

Vinca Wiedemann

Mentoring:

The Art of Asking the Right Questions and Shutting up at the Right Time.

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VINCA WIEDEMANN Hello and thank you for inviting me. I'm always a bit ambiguous about tables like these. Sitting behind a desk like this, someone at the Film School once told me, don't ever do it. Because it's like you're in Stalin's Moscow and the Central committee sitting there. It can feel nice, but it can also put you at quite a distance. So, maybe I'll sit over here. Rooms can be complicated. If the majority of you work as mentors, I think you know that rooms can be complicated. Those of you who are going to take this course over several days know that, very soon, you'll have your own spot in the room where you prefer to sit. The first day, if you sit in a specific chair, the next day you'll try to sit there again and you'll feel offended if someone steals your chair. You also know that some of you prefer to sit close to the door, so you can sneak out. And some of you prefer to sit over here, so you have your back to the window and not be offended by the light.

I say this because I used to supervise the film consultants at a Scandinavian film institute. They were refurbishing their department and were all going to have new offices. I've been a film consultant, too, which is something like a film commissioner or commissioning editor, and I wanted to talk to them about their rooms. Because, when they're discussing projects with applicants, they step into the role of a kind of mentor.

In Scandinavia, we have this wonderful system where you don't apply with a project to a committee. We have individual decision makers, and you can enter into a dialogue with them about your project. You discuss your project with them, and they're the ones who decide if your project is going to receive support. At the same time, they can maybe even help you with your project. So, I think that a lot of these film consultants consider themselves a kind of mentor.

I asked them to show me their new offices and how they were planning them to be. They showed me where the table was going to be and where the applicant was going to sit and where they were going to sit. We just walked around and looked at all the offices, and I didn't comment until afterwards. Because what I saw, which was pretty interesting, was that in each room – they were pretty small rooms – there was definitely one spot that was the best spot to sit in, which wasn't where people walk or where you have your back to the door. And who was supposed to sit in that spot? The person whose office it was, of course.

I asked them if they were aware of this – that they were inviting people into their office but had chosen the best spot to sit in for themselves. Of course, no one had thought about it. No one. They were pretty ashamed and we had a good laugh about it. I think there were several reasons why they chose that spot, but one was that they were as eager and anxious about performing as the applicants were. I suppose that's why a lot of you joined this class, because you want to perform, you want to improve your performance as mentors or script editors or whatever kind of mentor you are.

I thought it was funny to be invited here today to talk about being a mentor. I immediately started thinking about my mentors, both the good ones and the bad ones. The first thing that came to mind

was when I was a child and had to learn how to ski. Cross-country skiing is pretty complicated for a child. Do you know what cross-country skiing is? It's not you just going downhill. You have to climb, too. It's pretty complicated. At least it was when I was a child.

My sister and I were walking behind our parents. They were discussing something intellectual. It was really slippery and there was a hill and they said: "Just do it!" Of course, it was a very, very small hill, but we didn't dare go down that hill. In the end, our father lost his patience and started raising his voice and going, "Do it! Just do it now!"

I've remembered that first ski trip all my life because it was freezing. I thought they were stupid and my father thought I was stupid. Eventually, they went into a house to visit some friends and we stayed outside to play in the cold. [audience laughter]

Then, when I was in my twenties, after I met my first husband, we used to go to Norway a lot to ski. He had a five-year-old daughter and we often went out skiing with her and some other small children. He taught me everything about mentoring, because he was really good at skiing. He had three tricks. One was that he was always at the back of the group. He could easily just have gone ahead, but he would always be the last one to go. And I realised how sensitive you are when you're skiing, or when you're doing something where you're trying to be on the edge of what you can perform, and that is, if you're last, you'll start to feel inferior, you'll start having some really bad thoughts. But if you're first, you feel like you could conquer the world.

That was his first trick. His second trick was really basic as well. He would always bring some candy. This was in the '80s and children were supposed to eat vegetables. Some of the moms would bring dried fruit and stuff like that, but he would bring some old-fashioned Norwegian candy. So whenever the children started to get tired and lose their courage, he would give them some candy. Also really basic.

When these two tricks didn't work anymore, and the children were annoyed and crying and losing their courage, he had one final trick. You should know that he was *really* good at skiing, but he also had some flesh on him. As a result of this, his sweater didn't cover the lower part of his back. He would be standing out there and when the children started crying, he'd pretend that he lost his balance and fall into the deep snow. He'd get snow all over him and down his back, and he wouldn't be able to get up, and the children loved it.

He didn't really teach them a lot. He was just there. He didn't say anything. He wasn't really helping them, but of course he was helping them a lot.

