

Conversation with Eckart Stein

Mercè Ibarz

Eckart Stein led the international television workshop famed for innovation and creation, “Das kleine Fernsehspiel”, part of Germany’s second public network, ZDF, for 26 years from 1974 to 2000. The program has been going for 40 years continuously and is currently directed by Heike Hempel. There is no other non-news program that has lasted so long on TV. During these four decades, “Das kleine Fernsehspiel” has left a decisive mark on the renovation of independent cinema and television across much of Europe, North and South America, Africa and the Middle East. It produced the early films of Teo Angelopoulos, Chantal Akerman, Jim Jarmusch and Atom Egoyan and helped Rainer M. Fassbinder, Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard when nobody else was interested. Its work methods were used in the structure of the early years of Britain’s Channel Four and some of its proposals, such as theme-based nights, form an essential part of the German-French cultural channel, Arte. It could be said that Eckart Stein and his teams revolutionized the very idea of the production of images as well as programming. In the political and philosophical sense of images, “Das kleine Fernsehspiel” tested and created formulas, introduced light technologies to TV and avoided closed formats. Its professional commitment changed production into a close cooperation between program-makers and partners and promoted alternative forms of independent funding that made TV accessible to cultures and attitudes excluded from prevailing circuits. The program has an international reputation, consolidated by a good number of retrospectives, and was awarded the Galileo Prize by the Council of Europe in 1988. Thanks to Eckart Stein’s fighting spirit, the program’s extensive network of collaborators and the federal, non-centralist, control of German public television, “Das kleine Fernsehspiel” survived the retirement of its director in the year 2000. Eckart Stein has also formed part of other innovative structures, such as INPUT and the European producers’ training network, EAVE, since their earliest days. This conversation took place in Barcelona in August.

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Mercè Ibarz (M.I.). After 40 years of continual activity, “Das kleine Fernsehspiel” is a surprising TV classic: an international laboratory, an audiovisual workshop committed both to the pluralism of public right and the singularity and diversity of creation. Not much is known about its history or its films in this country. I even found it hard to translate the name because it is so precise...

Eckart Stein (E.S.). It is precise and open... It covers the first idea, i.e., to make television drama, or writing in the broad sense, rather than televised theater. In English it would translate as “The Little TV Play” - at least that is the literal translation. The French translations “La petite Fenetre

de la TV” or “La petite Lucarne de la TV” are good because they contain the idea that it is a window or an open court, which is what it is. The adjective “kleine” (little) has not been suitable for some time now. It comes from the early days when we were doing 25-minute broadcasts. Now they can be three hours or more, but “Das kleine Fernsehspiel” is an internationally recognized name and so it has stayed. You say it is surprising and I would add it is also paradoxical, because we have always been the dreamers, the court jesters, and yet we are the longest-lasting ongoing program and we are still the only international workshop for creation and innovation. No other television station has anything like

it...we would have been thrilled, and it is still necessary for television stations to have something like it.

M.I. What type of fictional work did you begin with?

E.S. With very subjective writing, a cinema style that the French later called 'author's own', that had the nature or psychology of a personal diary. We followed the great literature, the works of Robert Walser, Kafka and Musil. It was a very personal type of fiction, with a spirit of experimentation and poetry. Most were first films, a criterion we have upheld over the years, and included friends' films that did not form part of what was called German culture, i.e., they were foreign. We worked firstly with Eastern Europe and then with East Germany, even though it was difficult. It was never easy, we have never followed the rules of what we could call mutual complacency.

M.I. You did and continue to do what the rest of ZDF and ARD would not...

E.S. We have had that privilege. We have had many privileges, except for budgetary ones. But we were able to work with foreigners, and for post-war Germans it was extremely important to know what was happening in the rest of the world, because we were living in a ghost world... one that was post-historic.

M.I. Tell me about the original team. Who were they and what were they trying to do?

