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Michael Seeber

The Magic Triangle. The Field Of Creativity Between Producer, Director And Writer In Project Development

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MICHAEL SEEBER First of all, I don't want to give a very long lecture because I don't like to have these formal speeches. We're in a fine and proper group here, and will have time for a discussion afterwards.

This title "The Magic Triangle: The Field of Creativity Between Producer, Director and Scriptwriter in Project Development" sounds very, very pretentious and pompous. The content is not. I just wanted to throw in the thesis I've developed during my experience as a creative producer. This thesis is directed mainly toward scriptwriters, especially young scriptwriters, because experienced scriptwriters and experienced producers know what's necessary, and they know what the business is. So some of this may sound a bit trivial, but in my experience I've recognised that it's not always trivial. What I'm trying to avoid with my thesis often happens.

What does this title mean in general? What I mean with this title is: film development is not a process of a single individual working in a closed loft séparé. Writing and developing a film project is not comparable with writing a piece of literature. A film script is not a piece of literature. I really insist on this point because often young scriptwriters insist that what they are delivering is an authentic piece of art. Of course, writing is art. But for me, a script is not a piece of art.

When a writer has written a piece of literature, when his or her novel or poem is finished, he or she has achieved the final purpose of the work. A piece of literature has been written down; it's finished. A piece of literature consists of letters, words and sentences written down on a piece of paper or on the computer or printed in a book. That's it. Only when this piece of literature finds a reader, these letters, words and sentences, this piece of literature comes to life and gains a new reality and truth, a perception, understanding, interpretation of the reader.

A film script consists of letters, words and sentences. But when the film script finds a reader, these letters, words and sentences do not wake up. The film script does not come to a new life. There is no reality and truth in the film script.

In contradiction to a piece of literature, the final purpose of a film script doesn't rest in itself. That's the main difference. The film script cannot be brought to life through the eyes and mind of the reader. The film script is just a first step toward a film. Not the script itself, but the film is the final purpose of the script.

So to make a film out of a script, you need a film director and of course, a producer. And these two need a lot of other people to realise the intended film. Many of them are artists like the scriptwriter—the DoP, the set designer, the composer, the actors, etc. For all of them, the script is not a piece of literature. A film script is a kind of skeleton. It needs flesh, and muscles and blood to come to life. To bring in these elements, we need an entire film crew, including the actors, composer, etc., all of them headed by the producer and the director.

To develop a film project does not only mean to write a script. My thesis is – and my experience



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shows me that it's true – to develop a successful film project, you have to build up a creative triangle of writer-director-producer. The better the communication between these three edges of the triangle flows, the more creative power and magic the development process gains. It's clear it's not always a writer, a director and a producer, especially in documentary, where the writer and director are often the same person. But this doesn't change the concept. Then it's not a triangle but a creative plane, so to speak. But for the time being, I'll keep this term 'triangle.' The earlier in the development process the triangle is set up, the better the chances of developing a successful film script.

In most cases, the origin of a film is an idea. This origin can come from the writer, the director or the producer. If the producer has an idea for a film, he or she will think about who could be the best director and the best scriptwriter to develop and finally realise this idea. If the writer has the first idea, he or she has to find a producer and/or a director to realise the idea. In any case, there has to be a scriptwriter and a director—or both in the same person—and a producer to realise a film. And because the film script is not the final purpose, it is absolutely necessary that the first original idea, whoever has created it, is able to create a common vision, a strong and lively vision that is shared by the scriptwriter, the director and the producer. Without a common vision, there won't be a successful film. The earlier this vision emerges within the creative triangle, the better the chances of developing a successful film.

In my opinion, it is the common vision that gives the triangle of writer-director-producer its magic. This sounds trivial, but it is not trivial. This is my experience. Why do we need this triangle? The film is not music, not art, not architecture, not photography, not theatre. It's all of them, but it's much more than the sum of all these elements. It is a film. And a film is not only a piece of art. It is also a piece of economy, for example. We can't deny this fact. This means that a lot of decisions referring to many different levels and areas of its life have to be taken into account and have to be part of our development process. Therefore, we need the triangle of writer-director-producer. Not only the shooting of the film is teamwork; also the development of the film is teamwork.

What does this mean in practice? Let me just put on the table a few crucial moments from my experience that I consider very, very important one. I often see these points happening in the first mistakes, which have really bad consequences during development and then during production. The most important thing is to set up a creative dialogue between the parties involved. This creative dialogue is very important to me. I consider myself a 'creative' producer, and this means keeping a creative dialogue going with the director and scriptwriter throughout the whole production process. It's crucial for me. And we can only set up a creative dialogue when the parties consider each other partners. They have to be able to speak honestly to one another. For me, the relationship between producer, writer and director is something like a marriage. Like a marriage, there are good times and there are bad times. We have to be very careful about the partner to whom we are committing. If we commit to the wrong person, it's sheer hell. That means, when we start to develop a project, we have to find out as early as possible if the right partners are sitting at the table. Therefore, we have to sit together at the table as early and as intensely as possible, and start to talk about the common project.

