

„Writers for Europe“ Prague, Borders of Scriptwriting

Introduction lecture

Was Grenzen leisten

„What borders supply“

What began as a so-called Wandertag, a mere excursion, slowly evolved into an interesting event, a symposium, exciting and challenging not only for our students but also for us as teachers. I am very thankful that Pavel and his dedicated team organized this year's „Writers for Europe“ and even more that he brought a new perspective to our primary question „How do stories learn to travel?“. What does a story need in order to travel beyond cultural, national and linguistic borders? The original impulse of the symposium was to cross, to penetrate, to tear down borders. Adding the heading „The borders of screenwriting“ - like Pavel did - changes drastically the perspective on the topic. The very first ideas I had when I was confronted with the term borders were: Well, we live in very exciting and fascinating times. We live in a time where walls came down, a lot of walls, borders came literally tumbling down on us, walls of national borders and walls of rules and regulations. We were lucky and happy that the Berlin wall came down and the cold war ended. But we struggle extremely and fiercely - and still not very successfully - against the deregulation of neoliberal economic ideology. In a way it is strange that the American financial system is still called Wall Street. Why? Because the walls which fenced in wall street - the walls of financial laws - also came down long ago. The regulation of financial business was reduced. And once certain borders are crossed, you might realize that they have been there for a very good reason. But it is not easy to erect them again. People will resist, because the borders seem to limit freedom, the freedom of trade and business - which some people confuse and mistake with the freedom of individual expression. But without borders, eternity begins, randomness, invisibility. Without borders everything is either indifferent or one. What we are experiencing right now is how difficult it is to sensibly reintroduce formerly dissolved borders or limitations. Once you've scrambled the egg, you can't turn it back into a fried one. The urge to cross borders is immanent to all human beings. We all think the neighbor's cherries are much sweeter or, in other words, paradise is always elsewhere. And this is where we long to go. But it's only because of borders that we learn to distinguish, creating predictability and trust. They make life in community possible in the first place. So, is the crossing of borders a central pattern in human behavior in all known social forms of life? And is there a limitation to border-crossing, or continuous conquest?

This is how I feel and what I ask myself about the general or global paradox we live in. And when Pavel brought up the new headline for your symposium „Borders of scriptwriting“, this were the first ideas triggered in my brain. Borders are something we try to avoid. And at the same time there are certain borders which are absolutely necessary to keep life as fair, as just and as suitable as possible.

By choosing borders for the new topic, Pavel not only provoked this first ideas but he influenced my perception and suddenly I was observing the new key word borders all over the place. It seemed as if the word had to do with what we in German call *Zeitgeist*. *Lette*, the wonderfully inspiring European Culture Magazin, chose the title „Niveau sans frontiers“ for its one hundredth issue. Standard without borders, level without borders. The paradox declaration of the Swiss artist Max Grüter „Niveau sans frontiers“ ironically comments on the end of the bipolarity of the world and emphasises the necessity of borders. The German magazine **Brand Eins** dedicated its latest issue to borders, using a proverb we often heard in times of the Berlin wall : when we protested against West-German politics our parents said: „Geh doch rüber“ meaning “cross over - why don't you go and live behind the GDR wall ” In this magazine I found the definition of borders by philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann, who claimed that without borders we couldn't even live. Maybe his definition helps us clarify what exactly we are trying to think about. “To begin with, a border is nothing more than a real or mental line, separating two things from each other. It simultaneously lets one thing end and the other begin. And vice versa. And it gives both contour and shape. Most of all, it distinguishes one from the other – or it at least claims the difference. Without borders nothing was perceptible. They are prerequisites for all types of human insight. Because every insight starts with one crucial act: understanding. This is not that.” So borders supply awareness, insight, perception, no knowledge without borders.

The declaration of Max Grüter I mentioned also has a hidden anarchic artistic bond with a Czech poet.

We are here holding this symposium in the Czech Republic and it is the home country of The and Good Soldier Schwejk. *Der brave Soldat Schweijk* is a figure in world literature everybody in this room knows, and his creator - at least the Czech students will know his name - was Jaroslav Hasek. And this guy had a very special relationship with borders.

Hasek was a satirist and temporarily an anarcho-syndicalist, both features requiring a particular relationship with borders and the crossings thereof. Hasek founded „the party for moderate progress within the limits of the law“. This might sound somewhat harmless at first. „Party for moderate progress within the limits of the law“. The party manifesto included the reintroduction of the Inquisition and slavery. Why not? After all, both had once been within the limits of the law and completely legal. This great anarchist satirist who – probably fueled by alcohol – founded his party in the Prague neighborhood „Vinohrady“ in a pub called „The Golden Liter“ brings home to us just how relative the business of borders is. Just like Grüter. How they change historically but also how they fall victim to different interests. However we chose to set and define the borders or frameworks, determines how we value things.