For me, that's the ideal of being a mentor. I have to say, I think we all have images like this when we step into the role of a mentor, these good and bad images from our own lives that come into our minds. I think many of us don't like to be the bad father. We want to be the good father. We want to be the mature person who sees the big picture. I think we have to realise that what we're dealing with here isn't that. It's not about that. Maybe it's a stupid thing to say, but the people you're mentoring aren't children, and you're not their parents. It's not a family. It's about making films.

In a way, it's strange that we have so many discussions about mentoring in Europe. Of course, it has to do with the fact that we have a lot of public support for our films. The situation is, we all need financing for our films. I saw your CVs. A lot of you work directly or indirectly with financing. I think it would be a good thing to think about your actual function, when you're working as mentors. Are you into talent development? Are you working with young, inexperienced people? Is that your role in working with them? Or are you actually dealing with money? Maybe you're not dealing with money, but you're working for a company or institution or organisation that does. So maybe you're not the

one who's going to say yes or no to a project, but maybe someone else in your organisation is. Are you working with colleagues? Are you working with someone who maybe is not less experienced than you but just has a different role in the film project?

These are basic questions to ask yourself when looking at yourself as a mentor, because this is about experience. Being a colleague or being a decision maker will heavily influence what kind of mentor you are. How many of you are in the business of decision making on projects? Okay, one-third of the people here. How many are in the business of talent development? Some of you are even in both, a double function. How many of you are working as filmmakers, and are here in the function of being a filmmaker? So you're not mentors yourselves? Both? Okay, how many of you are not working as mentors? Okay.

This is probably the first question you should ask yourself as a mentor: What kind of mentor am I? When I really learned the most about being a mentor was when I was not into talent development and not into decision making. If you're a colleague and working with fellow filmmakers on their films, that's when you really get payback if you don't do your job well as a mentor.

One person I learned a lot from is Lars von Trier, the Danish filmmaker. I didn't learn from him because I was his mentor. I wasn't. But because he was my mentor when I started to write. The first script I ever wrote was for a feature film from a concept he had devised where the scriptwriter wasn't supposed to talk to the director. So, instead of talking to the director about the script, I had to talk to him. I thought that was pretty much okay. But I was *really* nervous the first time I had to get his feedback. We agreed that I would send him some scenes, so he could see if I could actually write. I didn't want to sign a contract if he thought my writing was terrible.

I sent him my scenes, and of course I didn't hear anything back from him. An enormous amount of time went by, at least a week. [audience laughter] I counted the hours, and when 10 days had passed by, I thought, Now I can call him. So I called him, and of course he hadn't read the scenes. We agreed on a week more, and one week later I called him. He had read the scenes, and he said one thing, "What is it you're most nervous about, most anxious about? Is it the dialogue?" And I said, "Yes, it's the dialogue." Dialogue is the one thing where you can't cheat. The rest no one is going to see, but the dialogue, that's what people can hear.

So he said: "Okay, listen, I can assure you, I think you're writing good dialogue." I was so relieved. So now we could discuss everything. And we did, and he was pretty harsh on me. But that one thing he asked me, where my nerves were, is something I've never forgotten. I think that's a good thing to remember, because when we're supervising someone, we're very often so target oriented that we tend to forget that they may have completely different agendas than we do. You need to make sure what their agenda is.

Also, having a guy like him [von Trier] in the Danish film industry, I think it affects everybody because we all respect him a lot. He makes such crazy films. And when you work at the Film Institute, there's a chance that he might apply to you for support. [audience laughter] The thing is, if he applies for support, you have to treat him like you treat everybody else. I have seen a few people from television stations trying to review his work and trying to level with him, for example on *Melancholia*. I don't know if you saw *Melancholia*. Just imagine someone sitting in the editing room, going, "Oh, I think the first eight minutes, the prologue doesn't really work. You give it all away. Why don't you just delete this part?" [audience laughter] But that was their function. That was what they had to do.

For me, it worked the other way. I had seen what he was doing and I was so full of respect when I was a decision maker. When I read a script, I always tried to imagine that it was his [von Trier's]

script. I thought, How would I react if it was a Lars von Trier script? Because I knew, if it was him, I'd be damned careful not to be too judgmental. Why did I play this game with myself? Because I know I'm so judgmental. I don't know about you. Maybe you're not. Maybe you're above being judgmental. I'm not. When I read something, I react extremely strongly to it.

I think it's really tough to read a script. I admire the readers at Eurimages. The year I was at Eurimages, I had to read so many scripts. I thought it was so hard, because when I pick up a script and open it, I'm actually nervous, because if I don't like it, I react violently to it. One of my colleagues once said to me, "Good scripts are so easy to read. But with bad scripts it is like an enormous effort every time you have to turn another page."