First of all, we have to agree on the answer to the question: Which movie are we going to make? This is a very crucial question, of course, in terms of the film and in finding out if we – the writer, the director, the producer – can work together. Do we respect each other and each other's talents? Are our respective sensibilities similar? Do the writer and the director consider me, the producer, only as a person who brings in the money? We have a conversation about what the story is, about the kind of movie we want to make, and how to make it. Again, in this we have to be partners. We have to agree on the story. If we agree on the story, does the script or the outline or the exposé or the treatment work with the story we want to tell? Are there parts that don't work very well? Does it



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work as well as it might work? Is there some bad dialogue or some unnecessary exposition? Are there artificial moments or ill-timed plot twists? All of this can undermine an otherwise good story, of course. I personally have the opinion that if the writer and/or director are not open to this kind of open, frank conversation, he or she is the wrong person to work with me.

There's another important issue for me as a producer. Talking to writers and directors, I often have the feeling they are much less interested in the audience than I am. The writer and director, especially the writer, have something to say. They have a personal message which they consider important. It has to be said. And they don't care if I, or anyone else, is interested in that or not. They want to make that movie, whether or not there's an audience for it or how big or small that audience is. But I consider it very important to find out for which audience we are going to develop our film as early as possible. Defining an audience not only influences the question of financing and budget, it also has an effect on important creative aspects. Developing the script, we have to make sure that the audience will be engaged and stay engaged throughout the whole story.

So what should be the relationship between producer, writer and director? I've mentioned marriage. I've mentioned something like mutual respect. As a writer or as a director, you should consider the producer someone with whom you can have an open, honest relationship, someone who can straighten you out. You should be open for help, not only with script problems during development, but also later in production, for example with editing the film. In my opinion, during production, the role of the producer is rightly limited. The line producer, the production manager are much more important than the producer. During production, the producer has to step in if something is falling apart or serious problems are occurring. This does not happen very often, but it does sometimes. But during project development, the producer should be constantly present at every stage to keep the creative energies flowing within the magic triangle.

Okay, this is the first thesis I wanted to throw into the room, and I'm here to answer questions and talk about my experiences. I'm interested in hearing your opinions about that.

AUDIENCE How would you work as a producer with a director or a scriptwriter who obviously is very experimental and has something unique and artistic in his or her approach? Do you think there's a danger that you, as the producer, could close off the creativity in a way by having a very tight grip on the creative development of a film? You could end up with a less interesting film. Do you see what I mean, if the scriptwriter had the possibility to work more freely?

SEEBER First of all, I very much like unique approaches. These are very important things. But to keep the creative dialogue does not mean any limitation to creativity. Definitely not. Quite the contrary, it could enhance the creativity. For me, keeping a dialogue doesn't mean setting limitations. Definitely not. It just means, what can we do together? Developing and producing a film, you have to take into account so many different elements. I think you have to take into account these different elements in every step of development, because if you really go wrong, it's so hard to find your way back. Keep the dialogue in every stage of development. Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER SLASKI This triangle you talk about is very clear, but in my experience, whenever I've been working on a larger-scale production, there's this external circle around the triangle of all kinds of other people who have opinions of their own. It seems the day of the grand old producer who was a kind of dictator, really, who could make final decisions, a Dino De Laurentiis-type producer and his equivalent in Europe – at least in Western Europe – is gone. Certainly productions that I've worked on, I first felt I was dealing with just two people, a director and a producer. And then I discovered later on that there were countless other people behind the scenes pulling the strings, from distributors to focus groups, test audiences and all sorts of things that were influencing the decisions of the producer. Is this very common now, or was it always thus, that a



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producer was also beholden to external forces? Or are the days of this sort of grand, strong dictatorial producer over?

SEEBER I think so. He has died already, but I think, for example, he [De Laurentiis] was not dependent on the statements of distributors or other financiers and so on. He really had his vision and was able to realise it.

The test audience is another case. I think it could make sense to present a rough cut, for example – perhaps not a rough cut, but a nearly final cut – to a test audience if I am not really sure. Unless I really have the feeling, okay, that's it, that's what I wanted to have. Then I don't need a test audience. This test audience is also a very, very dangerous thing.

Here's one example for this creative dialogue discussion. Last year, I produced quite a big documentary. This was a very complicated and difficult production, but in the end, it went very well. We were near rough-cut, and I worked a lot in the editing room with the editor and the director and had a lot of influence in getting the editing going in the right direction. Then I called the financiers and told them I would like to show the rough-cut in the next three weeks or so, could we fix a date for that? We fixed a date and I was so sure that we were on the right track that I thought I could go on holidays for two weeks. They will make it until the rough-cut; it's on the right track. [laughter]

When I was away, the director invited dozens and dozens of friends and other people to look at this rough-cut. He received such a lot of different opinions and advice and so on that he changed everything in this rough-cut. I came back and we had this rough-cut screening, which I saw for the first time, and it was a disaster. It was a real disaster. The financiers completely rejected the rough-cut. This happened for the first time in my career as a producer. Not a nice situation. I came back to the editing room with the director and it was really very, very hard to get the film back on the right track.

I learned something from this: Now I never let the director show a rough-cut to anyone outside of the business without my presence. Never again. I forbid it. Really.

AUDIENCE You had a rough-cut screening with the financiers? I didn't know that in Austria the financiers can see the rough cuts and have an influence over them.

SEEBER Yes, yes the commercial funders, in this case, ORF.

AUDIENCE And influence over the final cut or final version?

SEEBER It depends what you define as influence.

AUDIENCE You said they rejected it. That's why I'm asking.

SEEBER They said it didn't work this way, and the problem was I had the same opinion.

AUDIENCE But who has the final cut?

SEEBER The producer.

AUDIENCE Not the director?

SEEBER No.

AUDIENCE Normally we have contracts in which the director has the final cut, actually.

