

**A summer conversation between Katharina Mückstein — Austrian producer (La Banda Films) and author's filmmaker (Talea)**



**Gernot Schödl — Managing Director of the collecting society of filmmakers (VdFS) — also Peter Schernhuber and Sebastian Höglinger — the director team of the "Diagonale Festival of Austrian Film".**



## Living and Working in Austrian Film



Photos by Nadine Cordial Settele

**The scene is the "Hotel am Brillantengrund" in the 7th district of Vienna, a small family hotel with a sunny courtyard and good Filipino cuisine.**



**The Austrian film, the local scene — how is this seen from your perspective?**

**SH** A cliché about Austrian film attaches a certain heaviness, even melancholy to it. In general, the reaction to Austrian cinema often hovers at the extreme poles of very positive or very negative, although its potential actually lies in its rich diversity, in the way it plays with ambiguity and with tongue in cheek. Internationally, Austrian film has an incredibly high standing, is invited to festivals and discussed in the press. At home you get to feel only a little of this cultural value of Austrian film; or rather, it's almost impossible to measure it or put it in numbers.

**PS** It's also about the film culture of a country: In France or the US film enjoys a much higher significance both in society and within the cultural canon. Of course, the comparison is difficult and complex, but the fact is that Austrian film should be seen not only in statistics or box-office success; we have to try to stress its significance over and above this. In the long run it is naturally very desirable that increased appreciation on the home front is also reflected at the box office.

**KM** To celebrate the release of "Talea", I spent a year travelling to international festivals. Everyone on the international scene said: "Oh wow, an Austrian film!"

In Austria, however, I was confronted after almost every screening with accusations of "what a waste of money" and prejudices against Austrian films. Not a pleasant experience. The artists in this country aren't granted much of a spotlight.

**GS** The duty of the VdFS in the Austrian film industry is to act as a counterbalance also towards society and politics and to strengthen the self-image of the artists. Everyone has to pull together in order to be noticed, which doesn't happen yet.

**KM** The cultural sector these days is extremely economized. That scares me a lot. This attitude, that the more money you put in, the more money has to come out, has now infiltrated everything everywhere. In this context, there is little discussion as to how it affects us artists.

**GS** In my opinion, you have to strengthen cultural awareness in Austria on a broad base. France has already been mentioned as an example; here, art and culture have a different status and level of social acceptance.

Many people don't understand that a director often works for several years on a single film. In my experience people are not very aware of this. In order to be able to work at all, there has to be a financial basis for these two or more years: in my view people just don't understand this.

It's the responsibility of politics to give us this backing and secure for us these working conditions, this freedom.

**Where's the starting point? How can you increase understanding for film, how about film education in Austria?**

**KM** To be able to "read" a movie, you have to learn it, just as you learn the history of painting or sculpture. A basic understanding of film as an art form should be part of general education. Moreover, this should include production methods. After all, media competence is also about

knowing how something is made. You can only look critically at something if you understand its basic elements. Therefore I think something like this belongs in the school curriculum, especially in a world that's so full of moving images.

**SH** The discussion has been going on a long time about whether film needs to be a subject in the classroom. Regardless of how this subject is handled, the education system ignores the real lives of young people, who are constantly surrounded by moving images.

Still — and this debate kept cropping up during our last festival (YOUKI — International Youth Media Festival) — film screenings in the classroom are often used as a bonus treat. But the added value we might draw from the various possibilities of interpreting a film and what we can learn from form and style only rarely crops up as a topic for tuition.

This eventually leads to occasionally obscure demands as to how film education should be planned. Film is denigrated into a vehicle purely for the conveyance of content. You drag someone somewhere — a film that's supposed to have an interesting theme, and then you talk about it and that's more or less it. It is a problem, you must admit.

There's a deficit as regards film in the classroom. At the same time, countless initiatives are being sponsored, which orbit around the educational system like satellites and fortunately attempt to compensate for this deficit.

At present, youth culture is being influenced more than ever by moving images, and adapting to this fact of life has long been overdue in the classroom.

**Keyword young filmmaking in Austria; What is the employment situation for young filmmakers?**

**KM** The Film Academy is ruled by a spirit that's completely out of date, because a whole crowd of film directors teach there — of course, only men — who had super careers. It was surely tough to get where they are today, but we can't deny: no one from my generation will ever achieve their status. For instance, today it's almost impossible to live from cinema alone. And these directors have no idea what it's like today to get a break at the start. Not to mention what it means to do this job as a woman.

**GS** Most people only find out about the VdFS when their film is shown on TV. Therefore we want communication about us to start straight away at the film schools — who we are, what we do, and create awareness of this as soon as possible.

**KM** It would be more modern in approach to think in terms of cooperation rather than lone fighters and competition, because if we don't have a common political voice, our existence is totally at risk. I think this is something that hasn't yet got to young people in any way at all. The times of overnight stardom are over — it's not happening. And even if a film is running well, it doesn't mean you'll make a second film or will be able to live from something in between.

But you can only understand these conditions if people tell you about them, and you don't have to start from scratch every time.

**PS** Many creative people and those who work in arts and culture criticize the increasingly difficult conditions in surviving out there, decreasing budgets etc. But at the same time I notice an inflationary and increasingly imprecise manner of speaking from people in precarious positions. This is a problem, in that problems and strategies for solutions are no longer discussed, but bypassed with meaningless labels. There's a great deal of confusion going on here.

