

Screenplays in Germany

By Thomas Hernadi

A Job Between Heaven and Hell

A portrait of the current situation for screenplay writers in Germany.

"German screenplays are character driven, slow-paced, boring, loaded with depressing themes, far too intellectual, fixed on epic rather than dramatic structure and stink at the international box office."

Fortunately, these days are gone! "Film d'auteur", Fassbinder and friends, goodbye! Recent German films have changed this negative image on the world market. German international sale distributors claim that they have experienced a significant increase in foreign sales over the past three years. Nowadays Hollywood is paying more attention to Europe and especially to Germany.

German films are now claiming a higher share of the box office on their domestic market, a market which has been the exclusive domain of Hollywood for decades. Even Columbia and Buena Vista are investing in German screenplays. The German film is back!

Return to Commerce

The national film industry has changed for two reasons. First and foremost due to the introduction of private TV-channels whose chief concern is meeting the demands of their target audience rather than satisfying the personal needs of egocentric directors. As a result of this stronger market orientation, a new generation of screenplay writers has emerged. They are influenced by the American way of film-making. Drama structure, solid character development, teamwork and the notion of "target market" are no longer foreign terms to them.

Talent agencies for writers, an institution that was completely unknown in Germany until the beginning of the 1990s, wildfire. Due to a growing demand for

fiction, every gifted writer with an ability to pitch a story has a fair chance of breaking through. Some of them succeed; some of them end up in the soap opera or series business, which certainly makes for a decent living. The gold rush fever for fresh talent has cooled down, but there is still plenty of job opportunities for talented writers in Germany both now and for the years to come.

Market kills Creativity

Sounds like the Garden of Eden? At first glance, yes, but there are always two sides of a coin. Let's look at market orientation first. There can be no denying that producing a film for a target audience is good because everybody can make money and enjoy public acclamation. We all know there is no inherent contradiction between market orientation and good script writing, but Art and Commerce have been declared natural enemies by German film critics and program editors for many years.

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Recently however, hitting a target audience seems to have become more important than writing compelling stories. What I call "Tabloid genre movies" with sensational log-lines and eye-catching titles such as "I want my child back!" or "Death is what you deserve!" are more likely to be produced than quality movies with elaborate characters and a strong theme. Creating a good character, a convincing story and writing it in such a way that it reaches an audience is one thing; writing a story

because you presume that your target audience wants to see this or that is another.

Here's one example. Imagine you were a decision-maker at a private TV-station feeding on income from advertising. Supposed you knew that people love to watch soccer and you knew about the forthcoming world soccer championship. The decision is at hand. Hire a writer and ask him to dash off anything about soccer, just to make sure that you can air the movie right in time and profit from soccer-hysteria.

Market segments dictate content! Watching such a "tabloid-movie", one can easily make out the artificial elements in it. Characters feel "technically generated", not real, the plot is written around a predetermined market requirement. From a commercial point of view there is nothing wrong with it, but a writer's soul and the quality of German movies suffer! A continuing deterioration of TV movies will inevitable lead to - and in some cases have already lead to - lower ratings. The current strategy of Private TV-stations in particular keen on hooking the audience with rape, murder, sex and crime stories will eventually backfire.

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Copy Cats

There is a tendency to copy patterns that have worked previously instead of focusing on good original stories. Nobody would deny the fact that films have always been repetitive in structure, theme and characters throughout film history.

Fatal Attraction for instance has had many successors doing surprisingly well in the TV movie format. Many program editors and producers don't like taking risks. The former because they fear losing their jobs if they don't reach the required ratings, the latter because they fear financial ruin. As a consequence, we are flooded by movies and TV series following certain successful patterns, such as "psychopath hunts woman", "love triangle with

homosexual friend" or countless variations of "General Hospital". The audience consumes these products but I doubt weather they actually touch the viewers' hearts.

