

## **Keynote zum Thema : The Other Story- Feminist Scripts in cinema now**

a discussion organised by the Dortmund/Cologne IWFF on the status of women\* in the film business and gender equity during the Berlinale

### **Do we really need other stories?**

We already have one. And countless scriptwriting manuals and experts confirm to us that this one story this one narrative structure is absolutely sufficient. Why? Because you can express everything with it.

They describe it as a neutral container in which you can transport all content. It's neutral because it's natural - the natural way human beings have told and still tell stories through all times and cultures.

In my opinion, everything that is sold to you as natural and god-given and hence unquestionable should make you strongly suspicious.

Those manuals deliver you a prefabricated set of rules, a building kit that is supposed to enable you to produce a successful script in 21 days, 35 steps... or whatever. This prefabricated set of rules links your narrative material in a way that automatically produces certain forms of spectator attachment and suspense. If you are able to assemble the parts according to the manual you are likely to produce something that can drive.

What most of the proud model-makers don't realise, is that it always drives in the same direction.

One of the reasons they don't realise this might be that this canonised narrative structure is a vehicle for a predominant ideology. A patriarchal, neoliberal ideology whose core beliefs, interestingly, are also often justified by their alleged naturalness and thus neutrality.

This way of storytelling is as natural or artificial as any other way of storytelling. It was standardised for historical, economic and political reasons. To claim it is the only human way to tell stories means ignoring the most wonderful and also successful narrations and films.

Films are politics and not only if they have a superficial political message.

The structure in which we tell stories is of huge political relevance. It shapes how people think and feel, and it is a big part of our socialisation.

Narrative structure is defining the content of what we tell. Every way of telling a story is a way of interpreting the world.

In reality, the canonised plot-centred structure is extremely limiting.

Basically, you can tell just one story in many variants on the basis of this pattern:

The old story of the lone hero reaching a goal in a fight against evil antagonists. The structure defines what or who is important, what - according to Hitchcock - are the dull parts of life that have to be cut out.

Only the parts that push the plot forward towards an outcome of a conflict by a logic of cause and effect qualify. One situation or action is causing the next one.

Everything that is not directly related to this linear chain reaction of plot is more or less irrelevant and can be cut out.

All elements of the narrative : images, dialogue, characters, events ... are not per se interesting but just in the amount that they serve as a means to come into the future. Their ambiguity is eliminated and their complexity is reduced.

When the protagonist has reached the goal, the story is over.  
A problem with a clear cause, had a clear solution. The world makes sense! We can go home now and forget about it.

A basic requirement for this standardised structure is that the spectator fully identifies with the protagonist. As an identified spectator I am always on the side of my hero. I am wearing his or her shoes. In this position there is not enough space between us to get a good look at him or her.

It is counterproductive in this form to leave room for the spectators to squeeze in their normal perception of the world. If they would think autonomously, they could realise that the protagonist is actually a guy who kills constantly without a second thought and can't keep up a relationship for longer than two weeks.

But even if the protagonist is not that sociopathic, my perspective as a spectator becomes a slightly sociopathic one. From this mono-perspective, the world is divided into good and bad. We, my protagonist and I, are the good guys, and we face the others, the opponents, the bad guys. Everything is judged as either good news or bad news for us.

Everything that concerns the protagonist is important to me, every little scratch on his or her skin is interesting to me, whereas I couldn't care less about the guard my hero shoots dead whilst conquering the Headquarters of Evil.

You could say that the plot-centred structure is producing propaganda for the protagonist.

The protagonist has the job of getting the story going by wanting something and has to keep it going by actively fighting for it.

In our society, activity is still assigned to masculinity, passivity to femininity.

This is one of the many reasons why for a very long time nearly all film protagonists were men. He was the subject standing for all humankind fighting to solve universal human problems. She was the object, a function for his storyline, his journey.

All of us who grew up on a diet of male protagonists know these functions.

He has the goal - she is part of his goal, his love interest in the subplot, the helpless maiden he has to save, his prize

She is an obstacle for him as the soulless femme fatale, or more plainly, the screaming hysteric who hinders him in his fight and slows their flight with her impractical shoes and general clumsiness.

She is a catalyst for his inner journey, she leads him with her beauty, helplessness or high morals (because she is such an angel) to development and revelation.