That's another thing you have to look at carefully. Are you judgmental? Are you the judging type? What I just told you, was that being judgmental? Well, it was definitely reacting. Maybe it's because I come from filmmaking. I made films myself, not as a director, but in several other functions. So, in a sense, I live from what I like and what I don't like. Somehow I have to use this capacity of liking and not liking without showing it. [laughs] I think a lot of you know that feeling. I think we all know it.

How many of you have tried to write these reviews where you have to write the producer about what you think about the script or tell someone what you like? Show of hands. Nearly everybody. It's easy, in a way. I think it's really boring. I hate doing it. I always say no. But I've done a few of those. You just say what you think the strengths and weaknesses are and what you can do, an analysis, etc.

Have you ever had this terrible thing happen where they show it to the writer? It's awful. It's very, very rare, but it happens. It's against all agreements you made because the agreement, of course, is that it should be translated into diplomatic language with some encouraging words. If the job had been to write to the people who are actually working on it, you'd have written something different.

I'd call it being a supervisor, but you could also call it being a mentor. I think you should always take the starting point of pretending you're a colleague, not a father and not a decision maker. That's step one. You're a colleague, and maybe you're wrong and they're right. That's the first thing you could think of.

Then, the thing is that you react to something very strongly, and maybe your centre of attention is not where the filmmakers have their centre of attention. That's the second thing. You have to realise that your starting point is not their starting point.

Having respect for the people you talk with and realising the roles you have. If that's not clear, you'll have a really bad meeting. If you're a decision maker, you need to realise that people always think you're really clever. That's one thing you just have to realise. After I became a commissioning editor, nobody would ever stop me from telling a funny story. Everybody would laugh. Everybody would think I was being really clever. I remember hearing what people on the other side of the table would say if the commissioning editor said something really stupid. One thing you can say without feeling you're losing your dignity is, "How interesting! I never thought about it like that." [audience laughter] If anyone ever says that to you, it's a red alert!

Bille August, the Danish filmmaker who won an Academy Award and the Golden Palme at Cannes, he has another thing he always says: "I hear what you're saying. I hear what you're saying." Which means "Shut the fuck up!" [audience laughter] But he would never say that, of course, he is a very polite man.

For a mentor, there's one big pitfall, which is vanity. It's like if someone has been a teacher for a very long time, they tend to like the sound of their own voice too much. This goes triple for decision makers. Decision making also means that, if you're discussing things with people, they'll maybe hear only 20-25% of what you're saying. They have a completely different agenda than you do. This whole thing about where you sit in the room. Maybe they're just uncomfortable about where they're sitting in the room. Maybe they're wondering why you smiled or didn't smile when they came in the door. A lot of women wonder about things like, Why did I put on this blouse today? Really stupid things. If they're nervous, many women think about how they look. Really stupid things, which has to do with nerves.

If you're a decision maker, you have to really think about the red line between you and the applicant, because you can easily step on their toes or go too far. Or maybe you just don't read the room at all, so you don't understand where they are.

I know that the way you work here, in these groups, is that you read scripts and try to work on different stages of the texts – synopsis, treatment, script, and so on. For me, it's hardly possible to work on the script without dealing with the people who are working on it. For me, it's impossible. I guess because I've read so many bad scripts. That's the first thing. To me, I guess, 95% of all the scripts I read are really bad. Only because I've had so many decades of experience do I realise that bad scripts sometimes turn into good films, which is quite a lesson.

When I was young, I was really occupied with all the bad scripts. It was so nice to become a decision maker, because then you actually get to grant support to projects. Instead of just saying no to everything, I had to focus on the stuff I was saying yes to. I had to see potential and not only weaknesses. But I think a lot of us see weaknesses. And we think, if we're going to discuss scripts, we'll have to look into the weaknesses and see how we can make them better. We often think our role is – as we say in Danish – to find 'five flaws,' find five things wrong. That's the easy part. Finding the flaws is so easy. The thing is, of course, what you can do with the flaws. How can you improve them?

I don't think I've ever come up with a single idea that really worked, maybe none at all, without the people working on the script being present. For me, it's crucial to know how they see their script, and how they work with their script, in order to know how I can accommodate them in their process. I said this would be about asking the right questions. And for me, the right questions are so simple you'll probably find them disappointing. I think the best way, which works nearly every time, is to begin with the totally banal question: Where did the idea come from?

"Where did the idea come from?" can have different answers depending on whether it's your idea or a commission you received. Am I writing on someone else's idea? Is it a director-driven project or a producer-driven project or a scriptwriter-driven project? It also depends, of course, on whom I'm talking to. Is it a director writing his or her own script? Is it a scriptwriter? Et cetera. Nevertheless, this question is crucial to me: Where did the idea come from? And why did you want to work on this project?