The Dilemma of Recognizing a Good Script

Good original stories are around, though! Recognizing them, however, is another major German dilemma. Everyone can read a script and utter his personal opinion, fall in love with a story or hate it. It's a matter of taste! A solid evaluation is something else. The sad truth is that there are only a few truly competent decision-makers in Germany, who are able to read, evaluate and develop a good screenplay. Many of them don't even have the time to read a script. They flick over the pages and read only the dialogue. As a consequence, the real art of telling a story visually fails to emerge.

Being a writer and dramatic advisor myself I know how much time it takes to truly get into a story, to read it with such intensity that the motion picture emerges right in front of your eyes. The more intelligent a screenplay is drafted the more time you need to get into it, to give it a chance to unfold its beauty. But who's got the time, the knowledge and the skills required to do so? Whereas the "script-doctor", "script-consultant" or "dramatic advisor" generally play a vital part in script evaluation and development in the United States, these full-time positions simply did not exist in Germany until recently.

It Takes More Than Attending a Workshop

Thank heavens, the German film industry has become aware of this problem and now offers a variety of "How to read a script" classes to teach the basics. Nevertheless, the basics are not good enough. You need passion for filmmaking, a good nose for what is likely to succeed - something I would call "commercial instinct" - and experience.

Some of the young decision-makers, it seems, don't yet have these vital qualifications, no matter how talented they might be. In a sheer act of helplessness they often rely on what they have just learned in class. All of a sudden, a "perfect" structure or the positioning of a plot point become the most important aspects in story telling. Some of them become "Structure-Addicts". At creative meetings writer colleagues end up arguing for hours about the positioning of a plot point on page 20 instead of page 25. Plot is easier to grasp, plot is "homework" and, in my opinion, is nothing compared to what comes first: creating "unforgettable characters", so to cite the Seger-classic.

Talking about and developing good characters requires insight into life, into the very nature of the human condition. It also requires profound professional experience in script development. Attending a one week Seger workshop does not give anybody "a license to kill" a writer's work. The plot rather than character orientation is obvious, as plot is easier to handle. Everybody's grandfather could give decent feedback on plot options. Reading between the lines, understanding symbolism, theme and character arcs intelligently woven into the visual, grasping story spines, feeling the rhythm - this is the true art of writing, reading and evaluating a screenplay.

Being fully aware of the "German reading problem", the "Masterschool Drehbuch", an initiative of the Filmboard Berlin Brandenburg, offers very efficient workshops for film industry decision-makers called "The Art of Reading a Screenplay." They have also established new standards in script development. "Step by step," another program under their umbrella, gives talented writers the chance to develop a good treatment into a top screenplay. They work with renowned script consultants such as James Nathan, Don Bohlinger (Frank Daniel associates) and Oliver Schütte in an effort to raise industry standards.

Weirdo Characters

Some TV people and producers with a lack of experience also seem to confuse the notion of "interesting character" with "real character". They like the exceptional and feel "super creative" when inventing "extreme" characters. Weirdo traits are added to spice up a hero or heroine regardless of whether the audience will buy it.

Creating a character that is taken from life, someone we all can identify with, such as an unemployed father struggling to feed his family or a woman whose husband walks out on her, is a more difficult challenge and therefore likely to be avoided. A Protestant priest who is into pawing at little girls in spite of a rather excessive sex life with his wife who, in exchange, has sex with a Polish murderer captured in her attic, whom she threatens to kill with a gun if he reaches an orgasm earlier than she does, is just one real example of already-aired weirdo characters and evidence of what it really means to be "super creative".

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program editor wants. Only if he is truly lucky can he work with brilliant minds, experienced people and create unique TV material as good as any top HBO movie, but this is still the exception to the rule.

Weak Producers and Star Directors

Hang on, you might say, what about the producer and the director? Don't they have a say? The answer is plain and simple. In the German TV business the producer generally has nothing to say at all. Except for a few big names such as Bernd Eichinger or Regina Ziegler, a producer is nothing but a higher-ranked line producer doing exactly what the TV station wants.

