

„Soil“
Traveling in time and space

Lecture for Writers for Europe Prague Session 2018

By Jochen Brunow

Soil. When I first heard the title for the Prague session of Writers For Europe, I marveled at how wonderfully specific and inspiring it would be for writing a screenplay. And when I was asked to give the keynote speech a whole lot of associations and mental images rushed through my mind immediately — memories of very different movies popped up. Scenes and sequences dashed by, as well as the recollection of many personal experiences.

All of mankind works on soil, names it and describes it in different ways. We walk on soil, explore and discover it. We feel the soil and touch soil, we dig deep into it and build on it. Soil has a smell, a color and a sound. It evokes names and pictures and even history. Therefore soil can be read like a book.

Actually, I think soil might be one of the most central ideas and concepts in religion, mythology, spirituality, science, even in ideology and politics. And because of this, it is very present in all forms of art. Being faced with this enormous amount of content, I was worried about how to find a framework for my lecture. But since I am a writer and not a scientist, I will be speaking as a screenwriter to fellow screenwriters and filmmakers.

In the following, I will approach the idea of soil as if my task was to write a screenplay about it. Whenever I think about writing a film on a certain topic, I start to ask myself questions. I deeply believe that asking questions — and asking the right questions – is the most important first step concerning writing. If you don't have the right questions, your answers will be useless. But with a wrong question you have no chance to get a right answer which will push you forward in your work. So the first thing I'm asking myself is, "Why on earth (quite literally) is this theme so important? What is fundamental about it?" In answering these questions you are already guided towards the

heart of what you are going to write about. It is directing you towards the gold, towards the motor of the whole piece.

So why is soil so important? What is so essential about it? It is essential because we are made of it. We as human beings are made of soil. You are made of soil. I am made of soil. In some religions they say the first human was made of clay. In the Book of Genesis in the Bible it says God took dust to make Adam, the first man. It varies in the different mythologies, but it is always a form of soil from which mankind is made. And man is not only made of soil, man will also return to soil. At Christian funerals the pastor proclaims over the open grave, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes and dust to dust." Then family and friends throw three handfuls of soil onto the coffin. In the Christian tradition, life and death have a very strong relation to soil.

Maybe religion is all mumbo jumbo to you. Maybe you don't believe in God and want to be burnt when you are dead. You might think none of this applies to you. Nonetheless, we are all still built from molecules and we disintegrate into molecules. It is a mistake, as a writer and a filmmaker, to underestimate the historical and spiritual influence this has on your characters and the people you are telling your story to — the audience.

But there is even an argument for the cool and rational ones amongst you. There is no doubt, our human remains will rot, will be eaten by worms and become nutrition for plants. It is a scientific reality which is used in different academic fields. Take the scientists who search the sites of massacres or mass graves for signs of human life; not only do they use geophysical methods as indications, but also biological ones like vegetation and plants. Following this trail of thought sparks an idea for a film in my mind. I see a beautiful young girl walking her dog, strolling through the hillside close to a small village somewhere in the Balkan region. She is picking flowers from the meadow that is ripe with many different kinds of colorful blossoms. Her village is visited by EU researchers - maybe from The Hague - looking for signs and hints of a massacre. The villagers there don't like them, they do not cooperate in any way. Whatever the researchers try to find out, none of the locals seem to have seen or heard anything. They don't like to be reminded of the war, or any of the war crimes that came with it. The little girl brings home her colorful bouquet and her mother puts the flowers into a porcelain vase by the window.

Now a female pathologist sees the flowers in the window and casually talks to the mother about how beautiful they are, specially the purple ones. Are they from her garden? The mother explains that her daughter had picked them. You can obviously guess where this is going, but the audience of the film can't - because they haven't been told what I told you upfront. As a writer you can now milk the situation. The pathologist goes away without mentioning anything. She is looking for a possibility to talk to the daughter in private. So some day the two are walking the dog on the hillside and the girl shows the pathologist where she picked the wonderful purple flowers. The next day, the scientists start digging there and find body parts and human bones. They set up tents nearby, bring in their equipment and start to explore the soil systematically. Other foreigners arrive and start to interrogate and question the villagers more rigidly. Maybe the girl is now having problems in school with her classmates.