E.S. We were a group of friends. Our ambition was to have this free space once a week for 25 minutes from seven in the evening. Our goals, both political and aesthetic, were somewhat extreme, a spirit of contradiction. We were a multidisciplinary group, about 12 men (more women would join later), some of us coming from the theater, others from writing or production and two were intellectuals. We were a pre-1968 group in fact, without any experience in the media. I myself came from the theater. I would have to say that the group's honor lay in its spirit of utopia and the need to create a different future.

M.I. You began at the same time as ZDF and with the decision to make works by young people. Where did the first program-makers come from?

E.S. From a network of friends, which is why I talk so often

about networking. They were friends who recommended projects to us or who worked in very close cooperation with German film festivals and schools, as well as people from Lodz (Poland) and other countries. From the beginning, we worked a lot with women, which wasn't very well accepted back then, and in general with young people who were rebels within their own cultures and couldn't find funding in their own countries.

M.I. You also had an important budget from ZDF...

E.S. Before the days of what I would call market totalitarianism, during the 1960s, public TV was very pampered, especially in Germany, but also in other places. But, let's not kid ourselves, even then there was a feeling of competition and the need to get the biggest audience shares possible. At the very beginning the budget was quite big, but they shortly began to establish a relationship between big budgets and high numbers of viewers. This is a type of math that has nothing to do with political or aesthetic (i.e., humanist) math. Our budgets were tiny then and today they are even smaller by comparison. Today the budget stands at 5 million euros. For a broadcaster that makes around thirty new productions per year that is extremely small. So, we had to be very modest in our ambition of making films that were more expensive than our usual ones. We made very, very cheap films which were sometimes very well accepted in different countries.

M.I. That was the case of Jim Jarmush's first two films, plus Chantal Ackerman's *Les rendezvous d'Anna* and *News from Home*, and *Calendar* by Atom Egoyan. Other big films include Fassbinder's *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, Teo Angelopoulos's first two films, Godard's *Every Man for Himself* and *Daguerreotypes* by Agnes Varda.

E.S. We usually only do a filmmaker's first film so they can find better funding for their second. In some cases we have helped more and we are very happy to have done that. Lately we have been very proud of having created, if you could put it that way, new Turkish-German cinema. Today it is very successful and doesn't need money from "Das kleine Fernsehspiel" but at the beginning it did. Each age corresponds to a young cinema which is difficult to create and get onto the screen.

M.I. Angelopoulos, Jarmusch, Ackerman and Egoyan, I have to say, were good bets. Maybe they would have made it without you, but...

E.S. Or maybe not. Wim Wenders recommended Jarmusch to us. Wenders is a friend of the program, like Godard and Angelopoulos. We don't work with them anymore but they advise us on who we should help. There have been more examples of artists who began their careers with us and have become very famous, such as Bob Wilson and his video art.

M.I. Or whose careers have taken off again, like Godard's after his video years.

E.S. Yes, we have also helped filmmakers who wanted to renew their language, who didn't want to go back to doing what they already knew how to do and who felt isolated. Artists who couldn't count on getting their usual backing or, as in Godard's case, who had lost the confidence of the market. We only do it occasionally, but we do do it.

M.I. The "new German cinema" of the 1960s and 70s that reached here was often cinema in which you weren't particularly involved, although you were in a few cases.

E.S. As I told you, all German TV was involved in the recovery of the cinema and within that responsibility we devoted ourselves to more specific projects. At one particular time, however, we found that Fassbinder, who was already well known, didn't have the money for a project he was passionate about and which was also extremely personal, so we decided to make *The Merchant of Four Seasons* with him, which today is a reference point everywhere. After that, Fassbinder no longer needed us because everyone wanted to help him.

M.I. The aesthetic and geographic territory of "Das kleine Fernsehspiel" is frankly very rich.

E.S. I'm glad to hear you say that because, at the end of the day, our territory, whether aesthetic, geographic or political, is the world. After 40 years' experience we can definitely say that is the case. In the 1960s we were working with filmmakers from the East and we worked with filmmakers in Latin America at very difficult times during their military dictatorships. A film that is very famous in Brazil now is Jorge Bodanzky's *Irazema*. It is shown on television every

year and is also a museum piece. Well, it had a very unusual supporter in the cardinal of Bethlehem, without whose help we could not have got it made. He was the one who said, "The film must be made!" and with a cardinal practically standing behind the filmmaker, the police said, "Okay, that must be alright then..." During apartheid we worked with around ten black filmmakers from South Africa and also from Mozambique, Ethiopia, Senegal ... with people from everywhere, in fact, and usually with the help of Jeremy Isaacs, from the early days of Channel Four.