SEEBER Not in Austria. Of course, I understand this because the money received is from the



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producer, not the director; the producer is responsible for the money, the funding.

AUDIENCE But if the director doesn't have final say creatively, this can be problematic.

SEEBER I have to say that never, never in twenty years of doing business have there been problems with the final cut of the director. It has to do with this permanent dialogue with the editor and the director.

AUDIENCE But in terms of the contract, in Austria, is it the director who has the right to the final cut?

SEEBER No, it's the producer.

AUDIENCE The author of the final product is actually considered the director. As the artistic director of this product, you have the right of having the final cut.

AUDIENCE It depends on which country.

AUDIENCE In Scandinavia, the author's rights are very much protected.

AUDIENCE In India or America, where there are many, many films produced every year, in both countries the producer has final cut in general. In America, it's contractual where this can be changed, but usually the majority percentage goes to the producer, as it is in India, something like ninety-nine percent of the time.

AUDIENCE In France, actually in the contract it is the director who has final cut. But there is a point, a sort of common negotiation where this partnership has to be negotiated, a common consensual agreement. But the director has the final cut. If it's not clear in the contract, it's still clear legally due to this *droit normal* [common law].

AUDIENCE And what if it's a co-production between Austria and France?

SEEBER Yes, yes, yes, I had this case. And in this case, the French co-producer has the right for the French version, and the final cut goes to the director.

AUDIENCE So there have to be two versions?

SEEBER It could happen, yes. But again, I've never experienced this kind of conflict with the director, even with directors who have been considered very difficult.

AUDIENCE Even in that case, I would imagine that when you went back to re-edit when you explained that he had too much input from outside influences, in the end, it was probably his final cut anyhow. I'm talking about the case you just talked about, when it was rejected at one point, when you came back from your holiday to hell?

SEEBER I think that the art of being a good producer is keeping the dialogue with the director in that sense – that at every stage the director can say – is able to say – this is still my thing.

AUDIENCE But I'm interested in the reasons for rejection. Was there an obvious, objective reason of quality that was the driving reason why you found it unacceptable, as well as the financiers? It's what I meant with my first question in that there could be various reasons for rejecting or trying to change an artistic product, which are not necessarily connected to artistic or quality reasons, but to



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economical, or the sake of ratings when it comes to television. You might end up rejecting a lot of interesting films from an artistic point of view. In that context, I'm a little bit concerned, quite concerned actually. [laughing] This triangle that you're talking about can actually narrow artistic freedom or creativity.

SEEBER I think it depends on the qualities of the persons involved in this triangle. In any case, if the producer, for example, is narrow-minded and stubborn and is only interested in the TV ratings, for example, or pleasing the financiers. In any case, it's difficult and unpleasant work for all the parties involved. My interpretation of the creative dialogue is that it depends on the quality of the persons involved. It's a kind of ideal, a best-case scenario. But I always try to reach this best-case scenario. For me, producing films wouldn't be pleasurable or any fun if I can't do this job as a partner with the other creative parties. I have great respect for the writer and the director, really great respect. This is very important for me. But I expect respect in return and that they are open to keeping the dialogue going.

AUDIENCE In the end, even if there are problems, there are moments when realism and pragmatism have to become the solution, because otherwise it's a catastrophe. Once the film is finished, there's rarely a problem.

SEEBER But it happens, it happens.

AUDIENCE But once it's finished, generally speaking, there's a reasonable solution for everybody, which may not even be the right solution for the film in artistic terms, but in this complex profession, there's a point. . .

SEEBER I think what we all want is to get the best result possible. To get the best result possible, we have to find the best conditions to make it as good as possible.

AUDIENCE I think it's very important to have a good producer, and as I said before in the earlier discussion, I want to ask important questions. For example, you know my producer and you asked me why she is not here. There's no producer here.

SEEBER It's a pity; it's a real pity.

AUDIENCE She has a lot of intelligence and knowledge and she knows, because we've had this discussion, that I need more confrontation and she hasn't given it to me for this project.

SEEBER Why not?

AUDIENCE There are different moments in the dialogue I had with her. It was very good, and now the film will go out into the world and come back.

This is another question: in Switzerland, we have the possibility that if you are the author, the director, half the percentages go to the producer. For Christopher Frei's *War Photographer*, which was Oscar-nominated, he is both the producer and the director. I had many discussions with him, and he said if you can get the money, you don't need anybody. And I always say, but I need the dialogue for making the picture. For me, I'm looking for the questions. How do we expand the triangle, for example, for the author-artists? Is there also a dialogue for how to find the best people for the camera, in new cases, for example? How to choose the other ones, not who has the final word? This is the question – how to expand the team, the crew, in concrete terms?

SEEBER First of all, you have to know a lot of people to have a choice. In Austria, I know nearly every person who is good in his or her profession. I have a lot of people to choose from. I have to



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think about how they work together artistically. Or on a personal level, do they fit together? Are they open enough for a kind of dialogue, a lot of talking? What are their expectations towards production, towards their behaviour to each other, and so on. Communication is very, very crucial in this profession, in this job. Communication, communication, communication at every time, everywhere.

AUDIENCE But is the director part of those decisions of which people to take on board? It's a common decision?

SEEBER Well, of course.

AUDIENCE If you disagree, then who decides?

SEEBER I've never experienced where at the end of the discussion I would say to a director, you have to take this DoP, for example. At the end of the discussion, it was always a common decision.

