

DIE FABRIKANTEN – INTERVIEW WITH KEITH CUNNINGHAM AND TOM SCHLESINGER

You have been working together more than twentyfive years. You consult scriptwriters, you teach screenwriting and you write yourself. What does daily life, especially working life, looklike ? I noticed during the preparations that you travel a lot. How much time do spend on which fields of your work?

Keith Cunningham: In the past few years I have been doing a great many seminars, both in Germany, around Europe, and in nearby regions. In 2004, there were 24 workshops, almost one every 2 weeks, and I was on the road 225 days. I am trying to cut that out, cut back on the traveling so that I have more time for my writing. This year is a compromise, sort of a transition. I have fewer seminars, but I am working on screenplays in Istanbul and Morocco. So I turn out to be traveling about as much this year. Between screenplay deadlines, I am writing a book about my work with filmmakers in Ramallah, Palestine, and am in planning stages of a novel.

Tom Schlesinger: I'm collaborating on four diverse projects at the moment: a high concept romantic comedy, a dark indie comedy, a thriller television series in Germany, and, with Keith, a mythic action TV series in Morocco. I write each morning from about nine to one. In the afternoon, I work with my collaborators, and prepare for workshops and consultations. Then I exercise, and go back to my writing for a couple hours before dinner. When I'm teaching and consulting on the road, I keep a journal of ideas and dreams, and stay in touch with the people I'm collaborating with by phone.

Which projects, which films were something special to work on?

Tom: Working with Caroline Link on "Beyond Silence" and "Nowhere in Africa" was special for a number of reasons. Both films addressed the politics of family and relationships on a universal level, which is why I believed they both achieved international success. "Beyond Silence" was also gratifying because initially no one in Germany wanted to fund it. The "threshold guardian" producers and reduteurs were saying, "No one will come to see a family melodrama!" But writer-director Caroline Link is a true artist and, in the end, it was her conviction, talent and determination that made both these films happen. What was most special for me was the collaborative process of working with Caroline on the scripts.

Keith: I began a series of projects in 2003 with the Goethe Inst. in Ramallah, Palestine. I was invited to come and train writers and directors there. This led to workshops that Tom and I have taught in Morocco in 2005. This work has convinced me of the importance of collaborating with Muslim filmmakers and artists. That first trip to Ramallah opened my eyes to the gulf of misunderstanding that exists between the two worlds, and which is often made worse by the media treatment of it. I believe we must be creative and proactive in engaging in a dialogue, so I am specially motivated to work on scripts in these countries, collaborating with local directors and producers. I like the intensity, the urgency with which these people need to tell their stories.

For example, I am currently co-writing a script about the independence of Morocco from French colonialism in 1956. This required extensive historical research and trips to different parts of the country, as well as into tough neighborhoods in Casablanca where resistance activities took place. These events 50 years ago impact very much on how the country sees itself today. It is very hot politically, and my Moroccan partners work very hard to maintain their vision amid many outside pressures.

Tom: In addition to working with Keith in Morocco, I was part of a creative team brought together by the Swiss group, Focal, to work with filmmakers from Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. We worked with them to help them "grow" stories from their own cultures, build cross-cultural communication through storytelling, and build their commercial infrastructure, so they were not swallowed up by the multiplex theaters that were only showing blockbusters from Hollywood and fake art films from Europe.

Tom, what is the idea of "The Inner Reaches of Outer Space" articulated by your teacher Joseph Campbell about? Is it about a new mythology? Which films would be a good example?

Tom: Like so many of us, Joseph Campbell was quite moved by the Apollo spacecraft landing on the moon. In his book, "The Inner Reaches of Outer Space," he suggested that the laws of outer space are within us as well, and that a new mythology could arise from this. As it is above, so it is below; as it is without, so it is within. Joseph Campbell once told us that the shaman today is the artist going on inner journeys and bringing those "underworld" visions back to their societies through their art work.

Our model of "The Story Molecule" is a lens to view the relationship between a character's inner world and their outer world. Being aware of the symbiotic relationship between a character's inner world, the emotional network of characters and the outer world actions, we can say that everything we see on the screen is a metaphoric projection of what's happening inside the main character. We can't see what's happening inside our characters or inside ourselves, but like dreams, stories can be a vehicle of communication between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind.