M.I. Without frontiers...

E.S. In everything, especially aesthetics. A film might have a poetic slowness or a childlike hilarity, a very documentary-type spirit or an absurd, ironic or satirical spirit. The frontier is not only geographic but also among genres. Ideally, programming should be a reflection of the other's programming will.

M.I. The things you don't want to do is also important.

E.S. Very. It is still the program's ambition to not do what other teams at the station could do and we pass some projects on to them. We do the things that are hard to do, very often because we have to find money in different places and sometimes we don't even find it, but independence is one of the essential categories. Once I made a film with a Hopi Indian, Victor Masayesva, and our friends at the American stations said, "You know perfectly well that we only make American films", and they said it so confidently, without thinking it could be possible that Victor could be more American, let's say, than they were. Anyway, we couldn't find a partner, not one. So we went ahead and made the film alone. We have had to move heaven and earth to be able to make films with black directors. We have worked in the Los Angeles cemetery! We have had to look everywhere for money. We have gone to Unesco, a ministry in the Third World, the early Channel Four ... whoever we could, the Cinema Funds of the German länders, who help us a lot ... In that sense, the name ZDF has proved to be strong enough to go a long way towards finding partners and closing deals.

M.I. But financial independence is costly to maintain.

E.S. We learnt a lot from the North American independents.

They have a much tougher time than us in Europe, where we are pampered with government subsidies. They are independents in the Hollywood industry, either in cinema or TV, and have learnt to look for money outside of the prevailing system. That is what everybody is going to have to do more of in the future, to work outside the big industries, outside the Berlusconi, to put it that way. It is the legacy of Cassavettes, Wiseman, Scorsese when he began... the United States is a very impressive country in that sense: on the one hand it is the center of trade and on the other it is the Third World in terms of alternative expression in the cinema and on TV.

M.I. Which American independents have you worked with most?

E.S. To give you a few names, there's been Errol Morris, Mark Rappaport, Maxi Cohen, Jarmusch, Bob Wilson, Bill Douglas, Doug Harris, Egoyan and Stephen Dwoskin.

M.I. Let's look now at how "Das kleine Fernsehspiel" has evolved over the past 40 years. You were on air at seven in the evening for ten years up until 1972.

E.S. The managers at ZDF didn't think they could program "difficult" works so early and they told us to move to 10 p.m. for a few weeks and by 1972 we were only on at nights and at an increasingly late hour. I thought it was quite good, because it took away the pressure of 25 minutes, the *formatization* I had always fought against. This is formatization based on program schedules, but also on the spirit of the programs, their length, genre, how you position yourself with respect to prevailing trends. That is how we are able to still have an open workshop once a week.

M.I. And how long is it on air for?

E.S. It's completely open. It's still that way.

M.I. That is quite important. "We are marginal but not elitist" is what you used to say.

E.S. That's right. Very often we think we are making a modern program about politics in television, i.e., television as a forum, as a meeting place for citizens rather than a marketplace for consumers.

M.I. A form that is always experimental?

E.S. ...No, no, not necessarily, that's why I say we aren't elitist. We have made many first films, but that doesn't mean they have to be difficult art. Sometimes they have been difficult, especially at the beginning, because we were working with Eastern filmmakers and it was hard because they were communists, not for any other reason. So, daring, yes, always. But for different reasons. Sometimes for political reasons, other times for reasons of format, reasons of genre and, in particular, for reasons of crossing genres.

M.I. Yes, because even though the program is known as a production workshop, its sense of programming has not centered exclusively on fiction.