Basically, all really serious problems in a script, if you go back to the foundation of the people working on it, if something doesn't work in the script – and they lose the spirit to work with it or don't really know what to do with it – they lose themselves. And the only way they can find themselves is, very often, to go back to the beginning. So, if you ask people to tell you where the idea came from and why the hell they decided to spend so much energy and so much time working on it, they'll tell you where the spark came from. This is what they have to work from. So when you know that, when you know why they're working on this idea and where it came from, then you also know what

the core of the story is. It may not at all be where you think the core of the story is, which, of course, is the tricky part.

Sometimes you read a story about a certain theme and you realise that a very small thing in the middle, or away from the focus, is actually what's important to them. The thing, of course, is how you work with it, then. But you should be aware that this original spark is where it all comes from in their process. Also, we should always remember that it's a process we don't know where will end.

Now, I've talked about all the pitfalls. One of your big advantages, whether you're a decision maker or just a colleague or just the more experienced person, is that you didn't write the damned story, you're not absorbed in the details. You see the big picture. This, I think, is the reason why most people want to meet with a supervisor or mentor. When you work on a script, you work on the details, and you can't be working on all the great details and also see the big picture. You need someone to see your material from a fresh perspective. You don't do it all the time, but in specific spots. You do it when you come to a certain point where you feel stuck. I've written a version of my script, but basically it's the same. I've written a version of the script, but what am I to do now? I feel like I should get some response before I can get more energy to write. Of course, I wrote a version of the script as best as I possibly could. I may have a lot of ideas, but I also feel that I need someone to give me perspective.

The big picture is not an objective picture, in my point of view. You can see the structure of the script. I think that's the funniest thing about being a mentor. If you've worked as a scriptwriter or script supervisor for some years, you can start to see the material this way and you can say, Well, what if you do it like this and this? If you're in talent development, this is how you can assess talent, in my opinion. How good are they at actually looking at the structure from above and make changes? They might have a bad script, but if they're good at seeing the potentials and play with them they can make a much better script. You can't assess talent or a script by looking at just one version. But once you've seen two versions, you know a lot more. But still, it's about where the story came from. For me, this is crucial.

I presume you're all very much into the methodology of scriptwriting. I'm sure you're much better at it than I am because I was never really able to finish very many books on script structure. I think it's so boring. But I acknowledge everything about plot points and how to do a montage and everything. Working with it is a funny thing. It's so damned difficult.

Someone who didn't get support for their project and was really upset about it once told me, "But I know the plot point is on page 17. I have this going on, and the midpoint is there and everything is like they told me to do, but still you won't support me?" Another time, the head of a development programme doing courses like this told me that she thought it was so meaningful to make these courses because she could then teach filmmakers what happens if you have a protagonist, because it's so much easier if you have a protagonist and a clear project. Everything is much easier. In fact, a lot of problems come from the fact that you can't really choose who your protagonist is. If people just knew, everything would be much easier. She really had a mission with her courses. I won't mention her name, because maybe some of you know her. But we had a big argument over seven years ago because I told her, "Yes, of course I agree, but the thing is that you very often have scripts where there just isn't a clear protagonist. That's just the way it is. It's how the story started out."

I don't know whether you like her films or not, but I've worked a lot with Susanne Bier, who has made a lot of films. If you look carefully at her films, one thing that really distinguishes them is that she only very rarely has a clear protagonist. That gives her a lot of problems, and we've discussed it over the years. Of course, I always say, "Susanne, why don't you just pick one character as a

clear protagonist? Then we wouldn't have all these problems. We have too much material because there are too many scenes. That takes a really clever editor, because then you have to do it in the editing. It's really difficult to switch perspective if you don't have a clear story with a clear protagonist." And she'd always say, "Yeah, well, I don't think I agree. I know you always tell me that shit about protagonists." It's a kind of game we play.

But I have to say to that lady and her programme that maybe Susanne Bier's films would be have been better if she took her advice, but she's made some okay films. It's a difficult attitude to have. What provoked me, of course, was that she thought it worked like that, but storytelling doesn't work like that. Or, maybe the finished film will work like that, but that's not how a filmmaker's mind works.

I was trained as a film editor. Maybe that's why I work this way. I know that the plot point is something you'll realise where is during the last days of editing. It's in the last days of editing that you actually find your structure. And it's in the last days of editing that you realise that if you take this scene and put it here, then, suddenly, the structure will be vital. Suddenly, it will be vibrant. And it's because you didn't see that the material could work this way, that it was boring. Structure is something that's always fluctuating. To me, it's much more important to work with something else, which is what the filmmakers – and when I say filmmakers, I just mean the people working on the story – what they are obsessed about. What is their obsession? What do they like and what don't they like in their story?