What does this have to do with screenwriting? First: we write about reality, and how we perceive reality will influence the way we narrate it and how we will dramatize our real life world.. And second: The borders of screenwriting underlie the same notion. The way we define them predetermines the outcome, the individual, social or economic value of our writing.

Another experience which was triggered by the shift of perception was that I suddenly realized we are completely surrounded by and involved in „stories“ all the time and in any place. People search for narratives almost everywhere, in politics, in ideology, in Public Relation, but also in marketing, in advertising. These are stories in quotation marks, in inverted comma. These stories frame and reframe facts, they are told to influence our perception of the world. And the question rises: How do we separate the “false” stories from the dramatic stories with a meaningful connection to the real world? We can only do this by defining rules for stories, by specifying certain components and ingredients which are inherent parts of storytelling.

Nowadays, the classical storytelling in our business is hassled/challenged by new formats. Phenomena like the so-called docu-fiction ??? and the scripted reality formats. And then the games industry propagating cross-media products. People in the business increasingly speak of content when they mean storytelling. For the different distribution platforms available to us these days, “content” is the new hype word for all this obliterating the differences between all the diverging forms of moving images.

Dramatic scriptwriting is separated from this rather vague notion of content by existential borders. In his key note, Keith Cunningham will tell us more about the effects which occur when these borders are touched or disturbed and I think, we will discuss these ideas throughout the course of the symposium.

We aren't the only ones holding a symposium on the topic of borders. Each year in January, political and economic leaders – even a few scientists are admitted – meet in Davos, Switzerland, for the World Economic Forum. World leaders discuss the borders of trade, of quota and the reduction of trade barriers. In 1996, when John Perry Barlow made his appearance, things were quite different. Barlow is the songwriter of the rock band Grateful Dead. I sincerely hope that for some of you in the audience, this brilliant band still rings a bell. John Perry Barlow founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation defending the freedom and rights of internet users. He wanted to protect cyberspace from governmental influence and declared cyberspace a frontier, a border, restricting the influence of governments. Today, we know of course, that the real problem in cyberspace are not the governments, but the corporations that have big data available on a global scale and process it through algorithms. Big data is what we call the mass of data, worked out by algorithms, offering reliable information about the user.

The problem seems to distract us from our actual topic, but only on a surface level, as I will show with a small example. The new ways of distribution for film via the internet are being praised as our independence from big companies and corporations and the fossilized TV networks. But those who use the new internet platform "netflix" to view movies on demand is, just like all the other users, delivering big data. His viewer habit is recorded: which parts of the film he rewinds or fast forwards, when and for how long he interrupts the film, primarily and which point exactly. The combined gigantic mass of data serves as a pretty exact indication of the effect of the films and their stories which we, as writers, try and create.

To the industry of course, the only effect of interest is one isolated factor within the dramaturgy: viewer loyalty. When effectivity is everything, so is viewer loyalty. And I am slightly concerned that the new guidelines, generated from this big data, will make today's agonizing discussions about TV ratings seem like a walk in the park.

Since the rise of the so-called „Pixar Story Rules“, a critical conversation about processed storytelling has erupted, brought about by Richard Brody from The New Yorker. The Pixar Story Rules refers to the 22 prescribed regulations intending to guarantee a universal, global effect of the story for all the studio's animation work.

There have always been programs, like dramatica, asking the writer different types of questions to guide him or her through the material and hopefully improving the story. So far, its success was limited. But the capacity and complexity, and therefore the effectivity, of algorithms is growing. At the end of the last century we thought a lot about what effect digitalization would have on the moving image. Today we have long gotten used to them. What effect digitalization and the invasion of calculation has had on storytelling we don't yet know much about. Professional musicians already made some painful experiences in their field. I heard someone complain, „The people in the industry know exactly how many beats per minute will get people dancing. They know how many beats per minute will prompt them to get a drink. So they play a beat in the studio and then take it apart and piece it back together like lego, depending on what it is they need.“ This type of studio work wasn't for him, he said despairingly. „You can't improvise and that's really the soul of music.“

On Wednesday, we will have a lecture called “On Mathematics and Storytelling” and I hope we will hear more about the power and the dangers of algorithms in storytelling.

There are other borders of scriptwriting we might touch on during the next days of the symposium. Now, I want to have a short look at the more obscure or opaque kind of borders which are not so obvious but exist nonetheless.