E.S. We do a bit of everything. We also buy some things, but basically we produce. We have made documentaries, experimental works, debates, video art and so on. Sometimes we made great classic films, but a great film that wouldn't have been made without our help, e.g., Angelopoulos's early works, when Greece was going through a very difficult political situation. And other filmmakers, a bit of everything from around the world. And we have been true to ourselves and looked for partners who made it possible to finance the impossible. We have shown that TV is a space where art is possible, where debate is possible, where communication is possible, where citizen expression and dialogue are possible and that the classic European idea of the media is possible on TV.

M.I. You have always experimented with ways of doing and programming things that were later adopted and consolidated by other channels, such as Channel Four or Arte, and even by more conventional public and private broadcasters, e.g., talk shows or theme-based nights.

E.S. That has always happened to us. We have created formats through certain experiments. Formats is exactly the word, formats that were later copied by mainstream programming. The clearest example was a broadcast that was very, very political, in the 1970s, called "Spielraum" (Free Space). A later example was Arte's theme-based nights, which we also created. On "Spielraum" we held a discussion with the public about a certain topic...later everything began to fill up with talk shows...but we were a forum where the viewers were collaborators, where citizens could discuss a topic. In fact, that's where the idea for

theme-based nights was to come from later, something that we began and which later, once it had been created, we promoted on Arte.

M.I. You referred earlier to a classic concept of the European media and, in fact, this laboratory, as you could call the program, does contain something of an artistic and crafts-based workshop, traditional but open to all types of expression. It makes me want to say again that I am surprised by how resistant it has proven to be.

E.S. There is a phrase by Magritte which I came across late in the day but which I think is very apt with regard to working in the media (although he was talking about painting, of course). He said: "Painting makes you recognize that which you can't see in the original". That is what I think about television, both in aesthetic and political terms: television helps us understand things about reality that we don't understand. Very often it is hard to understand what is happening, and seeing a discussion on TV can help us, or a piece of art, a monologue or even a bit of tomfoolery. We have also made many jokey programs - many, I believe.

M.I. Ah, yes, your theory about the court jester.

E.S. Yes, I have even helped create an association, The Professional Fool Association, based in Frankfurt, to help keep the subversion of culture, the resistance of the jester and his role at the court, alive. It is important to continue to create spaces, especially for rebels in all areas of culture, whether it be politics, theater, university, arts, journalism or whatever. The idea is that the association helps us find patrons (a word and concept I prefer to sponsors, who always want payment in one form or another) who allow us to create different spaces - what used to be called the underground movement. But I've retired now, now it's up to the young professionals to run it.

M.I. After 1972, when you moved to night-times and were given more airtime, the length and type of your productions became even more diverse. That was when you invented *kamerafilm* and introduced light cameras into television productions.

E.S. It is also important to challenge through the use of words, and *kamerafilm* was a challenging expression. It was a way of saying that a production is not necessarily an array

of twenty-five cameras, but that the camera was interesting in itself, as a pencil of the author. We usually signed contracts not with producers but with program-makers who managed budgets themselves, with a friend who looked after the sound and a small work crew, which meant we were also experimenting with alternative forms of production. The light cameras were not at all well accepted at the beginning but we used them anyway. Later we did the same with video and now with digital cameras.

M.I. Another step in the night-time, long-length broadcasts was the production of documentaries, also from a unique point of view that over time came to be called *documentary creations*.

E.S. We slowly began to see that documentaries were increasingly important to our way of understanding television. We saw that images of reality had for some time been unrelated to reality, with a fiction that we could classify as pre-Berlusconi, or pre-Bill Gates. Our involvement with documentaries was therefore a rebellion, in that we wanted to have a more restless, richer, more honest, truthful understanding of reality. This was also the effect of 1968, a general understanding that reality had to be something real, not invented by finance or politics. It became part of the same wave as the *kamerafilms*.

M.I. Yes, the two concepts are similar.

E.S. That's right. We never made journalistic documentaries that only involved documentation or reports. They were always personal diaries, *kamerafilms* of the author, with their own take on reality. We could say they were a particular author's reality brought to the screen. They offered a culture of discourse, i.e., debate or participation, which the audience took seriously, not just as a marketing tool.