She is a means of characterising him as a successful jack-of-all-trades and a ladies' man.

She serves as decoration. And so on...

Everything she is allowed to be - and that's usually not much - she has to be in direct relation to him and his quest.

I spent my childhood and adolescence identifying with male protagonists and I became astonishingly skilled at ignoring the fact that I would never be Steve McQueen, and that I belonged to the others, to the group of one-dimensional, puppet-like beautifiers, lying around in bed, screaming at the wrong moment, and so forth.

Fortunately, after an absurdly long fight, we are beginning to have more women protagonists in mainstream movies and series.

Obviously, and in spite of repeated arguments to the contrary, it is possible to make money with films like this.

We could say now: Oh great, one structure really fits all! There is no need for other structures. There is just a need for other protagonists. Black people, transgender people, queer people, disabled people, women... have to become protagonists in mainstream movies. In order to fit in the job description, they have to be "active", they have to be "strong", they have to be winners. And finally we will have films which - for a change - are propaganda for marginalised people.

I think telling the hero's journey with diverse heroes is not enough. We need other stories. If we just have this one standard recipe, too much remains untold.

What about the Moldavian woman in Austria who looks after the children of our strong, active female protagonist while she is pursuing her goal?

While her own children are back in Moldavia without mother nor nanny.

She fills the background while we follow our heroine's journey. She is as important as the guard in the Headquarters of Evil, shot dead by a protagonist earlier in this talk. Collateral damage.

In order to have her story told in the standardised pattern, in order to come to the foreground as the hero of her journey, she has to be somebody who is able to overcome adverse circumstances. She has to free herself to move enough to be a winner of her own making, a self-made woman - in a system that is designed to disempower her and many other people. She has to be an exception.

She has to move uphill. But what does that mean in this system?

Maybe she could speculate successfully on the stock market to pay somebody else, less fortunate, less determined, to look after her own children.

You can make it if you want. *Sei deines Glückes einsamer Schmied*. Just do it. The system is not the problem - you are. If you cannot succeed in it, maybe you are not worth it.

Many of the very stories that are supposed to encourage people are more likely to produce shame. Shame is a very common emotion in our society and it is **not** an emotion that makes people speak up or form collectives.

Shame doesn't put us in a position to question predominant norms and conventions.

"If I really, really want it and if I try hard enough, I can make it."

Sentences like this are believed by the girls competing in Germany's Next Top Model and are repeated by them constantly during the show. Nevertheless, most of those girls do not win.

Not even the ones who eventually win this stupid contest.

The real limitations we face lie embedded in the narrative structure itself.

Any kind of narrative material you fill into the container of the plot-centred pattern will take its form. Its inner theme, the thematic heart of the material changes. What comes out again will resemble the same old story.

What if I want to tell a story about a collective fight for human rights?

For example, about the fight of a feminist movement, a fight that is defined by the fact that it is fought by a collective for a collective. If I organise my narrative material according to the standard pattern, I have to choose a lone heroine. She can take up

the cause and make it her goal, but what I really tell then is again the story of individual success or individual failure against the backdrop of the feminist group.

And what if there is no fight? What if there is no clear antagonist, no simple cause for a situation? No simple solution because there is no simple problem?

What if I want to write a script about my grandmother, who was born into a very poor Austrian/Croatian, Catholic family in the late 1920ies.

My grandmother had a small life.

She didn't achieve much, she didn't change much, she didn't learn much. She became a little resentful. Maybe she always was.

Hers was not a life you cut out of a magazine and frame and hang up on the wall as a good example, or a place of longing, or as a means with which you could shame others.

Because of inner and outer circumstances, she didn't have the visionary power to set herself a greater goal. She wasn't aware of any history, let alone herstory, as a base to see herself as a link to the future. The available history belonged to other people, who had paintings and books to tell them stories about their forefathers or sometimes even about their foremothers.

She didn't have clear antagonists, she could fight. Her antagonists were also her companions, people who were also defined by complex circumstances and also more or less helpless. Like my grandfather.

My grandmother was very active, that is to say, she worked her butt off all her life, destroyed her body with work, at home and in the factory. She washed sheets so that they could be made dirty again, she made food that vanished into her husband and children, she produced glue on an assembly line that never stopped.