As you can see, exploring the ideas behind the very first question about the essence of soil might lead you directly to a valid story.

The next question I'm asking myself when approaching the topic of soil for a story is, "Which experiences have I had with soil?" I can think of many, so I will just share one. The city where I was born lies between the river Eider and the canal connecting the North Sea to the Baltic Sea. As a kid I always wondered why so many streets and places had the names of rivers, streams and watermills. Then I learned that all these streets and places, all this alleys and small lanes were once water. They were arms of the river Eider before the canal was build. Later they were filled with soil. Suddenly I imagined that my home town could have looked like the Venice of the North, but instead it turned into a boring, provincial city. Now it starts to feel like the soil I was walking on was shaky and not solid at all. There was a strange feeling of insecurity. And I started to distrust the ground I walked on. I imagined the water of the river Eider was still streaming through the soil. Suddenly I distrusted all the surfaces in the city. And more often than not, I realized there was sewerage and wastewater underneath the neat face of the seemingly harmless small town.

Soil is part of history, as it preserves history in a certain way: the history of a group, the history of a people. That is why the idea of soil is so often abused by ideology. Soil isn't only connected to water, like in my example, it is often blood. It might be the place of a historic battle. Especially fascist governments have elevated this aspect of soil. "Blood

and soil" was the slogan of the NS regime to explain and justify their aggressive war strategies as well as the Holocaust. Maybe for Germans more than for other nations, the term "soil" always evokes the idea of political abuse.

If we think of soil as a term for space, we have to explore how the concept of space has changed lately. In the past years, science has seen a renaissance of the idea of space, going far beyond the understanding of a place as having set boundaries and a horizon. Space can no longer just be measured by degrees of longitude and latitude. A place isn't just a dot on our GPS, but is rather determined by its people, by their relations, their history and through their social, emotional, cultural and ideological connections. Philosophy and natural science started perceiving the "un-limitation" of three-dimensional space and called it *spatial turn* or *topographical turn*. Soil or a certain space isn't perceived as something given, something material and already existent, but as something that is produced during a social process. In modern thought, space is understood as a multidimensional coordinate system. Working with a space - or working with soil in your story - you have to take all of these coordinates into consideration. We as writers and filmmakers have to watch, observe and monitor the manifold and versatile relationships mankind has developed towards soil.

After asking what my own experiences with soil are, I ask myself what experiences others have had and told me about, or what I have read about soil. As I said in the beginning, there is a lot of material about soil in art. I just choose two examples which are important to me because of their emotional impact.

Spending part of my year on the island of Sardegna, I noticed the very special relationship the Sardinians have with the archaic landscape surrounding them. Marcello Fois is a local poet and has written about it. I tried to translate one of his poems.

We have known forever

Places have a soul

We have known this for a while, a very long time - always

We know that in the middle of the beating heart of a place

Sounds the voice of the water and the whispers of the wind

We know the breath of the earth is creating messages, laments and complaints.

*Places are like banquets, tables without a host
Ready to feed the hungry:
You just have to bow down and collect*

Further on Marcello Fois writes:

*We know this wisdom as well as music
Are not from this world
They are a voice, a voice of the place –
They are chants of a choir
A choir organized after cardinal points.*

*We know that this is not the world we want
but the one we have
And that makes all the difference*

And then Fois is talking about the abuse of the land and the soil, which has become standard human behavior.

*Because somewhere something is broken
At the banquets only few of us are eating
And the breath of the places becomes grave
And its soul is a broken crystal.
That's what we know.*

Nothing can give us more hope, can give us more of the necessary energy to write and to make films about a universal theme than the very ground we stand on. The soil beneath our feet. There were people who have always known this. I happened to find some of them when I was researching in Hawaii for a documentary film of mine called „The Echoes of Paradise“.