M.I. In 1974 you took over the program and made radical changes to the limits that ZDF offered which, it must be said, were pretty flexible seen from other contexts, even though the shows were moved to night-time. Were you able to make some type of network, even a small one, across European TV, which at that time was public only?

E.S. Across Europe we have only ever had one partner (and that was only for a few years), which was Britain's Channel

Four, when it was being run by Jeremy Isaacs.

M.I. However, the program continued.

E.S. Because of the island that the creation of Channel Four in London represented for us. This was an island that lasted too short a time. We also had the creation of 3sat, a publicly-run, cultural-based channel managed by the German-speaking part of Switzerland, Austria and the first and second German channels. We were very involved with that. It can't be said that "Das kleine Fernsehspiel" has grown but it does have more space. And the same thing happened with Arte.

M.I. "Das kleine Fernsehspiel" was instrumental in the creation of Channel Four. In fact, you were on the advisory board for the first few years, and this largely public channel contributed decisively to the promotion of contemporary cinema, not only British cinema.

E.S. Jeremy Isaacs admired our way of working and followed it when he was running Channel Four. We helped him and he also helped us a lot. But nobody else. There were some friendships, e.g., with the Finnish, which continue today. But real, intensive cooperation was only in the early years of Channel Four and was decisive for the work with filmmakers from the Third World. Today there is a different spirit there, too. Since Isaacs left it has become a completely market-oriented channel. It's a pity, because the Third World is becoming bigger and bigger and its possibilities of expression are becoming smaller and smaller in the increasingly Berlusconi media.

M.I. It seems ironic that networking continues to be so difficult in television.

E.S. When one door closes, another one opens, e.g., we moved to very late at night but were given the length we wanted. We have worked with festivals, cultural foundations, including very modest ones, with the Third World when we could ... These are co-financing partners but also partners who show the films we make, which is just as or more important.

M.I. With regard to the weekly broadcasts, a small and loyal audience follows "Das kleine Fernsehspiel", something you are proud of and the ZDF managers are unhappy with.

E.S. Look, a long time before there was fierce competition with private channels, people were already talking about audience shares, doing things that would attract the same audience as such-and-such a program on Channel One, etc. However, I have always argued that we had 100% of the citizens, i.e., that each broadcast had one-hundred percent of the public interested in that topic, e.g., a feminist broadcast might attract 3 or 4%, while another broadcast might be about 14-to-16-year olds, another about elderly people traumatized by the war and so on, so that over the course of the year the different broadcasts touched one-hundred percent of the audience. Aiming for maximum viewers can destroy the audience that is specifically interested.

M.I. That is an attitude that has been accepted for some time.

E.S. Yes, it is very important to be aware of that. It is not just the tyranny of Bill Gates and Berlusconi but also the abandonment, the disinterest, of others. It is very, very important to analyze politically that, before Gates and Berlusconi, there was a certain spirit of decadence in citizen independence.

M.I. Let's talk about formats, which you and your teams have spent years battling against because they are closed and dominant spaces that run counter to a rich and diverse television expression.

E.S. This is becoming more and more important. We are living in global times and globalization is not only about the market but also about images. In the words of Walter Benjamin, we citizens have become ideological products of the image market, in the hands of the people who control them. This is a global phenomenon, which we have to revolt against with regard to the treatment of images. To my way of thinking, only a type of revolution can save us. Otherwise, the market will eat us up: wars are a market and so are cultures: not only the culture of images but also the culture of parliament or theater or any other thing - they are ideological products of a number of monopolies. That is why I attack formats, why it is important to attack them - they are labels to put on boxes: 52 minutes, 25 minutes, etc. Formatization ends up ruling content! This is a type of marketing that does not allow changes in style, in the same

way that we are ourselves becoming more and more similar to other people, something that Andy Warhol already spoke about. We should remember what Aristotle said: We do not have the permission or the right to be similar, because similar people do not make the polis. Although I sometimes want to tell Aristotle that we don't have a polis today, we have a market. It is sad and there ought to be a spirit of rebellion against it all.