Movies like "Amelie," "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," "City of God," and virtually all of Peter Weir's movies reveal this inner world-outer world symbiosis.

Keith, what is the core idea of your book "The Soul of Screenwriting"? What are classic mistakes in storytelling, and why are there stories we immediately believe? Which miracle makes us sometimes identify immediately with the characters we see on screen?

Keith: "The Soul of Screenwriting" is a really comprehensive creative guide to developing screenplays. By comprehensive, I mean that the book guides the writer through the creative process itself. Of course there are very advanced techniques and models that aid the conceptual development and the writing of the project, such as the "Sixteen Story Steps" model Tom and I have created. But we all know that writers are human beings, and that feeling, intuition, and motivation are just as critical to the success of a work as structural systems and techniques.

So "The Soul of Screenwriting" addresses all of this, plus important topics such as orchestrating the idiom and visual style of the story, and the collaborative process in story development. I know all of the books that are out there on the market, what they have to say and what they lack. My goal has been to create absolutely the most useful and insightful book a writer could want. I spent the better part of 10 years working on "The Soul of Screenwriting". It may be published in two volumes.

The question of why we find some stories and characters convincing and others not is really quite complex. The answer takes us rather deep into society and psychology. Because it is not at all merely a question of craft and solid story construction. You could say that a number of factors come into play between the character and the audience. Of course the character must make sense to the viewer, be three dimensional with an outside and an inside, with a past, present, and future, and situated in a believable social context. We must also find the character likeable and sympathetic.

Yet we may have all this and still not be *compelled* by the character. What makes a character *compelling* is indeed related to dramatic construction. We must see that the character is active, takes a risk, and that his actions have consequences. The drama (including comedy) must engage the hero in a conflict from which there is no easy escape. Tom and I have spent a great deal of time articulating an understanding of the inner changes that a character is forced to make. We term this “growth through crisis.” As we want the character to succeed, we enter into increasing emotional identification with him as the crisis deepens.

But there is also another factor, and this comes from the audience as well as from the filmmaker. It has to do with what the audience subconsciously projects onto the figure of the main character. This *does* take place, sometimes feebly, sometimes overpoweringly. What the audience projects is related to the zeitgeist, to the power of marketing to build an image, and also to archetypes in the collective unconscious. The appeal of a figure like Hannibal Lector cannot be explained through marketing or any other deliberate process. Hannibal touches something primal, beyond rationality – and yet this dark force is very much floating in the zeitgeist. There is essentially one aspect or face to the compelling figure that is timeless and universal in human experience, but the specific expression of the universal is conditioned by a society at a given point in time. The way this perennial dark shadow embodied in Hannibal Lector is expressed in the movie belongs very much to our time, our moment in history. This is something studio executives, writers and directors try very hard to figure out, but it is very intuitive. It requires what we call a mythic understanding, and also a direct human experience of life. Creating good, compelling stories requires us to go beyond the conscious aspect of creativity into the intuitive, that night world most of us hesitate to enter.

The participants of the seminar in March will have to transfer your guidelines for developing a good story to their field of work, the field of communication. It seems that when they really want to get in touch with people, they have to touch the inner world of their potential target audience or customers – no matter how abstract the content respectively the cultural product being marketed is. Are there parallels even if their communication has no specific protagonist? Is it possible to create a story in which certain things or aspects play an important role?

Keith: It is well known in advertising and marketing that it is vitally important to *personify* a concept or a product so that the audience gains a feeling bond with it. That is, to give the object or concept the qualities belonging to a person: motive, will, moods, charm, movement/animation. Personification is one of the main strategies in any kind of marketing or communication. A second is a kind of *secondary identification*. We see a character, with whom we are induced to identify, positively transformed by the product. The product acts like a secondary character through its *relationship* to the “hero.” – like a status-symbol effect.

This is especially done in a way to create a virtual tautology. A universal value: freedom, power, sex-appeal, etc. is associated with the product in such a way that it becomes impossible for the viewer to think “No.” Of course the product itself may be garbage: unhealthy such as fastfood, cancer-causing such as cigarettes, or so unnecessary as to be virtually useless.