AUDIENCE In my experience, there would just be a veto from the producer because the chosen person was demanding too much money, a very famous DP who won't work for under so much per week, and the producer wasn't able to negotiate.

SEEBER If I have a documentary with a director in Austria, and he says to me, "I can only work with Michael Bauhaus as DoP," then I have to say, no, definitely.

AUDIENCE I know of an instance where a director picked a photographer who died, and then after shooting they had to choose a new one, and there was a suggestion of taking on someone to fulfil the strength that she was lacking. Each director does not have the same confidence of technical issues, and so forth. A photographer that might be excellent technically might have other issues personally. Do you know what I mean?

SLASKI How do you choose a composer, for instance? [laughter]

SEEBER First of all, music for me is extremely important, personally and also for film. I think I know a lot about music. Some of the most important Austrian composers are friends of mine, and my wife is a singer. I have a lot of relations to a lot of good musicians. As I said yesterday in the discussion, your [Christopher's] music is a little bit emancipated from the story, from what the images are telling. And for me, it's very, very important that music brings in a new element, a kind of independent element, into the storytelling to build up a kind of complexity of the whole thing. This is an important aspect of how to choose a composer, of course. Another aspect is, is the composer able to communicate, especially with the director?

AUDIENCE Probably one of the most interesting French films of the last forty years is À nos amours by Maurice Pialat. In the first minutes of the film, he used a song by Klaus Nomi, one minute in.

SEEBER Ah, that pa, pa, pa, pa, pa.

AUDIENCE It's fantastic. Two minutes of music, "The Cold Song."

SEEBER "Let me freeze to death again."

AUDIENCE But wouldn't choosing the composer totally be up to the director? This example also happened in a very close dialogue with the director.



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SEEBER Definitely. But there are some directors who say they are not so acquainted with music and they seek help.

AUDIENCE Are you always transparent with your director about the budget, or when you make changes in the budget? Do you discuss details of the budget?

SEEBER Details that are important for the creative aspects I have to discuss, of course. I have to make this budget decision together with the director because I have to give him the possibility to realise what he wants to do. Definitely yes. There are other things that you don't see in the budget. Of course he knows the overall budget, and on principle, I don't have anything to hide in my budgets.

AUDIENCE Sometimes, I'm hired as a consultant because the director, writer and producer are in a deadlock. They can't agree on something to do with the script development. Does that make sense to you? Sometimes I wonder if they should sort it out among themselves. When I walk in, I don't know who's pulling which way. Then I'll say I think it should be this way and it goes in the direction of one of the three of them, or two if there are just two of them. I always wonder if the other one is satisfied with that, the one who has 'lost.' I mean, I still accept the job and get paid for it. [laughter]

AUDIENCE And in the end, they do what you say or do they just use yours as another opinion?

AUDIENCE They use what I say against the other. [laughter] But again, that's not my problem. I'm not present when that happens.

AUDIENCE It's a practical case. Sometimes we used to do the script consulting with the producer and the director. Sometimes the director would come to us and say, "Can we have the conversation with just you and me?" [laughter] It doesn't happen very often because the producer and the director are often on good terms, but they still want to have a neutral party.

AUDIENCE Michael, does that make sense to you? Would you do that – calling somebody from outside who is neutral, let's say?

SEEBER Yes, yes, I've done it. Sometimes you are in a situation where it's not easy to solve the problems. It's not easy to take sides, to decide which side is right. For me it makes sense to call in another person. There is at least a chance that a person coming from outside can cut the confusion.

AUDIENCE What Christopher said before about these outside influences, you know? I have a lot of respect for the producer because when they're part of the discussion, they can often filter out a lot of the outside influences. In France, a lot of the financing comes from television, so there is a bundle of prerequisites and you have two or three channels financing. I have the impression that the producer goes out and listens and finds out what all the demands of those people are. If it's a good producer, they kind of filter that, and when they come back, they bring an understanding of all of that in trying to sort out what we can get away with, what has to be done or should be done to please them, even if it's not what they ask. So the producer is maybe not the powerful Hollywood mogul type, but his role is to buffer.

SEEBER But in this case, you can see how complex the job of the producer is. You have to deal with such a lot of different elements and forces and aspects and so on. You have to fulfil elements



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that are really contradictory to each other. You are a good producer if you can deal with all these different powers, and despite all these different aspects, are able to realise, at least, a great part of your original vision.

AUDIENCE We were talking about the point about if a producer influences a director at all, is he going to reduce the creativity? I think that does happen and it can be a true thing. Or there is the myth of that. We've seen films like that with a very, very commercial producer. But I also find that there are circumstances in which a director will break away from a producer and try to do something on his own because he feels stifled, and it's actually not as good. Again, it all depends on the people. But remember at the beginning when you were talking about writing a piece of literature and the screenplay, where the audience has to come into play? I've been in situations where the director refuses the ideas of the producer, maybe thinking that when the producer is talking about the audience that it's all about ratings and money, when in fact, often it's enabling the director to get his vision across. Sometimes you have directors who have a very specific vision, but the way they express it isn't very comprehensible. If you look at some people's filmographies, you have directors who work very well with some producers. They make a big hit and go on to make a film on their own or with a smaller producer where they have more power and it doesn't turn out as good.

AUDIENCE There might also be a difference between documentaries and fiction, because in documentaries you have other things counting as well, from a journalistic point of view, from an ethical point of view, many concerns. The politics that rule in TV channels now, we as documentary makers, experience that they are afraid of shocking the audience. They're getting too cowardly when it comes to screening interesting documentaries.