M.I. Did you expect more from Arte, which you were one of the founders of? In fact, you were going to be the first program director but then you turned it down. Why?

E.S. I helped establish Arte because I had been part of the program committee of La Sept (Channel 7, France) since 1986. The first broadcast by Arte was still five years away. At La Sept I was looking for a chance to create theme-based nights. The first was shown on France 3. The topic was Berlin and the history of its relationship with Paris. It was a three-hour broadcast. "Das kleine Fernsehspiel" then did three theme-based nights on 3sat, the German-speaking cultural channel, and that was how we were able to put the idea into practice. Then, during political negotiations between ZDF and La Sept about creating Arte, ZDF insisted that the theme-based nights were to be included as a basic part of the programming of the new French-German channel. And even though changes have been made at Arte, some of them depressing, there is still quite a lot of space for expression, a space that maybe could only exist there.

M.I. These depressing changes, are they related to format? I ask because there is also a sort of homogeneity at Arte, a danger of falling into routines, of formulas adapted to what could be known as "an Arte product".

E.S. Formats are cells that ideas are put into. Most of today's formats eliminate freedom, choice and rhythm and don't even need themes. That is why theme-based nights are islands, because you can create your own formats without following a model. But the theme-based nights on Arte are becoming difficult because of formats. For example, there is an increasing demand for fictional films to be shown first. This goes against the originality of the idea. The theme-based nights were created not only to discuss a theme differently but also, very importantly, so that the

editor of each night could be free to create a type of musicality, a sequence, a composition of images. But they are increasingly sticking to particular formats.

M.I. It is interesting to see that the question of formats is not only about a program's length and airtime but also, in the case of multidisciplinary programs such as theme-based nights, composition itself. For me, that is a question that affects storylines and the ideological interpretation of each night's theme, but I find that musicality, as you said, adds even more nuance.

E.S. It has been proven to me on a daily basis over forty years that it is not an extravagant idea you have for a few months. Aesthetic courage, artistic courage, the courage of expression and communication are some of the conditions of political courage. What's more, I would say that in the history of modern art, whether in avant-guard art like Dadaism or Surrealism, or in Benjamin's philosophy, there has always been that understanding that artistic revolt is also a philosophical and political, i.e., human, revolt and not an elitist idea of retiring to your workshop to create a work of art!

M.I. So that's why you concentrated on musicality in television programming.

E.S. Yes, I believe it is an area that has to be composed, that it is a question of composition.

M.I. Which involves words, the force of the theater, the polis, a plurality of spheres and individuals and also the immediateness of music...

E.S. ...Expression, in fact, which is why I like the metaphor of musicality because, like music, it is about communication. With music you communicate with the passer-by who is going to the market, the classical market, the market as a forum for the presence of others.

M.I. It seems, however, that Arte never really got off the ground in Germany.

E.S. It has found the space, but not the audience. And because it hasn't found the audience it is desperately playing with its space, but it is losing.

M.I. Really?

E.S. It could be compared to the history of “Das kleine Fernsehspiel”. We have never done it. We have never said, “We have to have 25,000 viewers per month” and so we have been allowed the times that don’t interest anybody. And I find that Arte does it too often. It plays with finding a bigger and bigger audience and so it is becoming more and more similar to the other channels.

M.I. It has never really been able to be truly European but is still French-German.

E.S. It can’t be said there has been much interest in other countries, who have seen that it is not a great success according to today’s criteria. “What should I do?” each country asks, “Perhaps I could create an autonomous cultural channel myself,” but it doesn’t seem they are very interested today. You don’t have it, for example.

M.I. The second public channels at the Autonomous and State levels try to offer a certain amount of cultural programming...

E.S. But that is also a way of understanding culture as a product. I present theater, music, dance and the church through reports. I give them space so they can be on the screen, but that does not mean making audiovisual culture of creation. If I program a work by Peter Brooks, it is cultural but it is not audiovisual creation, it is just screening.