History, like all important things in the Hawaiian culture, is preserved and passed down through generations by music and song. There is this Mele called „The Stone Song“. It was composed in the year 1893 for the members of the Royal Hawaiian Band who refused to bow down and take an oath to the provisional government. American big far-

mers had overthrown the royal Hawaiian dynasty and the legitimate Queen Lilioukalani was arrested in Iolani Palace. However, the bandmaster of the Royal Hawaiian Band took the oath to the new government. He was German and came from Prussia. But it was not just an act of submission. It was a plan to successfully save the band, which is still playing as the *Royal Band* until today. The bandmaster Henry Berger told the protesters they would soon be eating stones if they didn't continue working as musicians. The indigenous Hawaiians among his musicians answered that the stones, the soil, the *mama aina*, would feed them very well. The song also called „The Patriot Song“, which is still frequently sung today - is based on this story. It is very subversive because the militant political message is clothed in a very gentle melody. Anyone who does not know the Hawaiian language will be fooled by the uplifting tune which doesn't pay tribute to its political content about a dangerous tale of morality.

*We do not value
the government's hills of money
We are satisfied with the rocks
The wondrous food of the land
We support Lili'uokalani
who has won the rights of the land
She will be crowned again*

To crown her again would mean resistance, even militant resistance to the illegitimate American government. Skippy Ioane is an activist in this still ongoing fight as well as a musician. He is a contemporary singer-songwriter fighting for the Independence of Hawaii. Using an old spiritual he created a famous song which expresses the special relationship of the indigenous people of Hawaii with the land they live on. The American spiritual „He's Got the Whole World in His Hands“, first published in 1927, became an international hit in the 1950s and 1960s and has since been recorded by many singers and choirs. Playing the typical Hawaiian slackkey guitar Skippy sings:

*She's got the whole world in her hand
Mama aina is a living God, the living land
She is underneath our feet
And when we are hungry
she grows things for us to feed.*

The soil is mother earth, the *mama aina*, and she is a living Goddess. Indigenous people of all cultures knew about the deep relationship we have to the soil. You find it in most of their beliefs. In the 1970s Western scientist and researchers also started taking a new look at the earth as a system. The Club of Rome predicted the end of endless growth and global warming became a topic of discussion. Sustainability became a buzz word. That particular political climate was also the origin of the Gaia theory:

„The Gaia hypothesis, also known as the Gaia theory or the Gaia principle, proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on earth to form a synergistic and self-regulating, complex system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet.” That is the definition on wikipedia. This all-encompassing Gaia system doesn't only include plants and animals, water, atmosphere and mankind, but also the soil. To me, the Gaia theory is the same as the song of Skippy Ioane about *mama aina* as a living God.

It is not just plants and trees that grow on soil. In a way, we grow on soil, too. The physical place each of us lives on, shapes and forms our character. When creating a character for a screenplay, it is of greatest importance to know where he or she is from. What type of ground nurtured them? Sometimes characters are so closely related to their place of origin that it is part of their name.

The stereotypical Texan, for example, is perfectly captured in the film „Lucky“ (2017) where Harry Dean Stanton plays the lead character as well as himself, the actor — both tongue-tied but witty. In the beginning of Wim Wender's „Paris Texas“ Stanton has also become speechless, having been released from the waste land of the desert. One of the most common Dutch surnames is De Vries which means "coming from Vriesland", a Dutch province. The famous Don Quijote is called the man from La Mancha. The Spanish region La Mancha is known for its windmills and Don Quijote is fighting them because he is taking them for armed enemies. Not everyone might have read the original book by Cervantes, but everybody knows the name. Don Quijote is a character that has transcended fiction and has become a real life figure. The uniqueness of Don Quijote comes from sticking to ideas and principles that seem outdated and antiquated to the modern world. However, his principles stem from his place of origin in La Mancha. This is how

he got his name. So if you build your characters on their relation to their “mother soil”, you have a good chance of creating a universally understood person.

These are only some conceptual ideas I tried to follow to generate stories. Of course, you never know beforehand where they will take you. Ideas pop up in your subconscious as they please and it is important to welcome all of them in the process of developing — without judging them or censoring yourself. Keep them, store them away carefully, but do not make them your guideline. Always remember to come back to the important questions and try to answer all of them.

We have now come to the last set of questions I like to ask in my own writing process, “What movies and scenes that I know resonate with the theme? Which film might serve as a reference, or a good example to steal from?”