Per Kirkeby, a very famous Danish painter, once said that when he paints his paintings, he always works with points of annoyance. He's always annoyed by something. And this thing that's annoying him is what keeps him working. At some point, he leaves it alone – when there's no longer something that annoys him.

When we make films, when we tell stories, as mentors, there's a risk of thinking about structure and order. Of course, we know that storytelling is putting things in order, telling the story in a specific order. And the better you are at composing your storytelling, the better a storyteller you'll be and the more refined you'll be. Of course it's about making order. But I think we tend to forget that stories don't come from order. Stories come from life, and life is chaotic. Life is pure chaos.

Of course, I'm talking about films that have some kind of artistic element in them. If films have artistic elements in them, or if you're working with that, that's because you have an ambition. Hemingway said his ambition in storytelling was to make situations come alive. He wanted his readers to feel that they were living this moment. It wouldn't be about showing life or depicting life but making it come to life. The big challenge is that you have to take something very chaotic and very vital and very vibrant, and then you have to shape it. Then you have to put it into order without it dying.

I would say that, for me, the way I see the filmmaking process is that you have to protect this life. At the same time, you have to transform it. At some point, you have to kill your darlings. It's all about that. You have to kill something in order to maybe make something new become vibrant and alive. But the thing is, it comes from chaos. And the structure is just one point. It's just one element. As mentors and story supervisors, I think we have a tendency to overestimate the structure and not remember that what is actually the most important thing is that the filmmaker – the one who is going to see the process all the way through – he or she has to have clarity. He or she has to have a clear mind, a clear thought.

Mentoring and filmmaking for me are about helping to clear the mind about what the film could be about. What the film could be about, we don't know, and they don't know. They just know it came from something. This something they're refining, without losing it. Very often, we lose it in the

middle of the process, and we then have to go back and pick it up again in order to sustain the life in it. Also, as the Danish screenwriter Kim Fupz Aakeson once said, there has to be something to work on. If it's just a finished idea, it's boring. There has to be a challenge in it.

How do you work with a script at any given stage? Is it that there's a right way to go with it and a wrong way to go with it? I think I'm going away from that more and more as years go by. An idea can have a quality like a diamond or like gold. In its essence, you can feel that it's a good idea. You can feel a good idea. You can feel when it's really good. But I've also seen people with really mediocre ideas who insisted there was something in it and who actually came through with it. So who am I to judge? I just try not to discuss it too much, but maybe ask them if they have any other ideas, because what happens sometimes is we pick up on an idea too soon because we're so afraid of this empty space. Also, some people seem to believe getting ideas is difficult.

I think we all have a lot of ideas, so it's just a question of finding ways of getting ideas. But we all have ideas. We have a lot of ideas. Maybe the first one simply isn't the best one. But once you've decided on an idea and worked on it, I don't really think there's a right way to go. It's just a matter of creating a path where you'd like to go. Little Red Riding Hood went into the forest. She went where she wanted to go. That's what the story builds upon.

As a mentor, you have to walk together with the filmmakers and look at the path. Only when you understand where there's a will to go, can you understand what they're trying to achieve. This walking together you can also do with colleagues. Very often – at least this is my experience when I write – it's not about technical problems. More often, if you have a problem with a scene, it's because you've written too many versions of it. Ninety-nine percent of the time it's process.

I once had a really bad script. It was really funny but also really bad and boring. We tried to work with it. It was a road movie, a Danish film set in Sweden – out in the countryside, of course, because there was some regional money involved. That's how it started out. We had to go to Sweden and blah blah blah. I really liked this guy and he really tried to make it work. Then, at one point, I asked him, "Why do you really want to be out there in the countryside? What is it you like about the countryside? Where did the idea come from?" And he said, "No, I don't really like the countryside, now that you ask. It's because I wanted to make a road movie about a father and a son." That was also what I liked about it, but all I saw was this road movie in the Swedish countryside, with some really boring imagery, really clichéd imagery.

We started discussing the father and son. The son was at the centre of the project. Then I did what I always do – deconstruct. I said, "If this is the important stuff, and the countryside isn't, where could this road movie be set? What kind of landscapes do you like?" And he said, "Actually, I don't like nature at all because I grew up in Copenhagen and I like cities. I like Copenhagen." So I said, "What would happen if you made it in Copenhagen?" "But you can't make a road movie in ..." And I said, "Sure, just scale it down." And he was like, "Yeah! But can we do that?" He then started reformulating the whole movie into a movie that took place in Copenhagen. Then, suddenly, everything came alive.

I might have been – in fact, I was leading him down the wrong path – by working on stuff and scenes that didn't have anything to do with where the problem really lay. The problem was the landscapes. So, process and deconstruction. Sometimes it's difficult to identify where the ideas come from and what's important to them. Sometimes it's really important and really difficult to have to take things out. You say,

"So what if the man isn't the protagonist? What if it's a woman?"

