the audio-visual media play a vital role in shaping people's perception of reality. Films in particular are one of the most powerful tools to express cultural identity in today's "globalized" world.

Considerations of cultural diversity, however, are not confined to the "moving image". Cultural diversity is a major issue in many fields for European countries and, as the European Parliament recently stated, it is at the core of the European integration project.

Cultural diversity, in all its complexity, has also been at the core of UNESCO's endeavours. Ever since its creation, the Organization has been committed to providing intellectual and ethical tools - through education, science, culture and communication - for overcoming the suspicion, mistrust and hatred that can thrive on "ignorance of each other's ways and lives". The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted in 2001, bears witness to this continuing engagement. Our current work on drafting a convention to protect and promote the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions is the natural continuation of our long-standing dedication to this issue.

Cultural diversity is also at the core of Danish society. While cultural diversity may sometimes pose serious challenges in sensitive areas such as immigration, history also shows that Denmark is capable of rising to the challenge by developing innovative policy approaches.

Denmark, in fact, has been a pioneer in promoting diversity when it has come to supporting its creative industries. Within a few years, this sector has grown exponentially in Denmark, employing over 100,000 people and generating 137 billion Danish Kroner in 2001. Danish creativity, design and fashion industries have attracted international attention and recognition, as have Danish films.

This success is evidently tied-in with Denmark's proactive policy model, with its emphasis on strengthening opportunities for the cultural and creative sector to grow domestically and compete internationally. The Danish Film support system

exemplifies this policy model. Let me now offer some brief comments on this subject.

The great success of the Danish film sector over the last few years has attracted considerable attention from critics, scholars and the public at large. Who has not heard of the Dogma rules? Of ‘Dancer in the Dark’ and ‘Festen’ and the many splendid movies from film-makers such as Billie August, Susan Bier, Nicholas Winding Refn, Thomas Vinterberg or Lars von Trier? How can we explain why both Danish and international audiences have such high interest in and excited expectations about each new Danish film that appears? What, indeed, has been the recipe for this success?

History certainly has much to do with it. Denmark has a proud tradition of film production that goes back to the start of the twentieth century; remarkably, Nordisk Film, founded in 1906, is still up and running. Denmark also established an early track-record of exporting films and, through Asta Nielsen, influenced the development of silent movies.

While Danish film policy has evolved over the years, an enduring feature has been its commitment to providing public support to film creation. The new thrust given by the 1997 Film Act and the creation of the Danish Film Institute appear closely related to the recent blossoming of Danish cinematographic talent.

With its increased budget of direct subsidies, the Danish multi-year plan to support the film sector has yielded very encouraging results and has given a boost to the sector’s creative talent. For the one thing, Danish film production is extremely diversified, ranging from intimate, local, low budget comedies to thrillers for teens, from the challenges of Dogma to expensive international productions. This diversification is possibly one of the keys to the model’s success, as is the unusually large proportion of cinema-goers in Denmark who choose to see Danish films. Danes apparently like to see “local content”, which is a matter of some interest to UNESCO as we have long been encouraging countries to develop local content in their artistic production.

Public funding has generated a virtuous cycle of increasing productivity, growing professionalism and the fuelling of new talent. But what stands out for me is the fact that 25% of film subsidies are reserved for films for children and youth. Film shorts, documentaries and features alike cater to the particular needs of young people. This has a tremendous impact, first in shaping young people’s vision of the world and, second, by instilling in them the pleasure of enjoying films. It is also an opportunity for young Danish film makers to develop their talents.

Also worth mentioning are other innovative policy measures that are part of the strategy to develop the sector, such as the creation of a venture capital fund for the film and media industry, the development of business incubators, and the attraction of international film productions, such as the EU-funded Oresunds Region initiative.

Domestic broadcasting policy also seems to go in the direction of supporting the Danish film industry. Through their programming, the major nationwide TV stations show that they recognize their responsibilities in providing a public service.

It would seem that this proactive policy model and its encouraging results have been made possible thanks to the positive attitudes shown towards the sector by most political parties, which have seen the cinema as an efficient vehicle for preserving and exploring Danish cultural identity and diversity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Danish model has promoted a vibrant cinema industry but is it a model for export? Is it a success-story that others could imitate with similar success? I believe we must be cautious in this matter. We all know that successful development paths are not the same in all societies, nor do they enjoy the same economic and political conditions. Nor do they have matching audiences and private operators who will react in the same way to the same policy measures. Also, measures implemented successfully by Denmark may not be feasible or viable in other contexts, particularly if they entail raising public budgets.

