



Adapt or die?

For five days in October the world's largest gathering of publishers and agents took place in Frankfurt: there were over 3,000 exhibitors from over 100 countries with - apparently - nearly 400,000 new titles on show.

What has this to do with the film and television industry and with scriptwriters? Well, since it is estimated that well over half of all movies started life as books, the Frankfurt Bookfair is a natural place to find the stories for films and television dramas of the future. Recognising this, a new development was started a couple of years ago during the Bookfair: The International Agents' Centre for Adaptations and Screenplays. The London Bookfair also has events around film and television as does the Forum International Cinéma & Littérature in Monaco.

In Frankfurt, in a deceptively calm hall away from the book agents, film and television agents met with producers from all over the world. Films were screened and a vibrant series of workshops and panels took place offering the professionals chances to develop this side of the business. Following on from the event sponsored by the Frankfurt Bookfair and the Berlinale at February's Berlin Film Festival, there were events and a dinner hosted by the Berlinale in Frankfurt. This crossover between books and films is interesting for the light it throws on the film and television industries.

I would like to make a couple of observations about adaptations not simply for the sake of debate but because there is not enough discussion from the point of view of writers about the future of the industry in which they work.

Firstly, have you ever thought that adaptations are so popular with producers because they can't make original scripts work? Why is this? Is it because scriptwriters can't really consistently deliver original scripts? Is it because producers don't know how to work with scriptwriters in order to give original storytelling a shape or structure that will make the audience feel sufficiently good or even feel at all? Or is it because an adaptation of an original story will not be ruined as much by a director?

In other words, do we like doing adaptations because perhaps we are not very good at telling original stories on the screen?

Secondly, we must never forget that we make films for audiences, not for ourselves, a very common European malaise made worse in my view by subsidy funds for development that are given out too uncritically. Having a book to adapt somehow gives funders, producers and broadcasters a sense of false security, almost as if they know that telling a cinematic or televisual drama - with the exception of Soaps and Cops 'n Docs - is really difficult so 'Let's play safe and copy something else.' As an agent, I love selling adaptation rights but I hate seeing how often the resulting 'drama' is disappointing or never made at all.

I constantly hear from the buyers of scripts that what they want is something fresh and original, something different, yet research

shows that audiences love more of what they already like.

When we receive submissions in our office at Blake Friedmann - and we receive about 9,000 applications from writers a year - they often say that their submission is something '...that has never been done before! When you read it you can see perfectly well why it has never been done before! Originality is not as important as great storytelling, except to the ego of the person who thought it was different.

So what role do adaptations play in our film and television industries? Are they an admission that *auteur* writing is not the way to build an industry however culturally and politically correct it is? Are they a clue that feature films and television drama are **broadcasting**, by definition and budget, and therefore aimed at a larger rather than a smaller audience, something that we do not do consistently well enough?

What makes us human is our ability to tell stories and our need to experience as much as possible on the very small screen inside our minds. The ability to tell stories is undoubtedly better developed and easier to do in prose than in script, which is perhaps why the film and television industry is so dependent on our novelists.

Is novel writing apparently easier because you can describe the innermost thoughts and feelings of a character, something you have to demonstrate visually on screen in a film? How are these skills learned? Many of the great novelists or storytellers of the past few centuries, from Shakespeare to Thomas Mann, from Jane Austen to the recently controversial Günther Grass, have never heard of Sid Field or the three-act structure or Robert McKee or of the many creative writing courses and programmes that can produce robot writers.

All films - every single one - are in fact adaptations; if not from a play or a book, they are adapted from the writer's imagination. What the film and television industry relies on with book adaptations, are the added value of brand-awareness and the built-in following from the many readers of a book.

Adaptations are also a neat form of team-writing - a producer acquires (and pays for) two writers, not just one. This suggests to me that if European film-makers are to be more competitive with their American rivals, they need to pay more attention to collaborative team-writing and perhaps less to worshipping the *auteur*.

So if you think that adapting an existing story is easy, that thought is likely to make you fail. We need not only to adapt scripts from books but to recognise the limitations of the *auteur* school of scriptwriting. Adopting a more collaborative approach creatively - especially with regard to screenwriting and script editing - will secure the future of the industry more effectively than financial support for distribution, for example, something to which industry funders are always attracted.

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