AUDIENCE By rights, the producer should know that up front. If this communication has come across, then the producer should know that he or she is producing somebody who is going to come up with something risky. And the filmmaker should also make it clear to the producer. They should already be on the same wavelength before you get to that point.

AUDIENCE Ideally yes, but it doesn't always happen that way. And then comes the interesting situation of who is going to cut for that film and who has the final cut. I've had experiences that I, as a director, had the final cut and that I have the right to fight for my film because I didn't experience the same attitude from the producer, actually.

AUDIENCE The pressure is probably different, right? The pressure the director has towards his project is different from the producer's if it comes to a pressured situation. The pressure is different.

AUDIENCE In television documentaries, in general in Europe, the producer is really in line with the commissioning editors. There are exceptions, but generally the producers are totally under the direction of the commissioning editors – unfortunately.

SLASKI In the industry in Austria, from the 30s up to the early 60s, 70s, there was a sort of studio system. We had Ealing and Hamer and various other large studios almost modeled on the Hollywood system. I think that was the case in Germany, as well, these large entities of production. For instance, in the music department, you'd have a music director who would be responsible for directing or hiring full-time composers, orchestrators, music editors. They would basically be on payroll. They would have worked on a number of films provided to them. They wouldn't have to worry about marketing themselves or networking or any of the kind of things that have become part and parcel of the contemporary scene.

In some respects, as a composer, I kind of hark back to what it must have been like in those days because so much of my time is spent on nonmusical activities, when I would like to be able to



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concentrate purely on creating. I find the industry so haphazard, that the opportunities of actually bumping into the right person at the right time has almost as much chance as winning the lottery. So when it does happen, it feels like a miracle.

I look back to the MGM period in Hollywood, for example, where these works of genius were created, perhaps because all they had to do was focus on what they were good at as opposed to marketing themselves and the networking, which takes so much time. I can talk about the music industry because that's what I know. Very often, it's the friend of the friend of the brother of the director kind of situation, as opposed to having been filtered through an expert in these fields, who would have selected through a process the very best composers available in the country. They might have been complete anti-social freaks, but they were brilliant at what they did. Whereas now, you've got to be charming and a great larger-than-life personality and maybe the really talented people slip through the net because they haven't necessarily got the personality to impress at the cocktail party.

I think, well maybe there's something about the studio system that we've lost. I don't know if it ever really existed in Europe, but I think it did to a greater extent than it does now, where there were these centres of film production. I wonder whether people in the room think it would be nice if there were a huge place that we could go and be judged for our talents, as opposed to just relying on the chance miracle of being discovered accidentally or discovering a director or writer. In the world of music, it is extremely hard to actually know where to find the next project. How does one meet a director? It's the domino effect, and the ball starts rolling and you get known. It happens, but it's terribly difficult. Where do I go to meet the right person who is going to give me my first chance? And even then, after you've had your first chance, how do you keep the momentum going? It would be nice to be able to go to one location, and you know that if you go to that one place, you will have a chance then of having access to dozens and dozens of projects. You wouldn't have to go here, there and everywhere. Maybe there is an opportunity or desire amongst the freelance nature of our profession to create one or two or three centres of film production, European-wide film production, which could compete with the Hollywood studios, where European talent could find a home. Like a big castle where films would be made. [laughter]

AUDIENCE I saw this art film where it showed all these people working in different fields end up on laptops all being office managers, depicting the modern life of creative people. Everyone is free to do everything, but everyone, in the end, is sitting there managing funds, doing this and that. I heard of a project, a documentary, which is quite unique in film history. It was a movie that was never made, *L'enfer d'Henri-Georges Clouzot [Inferno]*. It was a filmmaker's dream. It was to be made by a famous director, and a producer came to him and said whatever money you need you have, and see you in three years, 'bye. For five years, he was producing and spent a lot of money and, ultimately, failed in the project with this whole attempt, having had all of these opportunities.

SLASKI Did he have any boundaries?

AUDIENCE Actually, in the documentary about this project, they said he had no boundaries. The producer just said, I am your biggest fan, do whatever you want; here's all the money you need to use one of the biggest cinematographers in France, Romy Schneider as an actress. He had great materials, but nothing came of it. It was an epic failure.

SLASKI There's a danger, of course, in a studio system where things can become a bit industrialised. Films from the 40s and 50s do feel a little bit like they came off the factory production line. I'm thinking about music a bit selfishly, but the music departments were so extraordinary, where you would have ten composers and ten orchestrators and there would be a particular person who did Westerns very well or one that did thrillers very well, or romantic stuff. So you'd often find yourself working with two or three other people on the same film. There was that incredible situation where you'd go to the canteen at lunchtime. I've spoken so much to people who worked



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like this in those days. You would mix with all these other creative people, bouncing ideas off of each other, sharing knowledge. It all sounds so idealistic; I'm sure there was backstabbing and all that, too.

AUDIENCE Can you imagine a Hollywood studio producer making a Bergman film or Antonioni film in the 50s?

SLASKI There was Cinecittà, for example, which was a huge studio. I'm talking about creating that sort of thing.

SEEBER On the other hand, I think the idea of a big European production house for the next 30, 40, 50 years is completely unrealistic. I mean the European markets are so segmented and so different and so small. I don't think it's possible to build up such a thing.

AUDIENCE Would that be desirable for you as a producer?