Cultural diversity manifests itself in the ways that societies and their governments address their different situations, needs and concerns, and we need to acknowledge this reality. As the 2000 UNESCO survey on cinema production reminds us, 80 countries around the world have never produced a single film. It was also estimated that in 2000, less than 2 per cent of Africans saw an African film, not surprising for a region that in the last 90 years has produced barely more than 600 feature films. South Africa is currently producing two feature films per year and is the biggest producer in the region. If we compare those figures to the 24 feature films produced in Denmark during 2001 and the 12 million cinema tickets sold in the same year, we must recognize that the differences are truly substantial.

This is why, in our view, it is important to stress that there are no magic recipes that fit all conditions. Indeed, each situation, each society, requires a different form of public policy intervention. Film-makers in many developing countries, for example, would like to receive public subsidies but government budgets and priorities usually do not allow for this.

The reaction of the public often matters most. Deliberate strategies to strengthen the film sector tend to have limited success because the films being produced do not appeal to the public. Equally important is the capacity of the cinema sector to organise itself in a professional and competitive way. The availability of basic infrastructure, cinematographic hardware, film schools and other training centres for human resources, and access to distribution and exhibition channels are all essential keys to success for a viable film sector. The policies needed to obtain these are inevitably as different as the real situations.

All these reasons point to the need to maintain a regulatory flexibility that will ensure enough policy space so that each society and its government can manoeuvre and make their own decisions about the sorts of policy measures that are most appropriate for them.

This, in fact, is the direction in which the current process towards elaborating a draft convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions is taking us. Let me examine this matter in the final part of my presentation.

As you may know, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the Organization's General Conference in 2001 states that "cultural policies should create ideal conditions for the flourishing of cultural diversity". While it is an important document in the ongoing debate over cultural diversity, the Declaration has no binding force. Consequently, UNESCO's Member States requested me to move to a higher level of standard-setting action by drawing up a binding legal instrument, whereby States Parties to it would take up both rights and obligations to promote and protect the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions.

The first phase of this effort was initiated last December, immediately after I received the mandate from the 32nd session of UNESCO General Conference in 2003, when I convened a meeting of 15 experts who bring various forms of technical expertise from a wide range of cultural fields and geographical regions. Since then, they have met a further two times, most recently between the 28th and 31st of May.

Key issues emerging from the work of these experts include the need to link sustainable development with efforts to promote and protect the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions. This entails strengthening the cultural capacity of developing countries and the cultural goods and services which serve as vehicles of their creativity. Enhancing the capacity of States to define their own cultural policies appears to be an essential element in this effort. Ultimately, the objective is to define general principles of cultural policy that would ensure policy space at the national level, stressing the need for diversity of domestic cultural expressions together with

an openness to expressions from other cultures of the world. International cooperation and assistance to countries with “weak cultural industries” would accompany this development of cultural policy.

The future scenario for elaborating the Convention is that, following the third experts meeting that finished two days ago, we shall consult three other international organizations – WTO, WIPO and UNCTAD. Taking account of their responses, we shall proceed to prepare the Preliminary Report that will be sent by mid-July to Member States, together with a preliminary draft of the Convention for their comments.

We shall organize the first Intergovernmental Meeting on the Convention, which will start on 20 September 2004 and will last for one week. Additional intergovernmental meetings will be held through which we shall further refine the text of the preliminary draft Convention, which will be finally submitted to the 33rd session of the General Conference in 2005 for its consideration. I am sure that Denmark will participate actively throughout this important process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cultural diversity is an inherent feature of all human societies. This implies that patterns of cooperation and contestation at cultural interfaces have always been present in human history, and this has been a most enriching process. In our contemporary world, however, shifts in cultural boundaries both at the local, regional and international level and in communication require that new actions and new cultural policies dealing with cultural diversity be established.

This is what UNESCO Member States have called for in recognition that cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are now at the top of the international political agenda. Both have become areas where solutions are being sought for the problems facing peace and global harmony.

The aim is to ensure that each culture has the possibility to preserve its identity and dignity. Ultimately, this is what the defence and promotion of cultural diversity entails as an ethical imperative rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity - to recognize that difference exists in terms of practices, beliefs, value systems and perspectives; to recognize the right to participate in cultural life; to recognize the right to create and express through the products of these creations; and, finally, to ensure dialogue and interactions so that differences become creative and constructive.

The central challenge relating to cultural diversity is to enable societies, communities and individuals to make their own political and cultural choices in

accordance with their specific situations, which are different and change over time. Ultimately, this is what really matters so that all countries can participate in the circuits of global cultural exchange on their own terms.

Mange Tak.