

SCRIPTLAND

European writers issue a manifesto

By Jay A. Fernandez, Special to The Times
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As grand declarations go, especially one penned by professional writers, the European Screenwriters Manifesto unveiled in Berlin two weeks ago is about as direct, succinct and no-nonsense as they come. Its first three planks are like sharp gunshots across the bow of the filmmaking industry:

- The screenwriter is an author of the film, a primary creator of the audiovisual work.
- The indiscriminate use of the possessory credit is unacceptable.
- The moral rights of the screenwriter, especially the right to maintain the integrity of a work and to protect it from any distortion or misuse, should be inalienable and should be fully honored in practice.

Wow. It's not quite "we hold these truths to be self-evident," but it gets the blood stirring nonetheless.

Debated and finalized at the first European Conference on Screenwriting last November during the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece, the manifesto was signed by 125 writers from 22 European countries. Spearheaded by the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe, which represents 21 national guilds and 9,000 writers, the manifesto was then officially presented in seven different languages at an opening reception on Feb. 9 at the 57th Berlin International Film Festival.

More than 800 writers, producers, actors, legal experts and scholars signed on there, pushing the total past the thousand signatories mark. Every day, 20 to 40 new signatures are added, including those of several high-profile European directors. In fact, anyone can sign it, whether European or not, or a screenwriter or not — you can join the movement online at <http://www.scenaristes.org> .

"What we tried to do by naming it the 'manifesto' is to challenge the international film community and to start a discussion about what has gone wrong and how we could set it right," says Christina Kallas, president of the federation and a screenwriter, story editor, author, producer and teacher. "It is a step in our campaign to give the screenwriter her rightful place, as in the theater and, indeed, in any other form of writing. We hope that it will be an important tool in our efforts to develop and enhance the status of screenwriters."

The manifesto demands commensurate remuneration for any and every ensuing use of the written work and it states that a writer's continuing involvement in the production and promotion of a film is a standard right, not a luxury. Among its additional demands, the manifesto calls upon national governments to support screenwriters with more resources;

upon critics, academics and universities to better acknowledge the role of screenwriters in the filmmaking process; and upon festivals and film museums to include the screenwriters' names in program literature and to feature screenwriter-derived tributes and retrospectives, as they do for directors and actors. (To read the entire European Screenwriters Manifesto, go to latimes.com/scriptland or the [scenaristes](http://scenaristes.com) website.)

Much of the federation's declaration mirrors the charter adopted by the International Affiliation of Writers Guilds at a conference held in Los Angeles in 1987 (to which the American writers guilds belong). The manifesto is also a direct response to the Dublin Declaration, adopted by members of the International Assn. of English Speaking Directors Organizations at a meeting in Dublin in 2003, which states that the director is the "primary creator of the audiovisual work."

Though the federation describes its manifesto as a political document, Kallas sees it less as a weapon than an olive branch for creative equity and collaboration. After all, the document acknowledges the cooperative nature of the medium by describing the screenwriter as "an" author, not "*the*" author. While directors from the older generation remain mostly unpersuaded, Kallas says younger directors seem more open to sharing authorial credit.

The federation plans another presentation at Cannes in May where it hopes to bring on a major actor or actress to become a "godfather" to the manifesto in the international film community.

Whether it gains any traction in Hollywood is another issue altogether, though it clearly echoes some of the WGA's objectives. Will American screenwriters tap into their own revolutionary spirit and add a public voice to their private gripes? If they do, will the independent force of the manifesto dovetail with or distract from the WGA's demands in looming contract negotiations? Have screenwriters already lost so much ground in a decades-long tilt away from their authorial primacy that a movement like this could never be anything more than symbolic?

"It's an important document," says Guillermo Arriaga, screenwriter of "Babel," "21 Grams" and "The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada" and an enthusiastic booster for the manifesto in the States. "It has to be signed by members of all the world, and this is the beginning."