The borders between screenplay and film for example seems to be a clear and definite line between word and image. But even in the screenplay we find deep connections between the text and the image/space, complex metamorphoses are taking place. In certain respect, the image and the narrative language are rooted one inside the other. On the one side, language is an abstract logical construction, but when it's used to tell something real, when we use it for storytelling, wouldn't we first need a prelingual, spatial notion of the matter? Wouldn't we need to experience something, or see it in our mind's eye, in order to talk or write about it? The analytical way of speaking or writing are called “reflecting” or “mirroring”. A visual/pictorial? representation of reality through the medium of the mirror. This idea will be discussed further in the lecture this afternoon by Miroslav Petříček, „Borders of Fiction: Reality“. On a related note, I would like to quote an author and screenwriter very dear to my heart:

„One does not look through writing on to reality – as through a clean or dirty window-pane. Words are never transparent. They create a space, not of existence, but of experience. The clarity of the written word has little to do with style itself. A baroque text can be clear; a simple text can be opaque. Clarity is the gift of the way *space, created by words* in a given text, is arranged.

These are the words of novelist John Berger. His storytelling in images has become known through his screenplays for Swiss director Alain Tanner's best films. The space he claims necessary to arrange words in a narrative text, of course, is not of physical nature. It might be that the scarf of a woman demands more space

than a cloud. This depends on the particular experience that is being related. In any case, the space we need in order to arrange the words, is one of images. (? stimmt das so?)

And then there is another totally different kind of border, with strange kinds of doors, - the threshold which the actor must cross to enter the game.

Actors contribute something to the story that doesn't necessarily add up with what the script or the dramatic composition provides. Actors bring their immediate physical presence to the table. They add the subtle relationship between their own persona and the performed, fictional character, our creation. It's a very special ingredient of any film. The special thing about actors in film is that – in contrast to the theatre – the craft and the very personal become much more intertwined. Film actors work with body and soul, their eyes and their voice, with their posture and shape. Things happen no one could put into words beforehand. Things that can't be captured in words, but rather invade through a void in the text, through a sort of gate we have to create. Robert Towne once described this process as follows:

„The point is that a fine actor on screen conveys a staggering amount of information before he ever opens his mouth. The screenwriter must be skillful with dialog to add to that information. This brings me to the biggest ongoing concern I have always had writing screenplays: If you believe that the actor projects character on film „tellingly“ in silence, then the questions you ask yourself are: How do I NOT say something? How do I not get into the actor's way? How can I exploit an actor's performance and place it at the service of the screenplay before he's given it?“

This means we need to create space, a manageable basic action that is easy to comprehend. This leaves space for minor matters and the actors can do and say things that aren't necessary to explain the story but tell us something else. You create these open spaces for actors by not cramming a scene. By trying to write laconic dialogue. If you can get the same result with 3 instead of 5 lines, it's the better option.

Towne – who is also a great director – added something else. He said, „Strangely enough, it is mostly the calmness in the actor's face that makes this possible. He compares it to the water surface. When the water is moving you cannot see deep, you only see the waves. But if the water is calm and clear, you can see deep down to the very ground.

Questioning the borders of scriptwriting is, in some way, limitless. It can lead us way out into the realms of philosophy, the borders inside in ourselves and outside, our borders of knowledge, of skills, of imagination, and creativity. It leads us to the philosophical question: is the universe without borders or is it endless? Is there a chance to know which is true? You might ask: does it even make a difference? I think it does. But before things in general and me in particular get too confused I want to quote Kafka. I think you can't have a symposium in Prague without quoting Kafka. So after offering up my own insignificant thoughts, I take refuge in Kafka. From what we know about his life, he was not a very happy guy. And his work is also not exactly bursting with joyful delight. But it is full of insight into life. He was a very, very good writer and a deep thinker and so he could not well avoid touching upon the source, the well, the off-spring of all human creativity. No wonder Kafka has the best advice for authors I ever read in a book, or any of the innumerable screenwriting manuals we have. So here is my Kafka quote:

(deutsch lassen)Du brauchst Dein Zimmer nicht zu verlassen,

bleib einfach an Deinem Tisch sitzen und horche.

Du brauchst nicht einmal zu horchen, warte einfach.

Du brauchst nicht einmal zu warten, werde einfach still –

Die Welt wird sich Dir offenbaren, sie hat gar keine andere Wahl.

You don't have to leave your room,

just stay at your table and listen.

You don't even have to listen, just wait.

You don't even have to wait, just fall silent

The world will reveal itself to you, it has no choice.

Research and experience are important for our work as writers, we need to be connected to the world around us but the inner source of our creativity is stillness, and this source has no borders at all, it is limitless, endless. I wish you all that you might be able to tap into this source, because then your stories will cross all national and linguistic borders.