"Well, that could be interesting, as well."

"Well, what if they're not married? What if they're mother and son?"

"Oh, that's interesting, too."

"Okay, what if it doesn't take place at night, but at day?"

"Yeah, that's also ... maybe ..."

Then you might say, "What if the dog isn't there?" And they say, "Oh, no, you can't take out the dog. Then there's no film!" [audience laughter] This is how you identify key elements. It's deconstruction. If you've worked on a script for a really long time, there's a question you can ask, and you have to ask it, but you have to wait to ask it. You asked it in the beginning, and then you worked with the script. Then, after a long time, if you're lucky, you realise that you forgot to ask the question again. Then it's time to ask it again. And the question is, "Who's the protagonist?"

It's so strange that we all tend to forget who the protagonist is and what the protagonist's project is. You work on it, and then you lose it. You lose sight of it. I don't know why it's like that. These are just my own statistics, but when you're on the third or fifth version of a script, you can ask this question again. Then you can really make people realise that they might have picked the wrong person, or the wrong story, for the protagonist. When I wrote it down, I thought this is too stupid to say, but this is the one question I've had the best results from asking – apart from the one about where the idea came from. Asking questions is also about realising who you're asking.

One thing we all tend to forget is that the script is not the film. This is also such a stupid thing to say. It's such a cliché. But we forget that the script is not the film. So many things happen after the script is finished. I had a discussion with a brilliant editor, who said, "Being an editor, you know that if you're not shooting everything in one take, you can just add dialogue. It's better to write too much dialogue than too little dialogue, because you can always take it out, but you can't put it in afterwards." That's so essential. So many supervisors want something polished that reads really well. If you're a decision maker, *please* don't make the filmmakers write a very well-polished script. Because too much dialogue is great. Take the script of *Blue Velvet*. It's fantastic to see the amount of boring information that's in that script. You learn every bit of information three times.

Once, with Susanne Bier again, in one of her films, I had to tell her I was so annoyed that the main character was crying all the time. I said, "You really have to be careful because I think she's a sissy. I don't really like her." And she said, "Yeah, yeah, I know. Of course. She's only going to cry once. I just don't know where." [audience laughter] So, just to be on the safe side, she'd put it in because maybe, maybe, maybe we'll do it and then we'll see where it works. Also there was this editor who once said, It's the number of scenes that worries me. The scene can be longer or shorter, but the number of scenes is worrisome.

That was another thing that stuck in my mind. But it's not a script or just one person that makes the film. Remember – and now we come to the shutting up part – that you're not the only one giving advice. Don't give too much advice, please. You know what it's like when you're working with something. You want few comments. Basically, we're working with creative people. So you give them a little bit of food and they'll get by because they have so much imagination. The people who can't stop talking are terrible. If you've ever had a difficult time with something, you know that too much talking only interferes with your work. It's so nice when people don't say too much and just stand in the back.

As mentors, we should realise that there are other people in the world who are also giving advice. My sister is a theatre director, and when she went into filmmaking, she was working with a producer who didn't really want her to be exposed to too much mentoring, because then she'd just get contradictory advice. And she said, "Yes! That's the whole point!" If you only talk to one person, that person would be the key witness. What they say you'd feel is true. And then you meet someone else who reads something differently, who gives completely different advice. In the end, it's up to you. That's how you regain ownership. "So, always make sure," she said, "that you have several people coming in, saying different things."

Of course, she could say this because she's a theatre director and not a film director. What's the difference? The difference is that she makes three plays in a year. But as a film director, unfortunately, you make maybe only one film in five years. So you don't gain the same experience. But I think filmmakers should learn to have that attitude.

Now, starting as the director of a film school and having a completely new team of teachers, of course I want to have the best teachers. We want to have a good programme, and we're really trying to rethink everything. One thing we are rethinking is the role of the teacher. We're trying to pull back a lot as teachers. We had a discussion about what we remembered about our own time in film school. How big of a role did the teachers play? It was really small. What we remember is our classmates, the people we went to film school and made films with afterwards. That was the big inspiration.

Then, of course, we remembered the really bad teachers. We all remembered some really bad teachers. I remember the impatient film editor, who was really bad at verbalising. I once saw her with a film-editing student who didn't really know how to do something, and she said, "Let me do it." [audience laughter] Then she sat down and did it. You don't do that. You don't take it out of the hands of the filmmakers. They're the ones who should do it.

Also, we all remembered a few magical persons. You have to remember that, if you want a mentor, then you also like the magic. They're like alchemists. Some of the most famous mentors have big hats and scarves and say mysterious things, and you really think they're wizards. They sprinkle some magic dust and your project will glow. Just don't believe you're one of them.

