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JUST SUPER (HELT SUPER): THE ACTIONS OF ARTEF AT THE BERLINALE

This letter concerns the actions of the Anti-Racism Task Force for European Film (ARTEF) towards the premiere of Just Super (Helt Super) in the Berlinale Generation section on Monday, February 20, and their statement published on February 24. These actions had severe consequences for the film team, the production company and the international sales agent, as well as the Berlinale and their employees – the main result being that the gala premiere of the film was cancelled.

The Norwegian Film Institute (NFI) is deeply concerned about the implications this incident might have for the artistic freedom of filmmakers, and the editorial freedom and independence of international film festivals. As several European organizations initially were supporters of ARTEF, we find it important to share our experiences with the broader European film community. We especially want to address the European Film Academy (EFA), as the driving force behind the establishment of ARTEF.

Diversity and inclusion in the Norwegian Film Institute

Addressing the power structures within the film industry and in our own institute has been one of our top priorities in recent years. We have incentivized our industry to innovate and disrupt its own well-established, and to a certain degree, outdated networks. We have implemented diversity as one of the key criteria for funding decisions and we have developed a diversity self-report scheme which is mandatory for all applicants. Diversity and inclusion are also driving much of our work related to talent development.

Furthermore, we have ensured diversity recruitment in our staff, including commissioning editors with diverse backgrounds, which has contributed to changing the conversations among decision-makers in the Norwegian film industry. The NFI is ambitious about promoting diversity and inclusion in the film industry. But: We believe that structural change can only be achieved through dialogue and cooperation.

Norwegian Film Institute and ARTEF

The Norwegian Film Institute was, after being approached by Matthijs Wouter Knol in September 2020 (then at European Film Market, now at European Film Academy), supportive of the ARTEF initiative and contributed financial support of € 2.000 for educational workshops at an early stage. Two of our employees attended several workshops online. In exchanges with Mr. Knol, we were assured that the sole purpose of the ARTEF network was to provide training and education possibilities and that as he said: “the main role is to educate ourselves”, and not to publish statements. However, NFI did not join ARTEF as a member. A Governmental organization like the NFI always needs to be cautious when engaging with third parties but considering that this was related to educational activities, it was green-lighted.

The incidents in Berlin

To our surprise, one of our colleagues was approached by one of the members of ARTEF's steering group on Saturday, February 18, only 48 hours prior to the premiere of Just Super in the Generation program, which had been scheduled since December 2022, stating:

"We have some concerns and wanted to check if there's specific Norwegian context behind my concerns. This has been flagged to us by white and phenotypically white people as concerning depictions of animalisation and black face. I also want to understand if there's specific Norwegian context to the character, mythology etc. As that might lead us back to the conversation on colonial histories and white supremacy."

Since the film's opening in Norway in September 2022, 110.000 children and parents have seen the film in Norwegian cinemas. Neither the producers nor NFI has received any negative reactions regarding the content or depictions in the film. The press screening in Berlin in January 2023 caused no negative reactions or concerns.

We directed ARTEF towards the producers of Just Super, Qvisten Animation, to answer any questions related to the characters or mythology of the film. At 19.00, the same day, we received the first e-mail from the Berlinale Generation programmers, stating:

"Some colleagues of ours, all Black and People of Color have raised concerns with us, that the Super Lion costume is (unintentionally, as they also think) reminiscent of tropes of Blackfacing and Animalisation of Black People and reproduces racist stereotypes."

From Sunday morning, February 19, there were several e-mails, calls, and meetings between the production company, the sales agent, the Norwegian Film Institute, and the management of the Berlinale. Subsequently, in a letter dated February 18, received February 19, ARTEF writes to the Generation programmers:

"Based on the trailer of the film, and from numerous in-depth statements from BIPOC colleagues of ours who have had the opportunity to watch the film in its entirety, we want to express our deep concerns that a film with racist tropes like blackfacing and animalization of black people has been selected to screen at the Berlinale." (...)" We hereby urge the Generation team to carefully reconsider whether HELT SUPER is appropriate for an event that prides itself with its strong stance on inclusion and diversity".

This was clearly an attempt to stop the screening of the film. The letter was signed by Marion Schmidt (DAE), Matthijs Wouter Knol (EFA) and Paula Alvarez Vaccaro on behalf of ARTEF.

The cancelled screening

This letter resulted again in numerous meetings between the NFI, Qvisten, the programmers, and the directors of the Berlinale. The Berlinale asked the producer to consider withdrawing the film from the program. After the producer and the NFI refused to cancel the screenings, the Berlinale agreed to look for other solutions.

The Just Super producers in Qvisten and the NFI repeatedly, already from Sunday evening, requested a meeting with ARTEF through Mr. Knol, even before we had seen their initial letter to Generation. After the cancelled screening, the festival agreed to facilitate a meeting with ARTEF. The ARTEF members of the steering group, still in Berlin, could not find the time for a meeting until Tuesday morning, which was after the scheduled gala premiere, Monday, February 20 at 10.00. At this point, everyone from the Just Super production except the director had left Berlin.

Qvisten and NFI reluctantly accepted to cancel the gala screening in order to give the festival more time to find a solution. Consequently, the Berlinale cancelled the premiere screening of Just Super, only minutes in advance of the scheduled time. The Berlinale then decided to issue a

message of warning to all ticket holders in advance of all the remaining screenings, which went ahead as scheduled.

The Norwegian Film Institute finds this process deeply worrying on several levels.

- What mandate did the ARTEF directors (the “steering committee”) act on when sending the initial letter, raising questions about the screening of a scheduled movie, and subsequently trying to pressure the Berlinale to cancel it?
- Are the members of the steering committee acting as individuals or as representatives of their organizations?
- Does the European Film Academy, as a founding body, support this action to stop the screening of a film selected for an international film festival?

In an unsigned statement from ARTEF, dated February 23, “a majority” of the steering committee state:

“ARTEF is not a watchdog, we exist inside the industry and merely identify problems and the systems that support them. Equally, we hope to act as a beacon for those who have experienced or have observed things that are harmful for BIPOC in the industry. Our interest is to work with institutions, organisations, companies and networks — not against them.”

If ARTEF is not a watchdog and wants to work with industry institutions, how can ARTEF urge the festival to reconsider screening a film three months after the film was announced on the Berlinale program – and merely hours before the premiere?

Implications for international film festivals

If this line of action continues, how will this affect festival programming in the future? How can we be sure that a film that has been invited and programmed, actually will be screened? In our view, the threshold should be extremely high for pulling a film from the program and canceling the premiere, which happened at the Berlinale.

We are also concerned that one of the effects of the events at this year’s Berlinale, can be that programmers become hesitant to program potentially controversial films in fear of being targeted by activist interest groups. ARTEF, judged by the actions at this year’s Berlinale, comes across as an activist group and a watchdog, despite claiming otherwise.

Free speech and democracy are currently under attack in many areas, and it is paramount for the Norwegian Film Institute to protect these values. Freedom of speech has its limits, of course. But the basic principle should be to show the work and then engage in discussions about it afterward.

With this letter, we invite the organizations behind ARTEF, and the European film community, to dialogue to avoid future similar situations.

Yours sincerely,
Norwegian Film Institute

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