M.I. Let’s continue with the metaphor of musicality and talk about the ownership of Arte. It is half French and the other half is divided between the German public stations, with one quarter belonging to ARD and the other to ZDF. There has been a strange disharmony between the two countries. Germany has not intervened directly, which is good.

E.S. Ah, yes, it’s very good. It’s not like Mitterrand, the “creator” of Arte, who wanted Kohl to play the same game. And Kohl invented it. But, as happened in the time of Adenauer and the creation of ZDF, the state premiers of the länders refused and demanded Kohl drop out. That is one of the reasons why it took so long to establish Arte.

M.I. You still haven’t told me why you didn’t want to be the first program director at Arte...

E.S. They offered it to me at the same time that “Das kleine Fernsehspiel” was going through a terrible time, the worst.

The offer of moving to Strasbourg was brilliant, but above all it was a way of getting rid of the program. My president at the time was quite open about it with me, and I greatly appreciated his frankness. However, I also reacted. This goes back to my colleagues again, that is why I talk about them so much, because it is important to make alliances, to have allies. One ally in particular - the Rotterdam Film Festival - helped us greatly. I told my president that not only would I not go to Strasbourg but I would fight against getting rid of the program. And he accepted it, he accepted my battle and the role of court jester again. Many retrospectives have been held on “Das kleine Fernsehspiel”, in San Francisco, Tokyo, Paris, Cannes (where we won the Galileo Prize from the Council of Europe in 1988), and in the same year as the crisis, i.e., 1994, Rotterdam organized a big retrospective of our work. I used the catalogue from this retrospective with the help of some other friends in our network, such as the press, who have always been very supportive. We also had the help of some of the members of the ZDF board of directors, e.g., the state premier of North-Rhine/Westphalia, Mr. Rau, who is today the president of the Republic, who wrote a letter to the president of ZDF saying, “The program must go on”.

M.I. The network you had built up over the years saved you.

E.S. Yes, the cooperation. Another example, which I also like very much, is that of Naum Klejman, the director of the Moscow Film Archive, who in 1995 said (and it really raised my spirits, I should say): “We cannot celebrate a hundred years of cinema with celebrating the contribution of “Das kleine Fernsehspiel”. Fifty productions from the history of the program were shown in Moscow and Naum convinced the Soros Foundation, of which he is the Russian representative, to finance them being shown on independent, private channels across the whole of the former USSR, both in the Asian and Baltic countries and others. The friends of the Soros Foundation organized the network, but they told us that they couldn’t pay for the filmmakers’ rights. And it was lovely because I wrote fifty letters, one to each friend who we had made a film with, and I received fifty letters giving me permission to go ahead with it. One day I thanked Angelopoulos, who had two films shown, for his support and I said it was a pity he hadn’t received even a dollar. And you know what he said? “I

haven't charged for the right but I have had the right to six million viewers that I never had before. That is payment enough!" Nobody said no, not one letter.

M.I. There must be something in making a network that is more a lifestyle. It doesn't just emerge from television station offices...

E.S. A network of friends is essential because if you don't have it, even if you become elitist or collaborationist or any other thing, you don't do but rather become... it is important to have close alliances. In our case, our friends have been the people who we made a film with twenty or thirty years ago and who we have remained in contact with, the festivals that send references about projects, so many people. Recently, through the Jerusalem Film Festival, which I took part in this July as a member of the jury for the part of television and where I later took part in a seminar, the friends were able to learn that "Das kleine Fernsehspiel" has been working with Israeli filmmakers for many years and also with Palestinian filmmakers. And they appreciated it a lot, they valued very highly the fact that the program is an island of communication between the two groups. Elias Suleiman, an Israeli Arab who has been very successful at Cannes, began with us. It has also been important to me to see a young generation that understands what communication and expression are about, who know they are very, very necessary and that it is very necessary to have a similar space in their environment.

M.I. There is another important component of your work, which is in keeping with many contemporary artists, and that is transmission, or teaching.

