

UGS REPORT FOR THE FSE MEETING, BERLIN, FEBRUARY 2010

The following report is intended to provide an idea of the UGS's situation at the present time of crisis in the French cinema and broadcasting industries.

The past year has been an extremely difficult one for the UGS and its members.

The main fact of life for the screenwriting profession in France is that over the past year the market for screenwriting services has contracted by anything up to 20 percent.

In television, the mainstay of employment for the great majority of our members, the volume of fiction produced has fallen by between one tenth and one sixth, depending on the criterion of measurement (number of programmes, hours, etc).

In cinema, though the French industry remains the strongest in Europe, the number of films produced has fallen by roughly 10 percent, with overall investment down by 25 percent, according to industry sources, and there has been a corresponding reduction in rates of pay.

In September the CNC (the French film board) reported that the total investment by broadcasters in the production of television drama was down by 44 percent in the first six months of 2009 compared with the same period in 2008.

The figure has been contested in some quarters as being barely credible, perhaps due to some accounting anomaly. Accurate or not, it reflects a dramatic slump in the volume of work available for screenwriters in television, due on the one hand to the slump in advertising revenue in the private sector and on the other to budgetary restrictions arising from the government-imposed reform of France-Televisions, the state broadcaster.

Here too there has been strong downward pressure on the rates of pay to writers able to find work.

There are grounds for believing that a similar situation exists in the United Kingdom, Ireland and other European countries.

The result of the changes in the filmmaking and broadcasting environment has been a sharp fall in UGS membership, either due to members leaving the profession or to members deciding that they cannot afford to pay the subscription.

Year-on-year, UGS membership has fallen from around 180, the level around which it has fluctuated since its creation a decade ago, to fewer than 120 at present.

This naturally has resulted in a sharp decline in the guild's finances which, compounded with other factors, saw the UGS slip into debt in the course of the year and required it to take out a private loan in order to meet its standing obligations (salaries, social charges, rent, etc).

The UGS executive has nonetheless remained as active as ever in the defence and promotion of writers' interests in such areas as:

- negotiations with producers' and directors' associations, in particular regarding claims recently registered by the television directors guild for an increased share in the droits d'auteurs which, if granted, would inevitably result in a fall in earnings for writers;
- legal defence in cases where writers' rights have patently been abused;
- representation in discussions with broadcasters, the CNC, the SACD and other partners;

- monitoring developments at government level (new legislation, official reports, etc);
- campaigning and concrete actions aimed at securing official recognition of screenwriting as a profession;
- organising seminars and other training opportunities;
- organising a presence at the Cannes film festival, including the provision of an online screenplay market;
- organising the annual Prix Prévert for best French film screenplay;
- organising "speed-dating" sessions with directors and producers, and setting up other opportunities for writers;
- mediation;
- etc.

Complicating the situation has been the *sauve-qui-peut* attitude that has prevailed following the government's reform of the audiovisual industry, announced in January 2008 and signed into law early last year. Many of the agreements, alliances and fora set up by the UGS with its industrial partners have effectively fallen into abeyance.

The mapping out of new working relations with producers, directors and broadcasters is the guild's major concern at the present time.

At the same time, the UGS is looking for areas where it can reduce expenditure over the coming year in order to repay the debt which it incurred in order to remain afloat.

In the present climate, the UGS board has decided that the guild's presence at the FSE general assembly in Berlin this month is not a priority. The guild will complete payment of its 2009 subscription to FSE membership, but no decision has yet been taken on payment of the 2010 membership fee and on UGS participation in FSE affairs generally.

The UGS delegates to the FSE have made known their differences with the FSE board over policy and feel that the comments made in the exchange of emails following last year's general meeting remain valid.

The situation of screenwriters in Europe has never been more precarious, with ever-increasing pressure being placed on writers to assume a role of producer or director on the American model, roles for which in the immense majority of cases they are not suited.

Given the fast-changing situation in the economic and technological environment, it is surely more appropriate for the FSE to devote its energies and resources to considering specific issues relating to the way writers in Europe earn their living than to issuing general statements or to developing relations with international partners whose goals and interests do not necessarily coincide with our own.

The FSE was formed after a series of meetings by European screenwriters as a means for finding common solutions to problems arising at the national level, notably by acting on the European parliament and finding ways of channelling more funds to writers. It is perhaps time once more to think seriously about what purpose the FSE is supposed to serve.