Just as a side note, stealing is a legitimate act of creation, if you know the art of transforming or transposing from other works. In the end, we are all dwarfs on the shoulders of giants. At least that is what Frank Daniel, former director of the FAMU in Prague, used to say when one of his students felt too precious about his or her creations.

In the early days of cinema, the avant-garde was working a lot with the theme of soil. The Russian film poet Alexander Dovzhenko, for example, made a movie called „Earth“ (1930) in which you see a lot of heaving corn in the bright sun. The film is praising the work of a new socialist kolkhoz. And in Spain Louis Buñuel filmed one of his first movies called “Las Hurdes” (1933), in a region of the same name, where you see the peasants’ soil burnt and wasted under a merciless sun. Buñuel uses experimental techniques to show the bitter poverty in the poorest region of northern Spain .

The classic film “The Grapes of Wrath” (1940), based on John Steinbeck’s 1939 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, is a social critique of the Great Depression. When Darryl F. Zanuck – the big movie mogul - bought the film rights, people in Hollywood assumed he did it to prevent anyone else from making the movie. But then he gave the project to John Ford, the best director in his studio. Nunnally Johnson wrote the screenplay and the great Greg Toland – inventor of the deep focus cinematography for „Citizen Kane“ — served as DOP. The film tells the story of an Oklahoma family, who, after losing their farm during the Great Depression, become migrant workers and end up in California. The family is

decimated by death and torn apart by social cruelty. Many critics consider "Grapes of Wrath" as one of the greatest American films of all time. (FILMCLIP)

Throughout the whole film it is fascinating to observe how people are embedded in the landscape. The novel as well as the film have coined a famous phrase with a lasting impact. At the end of the story, when the rest of the family is forced to go on the road again, while the other family members are left behind, exhausted and worn out. And the mother says, "We will always be there." Why? Because „we are the people“. This heartfelt statement „we are the people“ has since become something like a battle call for freedom.

Another coined phrase that immediately comes to mind in the context of soil is, "The people are the salt of the earth." It is the title of a film, written in 1954 by Michael Wilson, directed by Herbert J. Biberman. The film's plot centers around a long and difficult strike against the Zinc Company in New Mexico. In neorealist style, it shows how the miners, the company, and the police react during the strike. The work is considered one of the first pictures to advance the feminist social and political point of view. Both Wilson and Biberman were blacklisted by the Hollywood establishment due to their alleged involvement in communist politics.

„Salt of the Earth“ might sound familiar to some of you as the title of Wim Wender's film about photographer Sebastiano Salgado. After Salgado photographed cruelties and war crimes all over the world, he started the Genesis Project, to depict the immaculate face of nature and humankind. Wenders shows Salgados previous work and a lot of the pictures of the project in his film.

„Novecento“ (1976), a film by Bernardo Bertolucci, is an epic about life in the plains of the river Po as the country enters the twentieth century. Robert de Niro and Gerard Depardieu, respectively, play the son of the landlord and the son of the head of the farmworkers. Bertolucci wrote the screenplay together with his brother Guiseppe and Franco Arcalli. Great cinematography by the genius Vittorio Storaro. In "Novecento" the idea of soil appears as the the origin of fertility, and thus, sexuality. (FILMCLIP)

Soil is the topic in another of Italy's great filmmakers' work. In Michelangelo Antonioni's "Zabriski Point" we see the hills of a waste land and on the desert slopes lie couples wrapped around each other making love.

In the case of Andrej Tarkowski, there is a continuing thematic relationship with soil in his body of work. Even in a science fiction movie like „Solaris“ (1972) he pays a lot of attention to the delicate portrayal of the family’s home ground and their house. In “Stalker” (1979), Tarkowski depicts the mysterious “zone” with soil everywhere, water dripping over stones — a great example of nature photographed like still life. The Coen Brothers are another example.