E.S. It all forms part of the network and so I have always done seminars and courses at film schools. In the late 1980s, I also participated very actively, as head of studies, in the EAVE European network for young film and television producers. That is why I was so happy to take part in the Masters in Documentary Creation at the Pompeu Fabra University here in Barcelona when you asked me. I have also worked with the Sam Spiegel Film School in Jerusalem, where I have just finished a two-week seminar. I am happy because it allows me to create a spirit of continuity and a form of working in these teaching institutions. Continuity is greatly needed. There are increasingly fewer viewers and

fewer creators, only producers. Teaching is clearly a reflex. The individualistic spirit of "how can I market my talent to create images for the market?" rules, whereas in my courses, I like to raise contradictions.

M.I. I have the feeling that your theater training has profoundly influenced your concept of TV as a public stage.

E.S. I can see it now, as I get older. Yes, the eight years of theater, from the ages of seventeen to twenty-four, which I spent firstly in theaters in London and Paris and then in Munich... "History writing by story-telling", yes. This is a Greek theatre-based understanding that is very political. It is the idea of being in a forum in the polis. I'm going back to Aristotle again, who I always find extremely modern: "Only different citizens are able to create a polis, similar citizens cannot create a polis". What Aristotle is saying is that with the Berlusconi of the world we will not be able to create a country. It is not true that ideologies are dead but there is now only one, the ideology (a word I find very interesting because it covers everything: idea/image, logic/word) of monopolistic capitalism. Think about that great phrase of Bill Gates's: "The person who owns images owns minds" – that is exactly what is happening with Berlusconi! He's not only the owner of the consumption of images but also of the citizens, he has bought their votes in the marketplace. We are therefore not a classic democratic polis, based on the theater, which is the meeting place for citizens. Reality has become a product, a thing that can be sold in the media. We saw it with CNN during the Gulf War. Political courage, citizens' feelings, responsibility and so on are very thin on the ground today. That is why I sometimes think about Saint Thomas Aquinas (who'd have thought, a Catholic saint!), when he said "rage is the condition of courage". That is very theatrical, very exaggerated, but then I believe profoundly in the virtues of exaggeration.

M.I. Exaggeration? Don't you think there's enough on television?

E.S. Tell me about it. Again, it's to do with format. Given that the audiovisual landscape has been marked for the last ten years or so by formatization, it is worth exaggerating, which in this context means insisting on moving away from formats. Away from formats is freedom, truth, expression, communication, and importance. It is worth politically

exaggerating your right to speak on that “stage”. You too have the right to stage your aesthetic ambition, your ideas and images and not just those of Berlusconi. Look at how Berlusconi is even changing the idea of public right, which is also becoming part of his territory. Images form part of public right. It is important to remember that public television images in many places have now become partners of the images of the private system, they speak the same language and show the same things. For me, to exaggerate is to remove yourself from the stage of this cohabitation of formats.

M.I. To continue with the theater metaphor, it constitutes the ‘off’ with respect to the commercial circuit, which is fed by discoveries and innovations ‘off’ the main circuit.

E.S. That is another argument. Television directors are more open to accepting the simile that Broadway would not survive even five years if there were no off-Broadway that worked not to market rules but new formats, new ideas and new images, and the same thing happens with the independents in the Hollywood industry. But that is a conservative argument: I prefer to talk about the need for exaggeration.

M.I. On a final note, how would you see the beginnings of TV in Germany in perspective? I ask because they seem to me to be a theatrical moment, a new stage, and a representation of the post-war era. The European theatre of block politics, the first stirrings of today’s globalization...

E.S. We can also find paradoxes here. Our federal state means we have been luckier than the British, who gave their system over to public control during the Occupation. With that I mean that for the English, London is the capital, because the State is not federal (for now) while we have federal communities in the form of the länder, which first had a radio system and then a television system independently of Berlin. Yes, we have had a privileged position and freedom on the one hand and, on the other (and this is very important for my generation) the possibility of rediscovering our language, ideas and images (because we didn’t know them!) and we didn’t have that freedom of expression before. When I say ‘exaggeration’, I mean to say the expression of that which is possible, the independence and freedom of a generation that has to create, that has had to make new things. As Catalans and Spaniards, you must be able to understand it well.