The world of cultural institutions has tried to hold itself above such heavy, often bad-faith rhetoric. Museums, theaters, etc. appealed either to the audience’s already-developed appreciation for the arts and culture, and/or to a general sense of cultural entitlement. These strategies by themselves have a hard time winning new audiences of those who have not inherited the cultural canon of past

generations. This is a great challenge for institutions. They are pressured to adopt some unsavory rhetoric of advertising in order to compete for the audience's attention.

With their own goals and means, cultural institutions must still discover the essential *story, their story*, the narrative of what they are and what they stand for that will speak to people today.

Tom: Reaching people who are readers, spectators or the audience is a question of point of view. If you are not presenting a story with a main character, antagonist and subordinate characters, then you present the story in such a way that the audience becomes one of the characters. A great documentary film will do this very well, since the events often do not fit into a linear, dramatic narrative structure.

Why do people like stories so much?

Tom: People like stories because they are either a way of making meaning out of life, or a way to escape the inescapable fact that life is simply a mystery. I've studied the world's great religions and read many spiritual texts and in the end, no one really knows where we came from, where we are, or where we're going. Great stories are about humility. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," he was not talking about the underdog, the oppressed, or the weak of spirit. In my opinion, he was talking about men and women, who as Joseph Campbell suggested, courageously approach life with a "sense of awe in the face of the mystery." People of the earth, rather than people trying to control the earth.

Keith: An insightful writer, Frank McConnell, once said, "Stories are the best form of self-help mankind has ever devised." Much more could be elaborated on just why and how that is, but I think that puts it in a nutshell.

Do good stories influence the audience? There are certainly films that have changed our own view of the world, but can films also motivate us to act?

Keith: I do believe that great works of art, in whatever medium, convey something, an extra dimension. Otherwise, how could we recognize or appreciate greatness in art to begin with? It is not primarily a great *idea*. It is something like "charm." The great work fascinates us into a deeper contemplation. I recall seeing once in Milano a tiny Leonardo drawing of a stand of trees, barely 12x12 cm. I could stare at it for hours, it was so finely, intensely, and, one could say lovingly created. I recently saw "Babel", and am convinced that this film has greatness. It's not just a question of how the movie impacted me at the time, but how it impacted me hours and days later.

This is an entirely different thing than movies that are trying to be morally good or correct. With *this* motive mixed into the filmmaker's intention, it is almost impossible not to fall into didacticism, which ruins the artwork by destroying its depth.

Tom: I believe that documentary movies can motivate us to act. "An Inconvenient Truth," for example, has presented irrefutable evidence about global warning that no amount of media propaganda can neutralize. This film was a great commercial success in America, which means that it reached many people who were not aware of the immediate and lethal stakes of environmental pollution. I do not believe that fiction films motivate the audience to act on social and moral issues. We might have a cathartic emotional experience in great fiction films, or we might appreciate a character acting from their values rather but I don't feel that fiction films provide a transformation experience for the audience that leads to conscious actions. One reason for this is that fiction filmmakers tend to be more egocentric than documentary filmmakers.

They seem to develop characters based on the disease model of behavior, meaning they are projecting their own traumas and woundings into the characters and viewing life as a process of overcoming weaknesses rather than moving from strengths. Keith and I have discussed how it might be better for the self-proclaimed "auteurs" to go to therapy, rather than trying to work out their mental and emotional disorders through their films.

When you develop scripts, do you have the cinema audience in mind? Or do you rather think of what people your trust would say?

Keith: These are extremely complex decision-making processes, taking place in a collaborative context. No director, not even Hitchcock, got everything his way. Still, a creator must have a core of faith and a basic unshakeable motivation. One will spend from a year up to many years of terribly intense and often frustrating work on a single movie. If there is not a deep motivation, coming from a deep core, a person normally gets eaten up by the process. Those only motivated by ambition or their own egoism, but lacking that core, almost always turn out mediocre work that we all recognize is uninspired.

Tom: I asked the great film producer Saul Zaentz (One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest, Amadeus) this question. He stared into my eyes and said, "Write only what you believe in." I do talk to people that I trust about my screenplays but in the end, you have to take responsibility yourself for shaping the stories that you want to tell. Early on, Keith and I realized that there are really no maps to follow when writing screenplays. You write scripts that pander to the audiences' base desires and produce movies based on video games that are successful at the box office, but if you are just feeding the audience what they know and want, why bother? You might as well just open up a falafel stand.