Another case is „Milieu du Monde“ (1974), written by John Berger for the French-Swiss filmmaker Alain Tanner. Milieu du monde is the mountain refuge of a couple having a secret affair. The place becomes the borderland between East and West as it symbolizes the difference between the proletarian woman and the bourgeois engineer who gets away from his demanding job only to come to the mountains. Berger started as an essayist and novelist writing about painting and perception. „Ways of Seeing“ is the title of a famous TV series and book he produced. It was out of his understanding of perception that he developed his special relationship to soil. His characters were born from the ground they lived on. One of his novels is titled in German „Sauerde“ (1979) which means „Pig Earth“ in English.

Let us now have a look at the connection of soil and genre. Soil is a very important topic in all war films, which is related to my comments in the beginning about soil and ideology. Iwo Jima, a Pacific island, is one of the truly mystic places in the world with its long sandy beaches and violent battles between Japanese and Americans. A place of victory and a place of sorrow. After 35 days of battle almost 7.000 American soldiers died and more than 20,000 Japanese. One iconic image has shaped the memory of this battle and shows four American marines who raise the star-spangled banner at the top of Mount Suribachi. The stories surrounding the battle weren't just told amongst marines and the American public. It was just as emotional a memory for the Japanese people as two Japanese soldiers had survived in the underground tunnels of the small island. They stayed in hiding for four whole years and didn't lay down their weapons until 1949. Clint Eastwood took this story as an opportunity to show the brutality of war from two sides. He simultaneously released „Flag of our fathers“ and „Letters from Iwo Jima“ in 2002.
(FILMCLIP)

There is a proverb that claims, "The first victim of war is truth." Clint Eastwood, a conservative Republican, demonstrated his own understanding of this in "Flags of our Fathers" in the scene of the raising of the flag when mixing the real soil of war with the plastic soil one of propaganda in the baseball stadium. In "Iwo Jima" he showed the same moment in the battle from the Japanese perspective.

Another genre which heavily relates to the notion of soil is the Western. We are all familiar with iconic battle scenes in breathtaking settings — first against the Native Americans and later amongst the white settlers trying to conquer the West. The Neo-Western „Hell or Highwater“ (2016), written by Taylor Sheridan, starts with the following scene:

OPEN ON:

Dead grass. Burnt from four months of triple digit heat and no rain.

We move pass an endless sea of it.

We pass PUMP JACKS drawing black gold from the dirt ...

We pass a herd of cattle scratching breakfast from the blistered earth -- two old bulls huddle in the shadow of a mesquite tree, choosing shade over hunger.

We pass a graveyard of farm equipment and rusted propane tanks, signaling the city limits of ARCHER CITY, TEXAS.

We look over the town -- it doesn't take long.

Surrounding an old, stone courthouse are empty broken windows. A cafe. A title company ...

And FIRST TEXAS BANK.

We stop in front.

(FILMCLIP)

This precisely orchestrated scene informs us perfectly about what to expect from the movie. The whole plot of this modern Western is centered around soil seeing that the robbers collect money to pay the debt on the waste farm ground. They want their kids and family to profit from the oil, which was found on their family's property, and not the greedy bank managers who try to cheat them.

A great example from European cinema is "Wintersleep" by Nuri Bilge Ceylan which won the Palm d'Or in Cannes in 2014. His film „Once Upon a Time in Anatolia“ won The Great Prize of the Jury in Cannes in 2011 and shows how the visual restraint of storytelling combined with absolute precision of means can carry the audience into the subtlety and depth of an experience that is "human, profound, universal and uniquely cinematic." This is what a critic wrote about Ceylan's style. The film tells the story of the search for a missing body — a possible victim of a murder. (FILMCLIP)

So far we have talked about the rather complex and important value of soil as a subject or metaphor, but that doesn't mean you cannot make a comedy about it. British comedies often reference the peculiarities of the people from Wales, Ireland or Scotland. The film „The Englishman climbed on the hill and came down on the mountain“ takes place in Wales in the year 1917. While World War I is raging, the biggest problem of some Welsh villagers is that a mountain outside their village is not high enough to be officially registered as a mountain but only as a hill. The film's title already indicates what happens. The villagers start bringing soil to the hill until it is high enough to be a mountain. (FILMCLIP)

And with this last example I would like to close my list of examples and hope to have sparked some inspiration and helped you find your own relationship with soil.