SEEBER At the moment, no. On the other hand, I think that's the great power of Europe, not from the economic but the artistic point-of-view, that we have such a lot of variety here in Europe, such a lot of different approaches, different tastes, different faces, different stories and so on and so on. It's a *huge* economic problem. But from the artistic point-of-view, it's great.

AUDIENCE But I think this is a good start what you're doing now. I mean, if more composers could attend the forums where filmmakers are gathered, that would be great. Because the informal dialogues and talks that happen under certain circumstances like we have now, it's more useful than being formalised in a huge production house. So film festivals, forums, markets, pitching forums, wherever filmmakers are gathered. It would be great to also have the possibility to connect with composers.

SEEBER I would like to raise a question to the young scriptwriters. Have you experienced moments or situations with producers that were completely disappointing or uncomfortable? Where do you see the problems with the producers in your work?

AUDIENCE We worked with a production company that does mostly commercials and they're trying to do films now. We felt they didn't know enough to do drama, so we were actually the ones with all the knowledge, even though we were the writers, not the producers.

SEEBER Lack of competence.

AUDIENCE Yeah, lack of competence. We were the ones that knew all the actors, the DoPs and how to organiSe the crew to do a pilot. It felt difficult because we were pushing them to do the work for us that they were supposed to be doing themselves. And then we had a hard time because they were helping out – not much, but a little – in financing the pilot. When we tried to tell them that we didn't think it was working and that we wanted to go elsewhere, they insisted that they were the producers and that they had put some money and time in, so it was their work. It took a long time before we could actually leave them. We felt so bad and small because we were younger than they were. It was difficult because we didn't have that communication we've been talking about. If we had had that at the beginning, we would have had less of a problem on our side, I think. But we learned that our next producer should have more experience and be better at communicating.

AUDIENCE Your case is quite common. Producers coming from commercials entering into producing feature films, there are always issues.



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AUDIENCE Also, they didn't ask or we didn't do any written commitments so we never had a written commitment, just a handshake deal. So that made it hard to leave them. I wonder if someone comes to you with a treatment, for example, do you immediately make a written commitment, or how does it work?

SEEBER If we decide to develop the project together, yes we make a contract. It's a very small contract, but it's just so something is written and is on the table.

AUDIENCE Do you make it for a certain amount of time? Let's try to do this work together for half a year, maybe?

SEEBER Yes, we define the time of cooperation for me to find money or develop the project. It's necessary that I have, at least, an option on the treatment, to have the rights to apply for money, these kinds of things. Obviously, it's clear that if I as a producer am not able to finance the film until this or that time, all rights go back to the author. These are the things we always define in a small agreement. It's better for both sides to have something written.

AUDIENCE I would like to go back to the triangle. There is an imbalance of time. The writer and the director are putting in all the time on a project. The producer, at the same time, has a lot of other projects going on. There are many years of preparation, making the project, going into distribution. I can be concentrated on one project for a long time. How many projects are you working on at the same time?

SEEBER It differs. Last year, I had seven films in production at the same time and five in preproduction and development and so on.

AUDIENCE So this triangle has different concentrations.

SEEBER I wouldn't put it that way. I mean, the time investment is not equal to the weight of the input.

AUDIENCE The producer is always coming with a fresh view. So what happened in between? Because I'm always there.

AUDIENCE So you see this as a positive thing?

AUDIENCE It can be, of course, a positive thing. But with the rights, I think this is the concern. In Switzerland, the director always has the rights. I fight for this because all my concentration goes to one project, and you are working with different projects. It's a different thing. I mean this is very good that the producer goes away and comes again with fresh insight. He also is a troubleshooter. But it's a different concentration. I have one love story and you have so many projects.

SEEBER The point of gravity within this triangle always changes during the stage of development and the stage of production, of course. But that's okay as long as the triangle stays.

AUDIENCE Even with different people? In Austria, there are some people who write the script, people who direct the script and people who are producing it for their own company. Do you think it's important that the balance should be influenced by a certain person?

SEEBER In the case of certain people, a project can be discussed very intensely with other



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colleagues within a company. It's another kind of triangle. There is a lot of communication. Of course, there are filmmakers who do the job completely alone.

AUDIENCE What do you do when you're faced with a writer-director and you feel that he can't write? [laughter] Never mind whether this actually happens or not. [laughter] But suppose hypothetically you find this director who is a great director and he's writing his own screenplay, and it just doesn't work but he's adamant about it. To what kind of communication skills do you resort when suggesting it might be a good idea to get a writer on board?

SEEBER I have examples of this from my experience. It's not an easy discussion. In this discussion, it's very important to give the director your respect. That's always very, very important. I try to convince him that it's better to have an external writer, so to speak. If I'm not able to convince the director, we have to end our cooperation. I mean it doesn't make any sense. I've learned in my experience not to make too many compromises. I really must have the feeling that we can work very well together, otherwise it doesn't make sense. Realising films is such a tough job for all of the parties. It doesn't make sense to make it even more complicated. It's not good for the project and it's not good for the people.

SLASKI In your opinion, in cinema, is it still writer-directors or is it work-for-hire directors who go around directing projects simply as directors –directing other people's scripts? Because in Hollywood, I think, it is very much like that. But in Europe is there still the tendency of the director having written his own script?

SEEBER We have the other case, also – a team of writer and director. It's not so unusual.

AUDIENCE But it's usually the director's story. It's not usually the director who is just hired to direct someone else's script.

AUDIENCE Or he co-writes, at least.