But she never did anything "big", sustainable after which we could cut out and produce thereby a Happy Ever After. She wasn't given the power to act or associate her actions to a ladder of cause and effect, which she could climb up on.

She worked to maintain a status quo and therefore in the context of mainstream scriptwriting is dealt with as a passive character.

Most of the events in her life weren't caused by her heroic actions. She didn't make things happen, but they happened to her.

Hitler came to power, when she was a child, she lost a brother in the war, she married, she had two daughters, she had two illegal abortions, because she could not afford more children. One of her daughters got pregnant at 14 and she raised that grandchild only to lose him in a motorcycle accident 30 years later.

Now she lies in bed and waits for death as she waited for so many other things.

In the plot-centred form, this means that nothing happened in her life. Nothing happened because the things that did happen are not linked into a purposeful chain of cause and consequence according to this particular way of constructing and bending reality.

According to this logic her life has no usable outcome. It adds up to nothing.

In Hitchcock's logic, all parts of her dull life would be cut out.

Maybe she could be used as the one who serves coffee.

Maybe she should have done something, become revolutionary, got wise, got a divorce. But for complex reasons, she didn't - and thereby she mirrors reality and also political reality.

A reality that produced me, for example. To know about her helps me to know about myself and the world.

Is her story not relevant or interesting, not worthy of being told?

One structure does not fit all.

There are relevant themes like stagnation, dilemma, social powerlessness, trauma, the strength to live **with** adverse circumstances, the complexity of our world, life as it happens to us ... If we really want to investigate those themes and not just use them to tell stories about people who are able to overcome them, we need to engage other narrative structures.

In order to tell other stories, we have to be open to constellative storytelling, in which autonomous narrative elements must keep their complexity and correspond in many different ways.

We need theme-centred structures that create a red thread, a constellation of meaning in the spectator instead of a motorway of plot, on which we rush to a goal without looking to either side.

We need structures that allow the protagonist to make no development and have no revelations. - There must be development or revelation somewhere, but it can instead occur in the spectator.

We need active and emancipated spectators who think and feel beyond prefabricated patterns of good and evil, us and them, dominance and submission.

In this system people have internalised the standard story. They are conditioned by it not to ask questions, not to link facts in their own logic, not to ask if maybe we are the evil ones.

Consequently, they are making the jobs of advertisers and propagandists easier by telling the old story to themselves, when triggered by just one little piece of it.

The word: "Veränderung" - "Change" was a keyword in the electoral campaign of Sebastian Kurz in Austria. This word, combined with pictures of the candidate as the sympathetic winner, helped him win the election.

It worked despite, or because of, the fact that the political campaigners never mentioned what he wanted to change. The only additional information was that it would be a change in the RIGHT direction. Nobody specified what "right" meant in this context. Astonishingly, most of the voters didn't think to ask those questions. Trump was advertised as a self-made man. You can make it if you want, even if you are a sociopathic cretin. The well known fact that he is a billionaire's son did not significantly impact that image for millions of his followers.

We need films that explore life and not just constantly repeat the same beliefs about it. To do that all the elements of the narration, but especially the image, must regain their autonomy.

The image has to get its autonomy back so that we can look at people and not just at their representations, their functions for a plot. - "Oh I get it, that's beautiful Miss Right, that's the overdressed evil antagonist and that's the unimportant one who serves coffee."

We have to free the image from being limited by the plot, so that we can see people in their real individuality, in their specific manifestations shaped by forces beyond our control - beyond the simple judgement of whether they are good news or bad news.

You are good news, you are bad news. You are important, you are unimportant.

We have to allow the medium to do what it can do best - destroy stereotypes and clichés through precision. So that we allow the spectators to see the whole picture and not just parts of it. So that they can see the emperor is naked. And we are too. Maybe we would discover then that the woman serving coffee is an actual person. Even if at the moment the focus is not on her. But it could be on her.

My grandmother may have had a small life, but for her it was as big as the world. She may have had a small life from a certain perspective, but if you look at it closely it takes up all the available space.

In my opinion, we have to reclaim the definition of what a story is, of what narration is, and we have to explore and fully use the possibilities offered by our medium. To do this, we have to leave the little island of the canonised film story and sail out into the oceans of other stories.

Without a prefabricated structure, without a building kit, we have to construct our own boats, without maps, we must rely on our own skills of orientation.