If you're a decision maker, you know people say, "It's just not very specific what she [the script advisor] said. Couldn't she have been more specific about what I should do?" They want answers and at the same time they don't want answers. They want magic. They want you to say they're really good. They want reviews and, of course, only rave reviews. You may think you aren't reviewing, you aren't being judgmental, but they want you to. I think you should be careful not to give them what they want. Don't give them what they want. You should remember that you're just one out of several people giving advice. Maybe their husband or mother is giving them much better advice, because they know exactly where they are in the process.

You should also just remember that everybody wants to perform. I've already said that. But you should remember that the most important moment is if you solve one thing. To solve one thing is to get "the good idea." The good idea is when you screen your unfinished film and you know where the problem is. Believe me, by that time, the second cut, you know exactly where the problem is. You invited some friends – at least that's what we do in Denmark – and some people like you to see the unfinished film and discuss it. Everybody agrees where the problems are. Some people think they're really clever and say, "I don't really know about the middle. I think there's a problem in the middle." "Yes, I know there's a problem in the middle." And we all sit and discuss it. And then someone says, "How about we do this?" And everybody agrees that's the right thing to do. Everybody agrees. And we say, "Goodbye. Everything is fine."

Then we go home to the editing room and do it. And the moment we see it, we realise the idea doesn't work at all. It was the wrong idea. It's so strange, because the whole room agreed that was the right way to go. But it just doesn't work. And the moment you see it, you realise – everybody realises – why it doesn't work. And then another discussion begins and eventually, if you're lucky, you realise what you should do instead of what you thought you should do.

This is what filmmaking is all about. During the brainstorming session, you're not making the film. You come up with idea, but it's only when you're working on the actual material that you realise what works and what doesn't work. Sometimes – like with the guy I told you about who didn't want to film in the Swedish countryside but in Copenhagen cityscapes – the moment we discovered that, we knew, the whole room knew, it was crucial. There were many other things on my list, but I decided to start there. That was the moment I knew he had food for thought. He had enough. It was a moment of silence – a moment of silence that the mentor should not break. The producer will usually break that silence. This is very often the case. So, you producers, remember that. It's important to shut up at that time because you've given them enough. There's enough now. There's enough in the room for them to work with. It will turn everything upside down. Maybe you had a lot of comments on other scenes, but they'll probably re-write those scenes anyway. It would just be confusing. That's a moment to stop and say, "Maybe that's enough." If you say that, I'd say most people would say, "Yes! That's enough. Let's stop now." They were just polite because you asked them, and they don't want to say stop too soon. But actually they can't take anymore. That's how it works.

Also, we all like to see ourselves as helpers. And when we're stuck, we want helpers. But, of course, we need to realise that, because we're dealing with art – and art is about life, and in life we're all somehow equal – we're all poor fools. We're fooling around not knowing how to deal with life. We're just trying to help each other and trying to maintain some dignity in our lives. Plus, when we're working with a film, and we're being helped, it's somehow really difficult to maintain your dignity.

Please correct me if you know the story, but I think it's a short story by Baudelaire, a beautiful story about a man who has to be helped. There are these sessions where the helper is helping the man. I think he's on the verge of suicide when he comes in, and the helper really builds him up. And life starts again. Then, in the end, when the man is really happy and the helper really feels he has fulfilled his task, the man gets up and punches the helper in the face and leaves the room.

I think this is something we should remember. When we're being helped, we also have to be able to regain our dignity and feel that we can stand on our own feet. Therefore, filmmakers will very often leave you at some point. They'll leave at one point in the process. I've seen so many scriptwriters being deserted by directors who go, "Bye-bye. I'm off to my film crew." Off to new, exciting people to work with and a new, fresh perspective.

So, you worked with the scriptwriter for as long as you could. It was sometimes a humiliating process. Now the scriptwriter knows so much about you. Or the mentor knows so much about you. I'm leaving now. I'm going to get a new perspective on my filmmaking. That was one perspective, and the actor will give me a completely different perspective on my film. The cinematographer will give me a completely new perspective. Or, the producer and the financial issues will give me a completely new perspective. That's how it should be. Being a mentor, you have to be like a Teflon frying pan. Don't be clingy. You should be a bit like this: "Go on, bye-bye." If you're the decision maker, it's no problem anyway, because the moment they get the money they're gone. [audience laughter]

Someone once asked me, "So, now that you're a film consultant, do you make a lot of enemies?" And I said, "I won't know until I stop being one. Then I'll know." When I'm that position, I have a lot of friends for the moment. Later, it's probably quite different.

So remember, don't be clingy. Let them get back up and let them regain their dignity.