AUDIENCE You've worked on several projects with the same people, same writer, same director, yes? What I see in the Norwegian film environment is that one director does a very successful film with one company and then the next time, it's a different company. I haven't done a feature film yet, but am wondering what might be wrong with these collaborations? Why would they switch each time? Maybe it's just timing, I'm thinking.

SEEBER I think there are other reasons. The reason could be that the sources of financing in Europe are very, very limited. One production company can only get money from the same funders for one project, not for two or three at the same time. So if the director has a lot of ideas ...

AUDIENCE Or there is the issue, too, that they have to wait eight years or something before they can apply to the same fund, or enough time has to pass because these can be state funders who have these limitations.

AUDIENCE We can ask Petter Naess tomorrow.

AUDIENCE Yeah, yeah, he's an example of that. He was with Michael and then he switched to Zentropa, so who will be his next producers? I'm sure there are different answers to this question of why people don't stick together. You can finally find a person you work with well. That's the whole point, isn't it? Maybe that's why he's switching.

AUDIENCE What interests you more as a producer: searching more for a good script or good



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stories, or searching for good directors who have great potential? I mean this question for you personally, not in a general way.

SEEBER I can't say something general about this. I know directors I worked with many, many years ago, and I have the wish to work with him or her again even if there's no concrete project on the table. We can sit together and say okay, we wish to work together again so let's think about a possibility to find something that we can do together. Or I read about a story or have an idea for a story, for example, and think that it would be a good idea to make a film out of it, and I think about who can do it. I talk with writers and directors.

AUDIENCE Would you say there's a wave? Would you say that it's sixty percent scripts or eighty percent scripts?

MICHAEL SEEBER No, I really can't give figures for this. It's really mixed.

AUDIENCE You have a story or a book or whatever, and you get the writer to write the script. Wouldn't you be a little concerned about then finding a director in Europe, the way people work in Europe?

SEEBER I don't really understand what you mean.

AUDIENCE You have an idea for a story. You hire a writer, correct, not a director? The professional scriptwriter writes a first draft. Wouldn't you be concerned about finding a director given the fact that most directors in Europe have the rights to something, or have their own stories?

SEEBER I think if you have a really good script, from an artistic point of view a really interesting script, it won't be so difficult to find a director. Even directors who write their own scripts, they probably like to receive a quite finished script. I mean, good scripts are not lying around on the street.

AUDIENCE And what if the producer and director want to change something in the script during a shoot? I don't know if this happens very often, but you lose some days because you need to change something. How is the writer invited in once he has sold his script? Is he there?

SEEBER I don't have the experience of having to change the script, for example, during shooting.

AUDIENCE What about minor changes? It often happens that dialogue is changed. Does the writer have to know that? How free are you?

SEEBER If there are really minor changes to cut some dialogue or something, I don't have any bad feeling about that.

AUDIENCE Unless there are major changes – because you've sold the rights.

AUDIENCE If you're looking for a co-producer, are you looking for the one who can bring in money or the one who also brings you a creative dialogue?

SEEBER The second is the better opportunity. It depends. I really like to work with people who put in creative thoughts.

AUDIENCE Is there space for that or is it just a political or economical thing?



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SEEBER If their ideas are good of course there's space. For really good ideas there's always space. It depends on the stage you are in. I've never had problems with other producers. Never. [laughter]

AUDIENCE I agree with you very much on the idea of this triangle. My personal situation is that I was working on my first film with a producer who regarded me as a greenhorn, which I really was, of course. But instead of building up the triangle, in a way, he left me alone and in the end, came into the editing room and tried to decide everything.

SEEBER Don't work anymore with this person.

AUDIENCE No, no we're not working together anymore because we ended up in big fights. Now I'm working with a producer who is a director himself, and he loves to get involved in other projects, which I highly appreciate because he's a very quick and intelligent thinker and he has loads of ideas. And the problem now is [laughter] the balance. It gets confusing because he comes into the editing room, and I have the feeling he's sitting in the director's chair. Not that he's there to humiliate me or kick me out or whatever, but because he's so enthusiastic and starts directing. So I'm behind the wallpaper, and that's difficult for me.

SEEBER I can imagine, yes.

AUDIENCE I appreciate him very much because I'm still quite inexperienced. Any producer or cameraman might have more 'flight hours' than I do. It will always be this way that you are always more experienced than I am. You have ten projects a year and I have – when I'm lucky – one every year or two. So you always know more than I do. You have more experience. I won't say you're always right or the producer's always right or the cameraman's always right, but they have a broader background than I have, and that's very important for me. How do you see this balance? You also like to get involved very much in your projects.

AUDIENCE Do you know your limits? [laughter]

SEEBER I think so. [laughter] I know when I have to shut my mouth. I think it's also a question of respect, I would say. I often work with inexperienced writers or directors. I love doing this. For me, it's fun to explore with new people and new creative talent. You have to be very careful with these inexperienced people. You have to take care of them and nurture them with input. It doesn't make sense to overwhelm them with input. It doesn't make any sense. You have to be very careful. How much input can young talent stand? You have to be very sensitive in these situations.

AUDIENCE It sounds like your producer is weighing too much in the triangle? He wants to be the triangle all by himself, right?

AUDIENCE No, no, no, that's not his plan. His intentions are good, and I trust him completely. He's not the kind of person who would trick me or something like that.

SEEBER It's his personality.

AUDIENCE It's his personality and his temper, also. Sometimes I get confused, and it's difficult for me to stick to my own idea. You understand what I mean?