The director, however, is in a much stronger position. If he has a good success record, program editors tend to trust him. Sometimes they trust him more than he or she deserves. A resulting lack of creative control can lead to disaster and disaster happens all the time on the German screen.

Only a few German producers have managed to create their "own profile," to develop what they truly believe in. They have a vision and fight for it. If a producer constantly says yes to redrafting and



From left to right: Jürgen Seidler, Dagmar Benko and Oliver Schütte, the Founder of ScriptHouse.

reorienting a screenplay, he is at the mercy of the German TV Empire. Respecting and acknowledging a producer includes arguments, discussions and saying "No, this is not what I want to do!" Conformists don't do their movies and their own business any good. But while many German producers have what it takes, they too depend on development money from TV stations to survive. It's a vicious circle.

Therefore, thorough development of a script is a luxury most German producers cannot afford. Fortunately, there are new initiatives such as the Berlin-based **SCRIPTHOUSE**. In addition to offering

script analysis services, a recently created branch called "Script Lab" works with writers to both develop and market high-grade material. Up-front investments in story development pay off! "Script-house" has become a quality label investors seem to trust.

Cinema in Pure Luxury

So far my discussions have focused on the TV business while neglecting cinema. I did this with good reason as German cinema operates under different rules. TV means making money, TV is "business", "industry," whereas cinema is pure luxury! Writing for the big screen is risky and includes writing on spec.

Without a German star-studded actor package or a tremendous past record of success for a director or producer, there is virtually no chance to get development money, neither from the public subsidy system nor from distributors or TV stations. A good script does not seem to be an argument strong enough to pump development money into a project. After all, it is a matter of trust. I talk about trust in a screenplay rather than in a creative constellation. Trust, however requires competent readers, trust needs courage and "commercial instinct," all which brings us back to the previously mentioned dilemma.

It is true that Germany has an elaborate subsidy system for cinema. Writers can always submit their treatment to a national or local film subsidy committee, but can they be sure that their work will be recognized? Our subsidy system continues to spend millions each year on writing, pre-production and production. Some of the committees have experienced members on board others are crowded with lawyers, politicians and other people who have no experience in the creative process of script development.

We all had a good laugh when Caroline Link, the Oscar nominee for *Beyond Silence*, revealed to the press that her script was first turned down by the "Filmförderungsanstalt", one of the national subsidy systems. According to Link, the committee thought that a movie dealing with handicapped people would not attract an audience. Now Link can submit whatever she likes and get an OK. Other brilliant screenplays, however, continue to be ignored because there is no "trust".

What It Really Takes To Succeed

Politics is another factor that could fill pages. Like any other industry in the world, corruption, favoritism and personal relationships play a vital part in decision-making. Nobody talks about it, but everybody knows how the system works. In order to survive, a German writer needs powerful alliances, solid networking and a sound business attitude. Sometimes these traits are far more important than actually writing a good screenplay.

A screenplay might not be shot because there is a sudden change in management of a TV station, because your director is known for exceeding budgets, or because of sudden changes in programming policy. The German business is as tough as anywhere else. A writer can decide whether he wants to play in the risky upper league or kick the ball in the backyard of his neighbor's garden.

Writing for series, soaps and sitcoms is easier. There are less impediments to deal with, faster decision-making and good job opportunities with decent income. Things become substantially more difficult every step up the ladder. The writer becomes a Vogler-like hero on his own "writer's journey" and without what we might call "divine support", "mere luck" or the famous "three" - right people, right time and right place - without these elements he might be able to enjoy watching one of his market-friendly screenplays performed on television, but he will probably never see his work appear on the big screen.

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Since 1995, Hernadi has been working as a freelance screenplay writer for cinema and television as well as a script consultant for German TV broadcasters and production companies.

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