APPLAUSE

WIEDEMANN Any questions? If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

AUDIENCE You said at the beginning that, when you were at the film institute, you acted on any script as though it were Lars von Trier's. But what if it were? How do you deal with somebody like that?

WIEDEMANN [laughs] That's very easy. First of all, it was much more important to focus on the financial issues. Because once you have a star, the possibility of getting budgets with a lot of fluff is a thing. I've seen some big shots' movies being over-financed. So, I think that's where we had our focus at the Danish Film Institute.

I had a conversation with him [von Trier] on *Dogville*. I was the consultant on *Dogville*. It's really difficult with a guy like him, because he can only take in very little. You try to live up to the man sitting in front of you. Basically, that's what I did. I couldn't say anything. *Dogville* was such a strange project. I didn't feel that I could improve anything. I wanted to know how he was going to do it and I asked questions about that. But I didn't think there was much to comment on, actually.

When I talked about treating everybody as if they were Lars von Trier, that doesn't mean I wouldn't give them a different kind of response, but I'd show them the same respect. Especially, when I had to write rejection letters. That was the most important time to imagine that it was him. I always wrote those letters in a way where I thought, Maybe this project will become a film anyway. It may become a good film. It may even become a film that I think is good. It may become a big success and may get good reviews. If so, I have to be able to meet them later and feel that my letter was okay. So, that's a completely different kind of letter.

When I was at the Danish Film Institute, we had these archives. When a new consultant came in, they would go through the old projects again, because maybe some would get support this time. They didn't realise I could go into the files and see all the old letters. That gave me quite a good impression of how people were writing. At one point, I read two different rejections: one from a guy who was so polite. He wrote so positively about this project that in the end I was like, "So why don't you support it if it's that good?" [audience laughter] And the other one was like, "I don't want to support this project. I don't hope anybody else will support this project, either." [audience laughter]

Somehow, you have to not describe the strengths and the weaknesses, but describe why you see the potential and where you see room for improvement. Because you don't have a good idea. You don't say you don't think the potential is good enough. It's only what you think and what you read. Maybe with first-time filmmakers, you'll say this is too big a risk.

I once rejected a project that I actually really liked. This was in the talent development scheme. But he [the director] hadn't done any films before. He was educated as a producer at the film school. And two fellow producers said, "We believe he's a director. We want to make his first film." And I said, "I'm sorry. I like the script..." I wrote the letter like that, really respectful, but I said, "It's too big a risk. He hasn't done five minutes of film. I don't want to do it. I can't defend giving money to this project."

They made it anyway and it became a huge success. A year later, there was a seminar at the Film Institute and we were sitting on a panel together. We talked about the whole process. I read the letter out loud so people could hear it, and we had this discussion: Should I have done otherwise? But I was so happy I had written that letter. And you know what? The producers knew him. They had been with him in film school for four years. Of course they knew him. I was just a bureaucrat. I had the opportunity to have one or two conversations with them and read the script. How could I know him? On the basis of what I was being presented with, I did what I could do. I knew there might be more to it, but I didn't have the opportunity to see more. So, you're always only looking at what's being presented. There might be something you can't see, and maybe there's something they don't show you. Maybe they didn't show it to you because it wasn't conscious in their own minds. Like the landscapes I mentioned.

AUDIENCE Do you think scripts are the best vehicle for understanding the potential of someone telling a story through film?

WIEDEMANN No. I think a script alone is nothing, actually. The script alone is nothing. The script alone, of course, is the best way of communicating an idea. And, at least for the financiers and the film crew, it's important. That's also why I talk so much about the people involved. When I was at New Danish Screen, which is a talent development scheme, it was so often the case that if there was just some tiny little thing that I liked in a script, or maybe sometimes if I just liked the people involved, I would invite them in. And so many things would happen. Just by hearing them talk about the project, I could see it. Also, they weren't so experienced. Maybe they were just bad at writing. But their ideas of what they wanted to do were so interesting that I said, Ah, I want to work with these people because they're funny.

Very often, the opposite was the case. Maybe what I thought was the interesting thing was something that didn't matter to them. Sometimes you'd ask discreetly, "What about taking that out?" "Oh, yes, I thought about taking that out." Then, okay, they have a completely different view of the script than you do. Also, very often you read a really bad ending to a script. Then it's important to know if they wanted to make the story because of that idea. But maybe when you ask about the ending, they say, "Well, we had three endings, and we think they all stink. We don't really know what to do, so we gave you the best one, and the other two are like this and like this." Then we go, Maybe it's because the problem is in the beginning. Stuff like that. And that's okay, because then there's something to work on.

So, the script. Of course I can't say it's nothing. Of course it's not nothing. But I think it's next to nothing without the team.

Thanks for listening to me.