SLASKI I suppose there are as many producers as there are types and personalities in the world. In terms of my own projects, every producer's been completely different, from the very old school smoking the cigar feet up on the desk type of producer, to the cultivated, elegant gentleman, such



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as yourself. [laughter]

SEEBER Oh! Thank you very much. [laughing]

SLASKI I know which one I'd rather be working for. It's not always the case. Sometimes the cigar smoking feet up on the desk producers are also very good. When there's indecision in a group, for example, they just cut through it and there's discipline. I remember working on a film with two directors. In fact, it's happened twice.

SEEBER For the same film there are two directors? This was the arrangement from the beginning that there would be two directors?

SLASKI Yes, in fact, they both wrote it and both directed it. It was a wonderful experience in general. But there were one or two moments of disagreement. There was one director who would write her comments to me and she said that the producer would like me to re-do this section because he feels there's some problem. So I did this. We were mixing the music and I had to do it very fast since I had to travel the next morning by plane to the producer. I had been summoned. I thought this is the end now; I've been sacked.

So I was summoned to the big meeting in his office. He was one of the big producers in his country so I was quite nervous. I remember sitting at this large conference table with him on one end, the directors on the other and me in the middle. What became very clear very quickly was that, in fact, he had had no problem whatsoever with any of it. The directors had blamed him for things they didn't quite like. They couldn't tell me directly. They used him as an excuse. [laughter] In the end, he made a decision.

What had happened is that the two directors were fighting between themselves. One wanted one thing, the other wanted another, and I was caught in the middle trying to please both ideas. The producer just made the decision that we were going to do it this way, and they didn't say a word. He solved the issue. I hadn't met him until this point, but he had been painted as this terrible ogre who was tasteless and awful. In fact, he was charming and wonderful, but everyone had his or her own agenda. I will never take somebody else's opinion about somebody else until I meet him myself because everyone's got their own vision of whom they're working for.

With the Quay brothers, for example, a highly respected team as animators – their producer didn't have any involvement in their creative decisions, so I knew if they told me to do something, I was talking to the final decision makers and there wouldn't be that concern later. Even the director, if he was not satisfied, would have to go to another level of process. Every producer is so different. As you said very early on in the discussion, this triangle, and the success of it, is purely related to the quality, the calibre, of the people involved in that triangle.

SEEBER Definitely, yes.

AUDIENCE Have you ever experienced something where the writer comes to you with a project and you let that person also influence the choice of the director?

SEEBER If a writer came with a script and had a proposal for the director?

AUDIENCE Yes, would you take that into consideration?

SEEBER Well, yes, I'd take that into consideration, of course. Why not? [laughter]

AUDIENCE Maybe you disagree. Maybe you have reasons for choosing a certain director. So what happens if there's discussion there?



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SEEBER I mean, if I have the opinion that the director that the writer is proposing is just the wrong person or something, not experienced enough, not good enough or whatever, or it's not the person with whom I want to work, then yes, there are reasons sometimes. Then I have to say no if I want to have the script and I cannot realise it with this director that the writer proposes. If the writer says no then okay, the cooperation is finished. But I've never experienced this that a writer would come and insist on a certain director or even come with a suggestion – sometimes this happens but not very often.

AUDIENCE Have you ever really suffered on a project? And why?

SEEBER Yes, yes, I have experienced this. The reason is the example that I told you from the beginning with Bakhtyar Khudojnazarov. There was so much money invested into development, and finally we figured out it wasn't possible to realise the script. There were other problems and the director really went completely crazy. It was a very, very, very brutal situation, of course. I suffered many years from this. I became very ill for two or three years with very severe depression. But it's gone. I learned a lot of important things from this.

AUDIENCE In your contract, you have a clause there that if something like that were to happen, then these are the solutions that would be pursued.

SEEBER Yes, certain termination clauses explaining which situations would occur where I would have the right to terminate the contract before it expired.

AUDIENCE But the people involved up to that stage were not paid because of the bankruptcy.

SEEBER Most were paid, but we producers, my partner and I, had a lot of debts that we couldn't stand. It happens, yes.

AUDIENCE I think we can all go see Mel Brooks' *The Producers* tomorrow because now we have many responses to that. [laughter]

AUDIENCE What about the rights then up to that stage? Say, in your case, where the film wasn't made; it can't be made. At the beginning of the project you overspend. And you're in a situation where you have to divide up the rights or the film goes to the bankruptcy people.

SEEBER In my case, the rights of the script went to the successor of my company, the person who purchased the company in the bankruptcy case. The rights remained with the company.

AUDIENCE The bankruptcy people put the company up for sale to recover some of the funds for the losses and then anybody can buy it.

SEEBER I know other cases in which this happened.

AUDIENCE And the director who wrote the script, loses it. Or if it's up for sale, he can buy it back.

SEEBER If he has the money, yes.

AUDIENCE What happened in this case?

SEEBER I don't know. The film was never made so I don't know.

AUDIENCE What did the new owners of the company do with the script?



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SEEBER I don't know. Probably they sold it, I don't know.

AUDIENCE You suffered a lot because of your reputation. Suddenly you're a producer whose project went bankrupt. It took a lot of time for you to recover and obviously, your personal psychological state suffered.

SEEBER Yes, this was a heavy thing.

AUDIENCE Trust is very important, isn't it, this triangle of respect and trust?

SEEBER Yes, and communication, communication, communication. Okay, any other urgent things on the table? – Thank you very much. [applause]

END

