

Independent Film Distribution Needs Industry Support to Survive Coronavirus (Guest Column)

By Christine Eloy 

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In a guest article written for Variety, Christine Eloy, managing director of [Europa Distribution](#), which represents indie distributors across Europe, appeals for assistance for the sector as its survival is threatened by the impact of [COVID-19](#), and underscores its critical importance to the independent film business as a whole.

The long, unprecedented crisis we are going through has impacted everyone and brought nearly every part of the film industry to a standstill: shoots, cinemas, releases. People are working part-time or not at all, fearing they may lose their job. We all hope to see the end of it and go back to work, but even if cinemas start to re-open, the impact of the crisis will be felt for a long time: a frightening thought.

We in the film sector are generally a lucky lot, working on films that will entertain and/or open doors in people's mind. For distributors, that translates into a constant search for pearls to add to their lineup, which will be worked on by a whole team of marketing, press and sales people. Their work to create awareness is what makes a film exist for local audiences. It is a critical role, linking creation and production to exhibition (cinemas, DVD and VOD, TV) and the ultimate grail: the audience.

In that, distribution is a fragile sector in essence, dealing with the important gap between upward investments in acquisitions and future potential audience and income. If this "gambling" aspect of the sector is not new, the level of fragility has now reached a frightening level: large amounts of money have been spent on acquisition, release and promotion of films, while revenues have disappeared from the distribution equation.

Cinemas will slowly re-open, but no one knows exactly when or how but for a few countries. Will there be a huge amount of titles standing in line to premiere, with smaller independent films in the worst position? Will there even be an audience? People may have lost the confidence to go back into the screening rooms or may have developed alternative viewing habits.

If consumers are now more open to online film watching, it is good news in many respects, but doesn't represent a sustainable business model when it comes to film. Don't get me wrong: distributors are using new technologies and different release strategies since every single independent film needs a tailored release. But today, online audiences represent only a fraction of the admissions and consequent revenues generated by a theatrical release. It's the icing on the cake, and the cake is still the theatrical audience.

Our film sector is extremely interconnected and the survival of cinemas is as essential to distributors as the success of distribution in the acquisition, release and promotion of titles is to the rest of the value chain. This can't happen without resources, but it is the situation independent distributors find themselves today. How will they release and promote the films they have already acquired, at past Berlin, Toronto, Cannes and other markets?

Hence independent distributors are calling for urgent help from national and European bodies to make sure the whole film distribution sector survives this pandemic (see statements [here](#)). The danger is not only about jobs and businesses, it is about culture, about films circulation, and the indubitable importance of film diversity on our screens.

Films, cinemas and audiences need distributors' unique and irreplaceable competence in facilitating the access to a wide range of independent films. They are in the front line of sharing and promoting not only films coming from all over the world, but through them, different cultures and values of diversity, tolerance and openness, which will play a crucial role with our recovery. The essence of independent film distribution is cultural diversity, connecting and engaging audiences with diverse stories, ideas and values that bring us together instead of opposing us.

A colleague in distribution used to say, "God is a cinephile," meaning we would always be rescued from a seemingly hopeless situation. We all need that cinephilia now, and recognition of and support for distributors' unique contribution to the film sector, cultural life and society at large.

Christine Eloy is managing director of Europa Distribution.

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