We notice this very strongly during the festival as well. We try to pay everyone a fair wage within the confines of a narrow budget; we want to set up internships, that is, places that are defined as such and ought to exist as such, for instance for people still in training. Like the traditional film jobs, this links up with the question of when training becomes a profession and what framework conditions are needed for this.

**KM** I have advertised internships a couple of times and try to offer them only to people who I feel can learn something and get something out of the experience.

What mattered for me was that I had the confidence at all to become a director; I grew up in a punk-rock, do-it-yourself environment and we did an enormous amount off our own bats. For instance, organised huge concerts and tours — things you don't normally do at the age of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. And everyone will probably tell you, that it won't work. But it does! Because you get a kick out of working with cool people and getting the show on the road. And this is the way I see film-making. There's no reason at all to start at the back of the queue and wait till someone picks you out as a star; you simply have to go for it and do what you think is the right thing for you.

I was only able to decide for film director as my job when I had various plan-B scenarios stacked on my desk. As long as I thought, I have to make it and mustn't fail, I was so worried about failing that I couldn't do the job.

If you do a job that puts you under so much achievement pressure — and this is particularly the case in making films, but is also true of society in general — you have to have the chance of saying: and what if it doesn't work?

You have to have the exit scenario so sorted out in your mind that you can still relax enough to work on the job at hand and not just for success.

**What about the movie and the place of the cinema in this day and age? Keyword crisis of cinema. What is the use of films today?**

**KM** I studied at the Film Academy, where we were still taught in a very traditional way. For instance to work on cinema as space. With Michael Haneke as a professor you are up against a standard demanding you produce very serious cinema. But I must say, I see this crisis in film also as a huge opportunity. I am very interested in finding new forms. It's not important to me to make films for the cinema for the rest of my life, but I want to reach as many people with my work as possible. If other media are better for it, so be it.

**GS** Legislation always lags behind technological developments. It has always been like this. It's basically nothing negative and will remain so. But the amendment to the copyright law was yesterday's solution and now you have

to work at an up-to-date solution. You have to think about streaming and other channels for films and how this can be remunerated so that creative people can have a share in the profits, not just the producers. This is a challenge.

**KM** Apart from illegal downloads, what is needed to overcome this crisis as I see it is simply the political will of filmmakers. Since this medium is bogged down in this crisis, it would need a kind of political admission that artists have to be supported to get them out of it.

**PS** I would like to come back to the cinema as location. On the one hand, it's of course a good idea to open up new distribution channels such as video on demand, but at the same time the cinema provides unique options in which we can ask ourselves what we can learn from the cinema at present. Cinema rejects the compulsive scramble of keeping up with the zeitgeist, just as it does the pressure that we have to/ can do everything, every time, and everywhere.

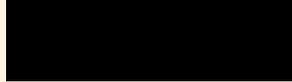
**SH** At festivals you notice there is indeed an interest in going to programmes compiled by someone else, who says: have a look at this, in this sequence, in this context. This is particularly interesting of course at festivals or events that are marked by a curatorial touch and events-short-film programmes for instance — that aren't just a simple, thematic sequence of films, but tell more, in the best cases. In my opinion only cinema can do this; I actually go to a real place and have to open myself up to the experience.

**PS** It's crucial that cinema can instruct us in how we communicate, how we speak, how we discuss, even how we argue. In the sense that people don't just withdraw, but re-enter into dialogue after the screening. In the ideal case this is of course more evident at a festival than in the regular cinema business, simply because filmmakers are on site. You can start talking and can contradict if you don't agree with something.

**SH** Following on from this, I find it fascinating in general to think about cinema architecture. Because there are very few cinemas that work as places I go to for more than just this one movie — as places that also fulfil a social function. Why for example does a multiplex cinema work as a meeting place for teenagers, where they go and watch a movie and still have the opportunity to hang out there afterwards? Or why does the Austrian Film Museum make me go out of the cinema hall, step onto another planet, hang out at the bar so I can talk to others about what I've seen? And why doesn't that work in other theatres? This has to do with programming of course, but it's also related to the architecture.

**PS** So now we are back at our original question: what are the characteristics of a national film industry and cinema culture? This also involves the question of what cinema locations might look like in ten, twenty years' time. What directions will they take? We can compare this to supposedly more banal event locations, where it's taken for granted that a club, for instance, looks quite different now from what it did twenty years ago.

**SH** We've often been asked: "You're younger now, aren't you, will the festival now go on the Internet?" — Something like that. But that's not it, by any means.



#### What do you wish for the future?

**KH** For me at the moment it is most important to make money. I earned almost nothing during my first film; This won't happen to me a second time, that's for sure, self-exploitation is over for me now, and that's a good thing. The main thing for me is that I carry on in this profession. What I learned with the first film is how much you can actually generate out of festival successes. That's what I'd like for the second film — provided it makes its way so fantastically through the festivals again — and that I can also take something of it back to Austria with me. It means so much to me here, too, where I come from, to communicate with people about this film, and not only abroad ...

**GS** Our wish is, of course, that we can make that happen, that through using the works of our film-makers we can create a basic stock that yields a cash flow that bridges the gap when no projects and no income are forthcoming, thus enable people to work on creative tasks. This is a very important aspect.

**SH** We hope that we can continue the Diagonale as a working festival and that it will continue to be seen as a platform, where people are really eager to show their films — in the best possible projection quality and with the biggest possible audience.

We also want Graz to become a place where topics are discussed that are relevant to the whole of society: topics that dock onto to the needs and interests of the Austrian film industry, and vice versa.

Thank you for the interview!

**Peter Schernhuber was born in 1987 in Wels. He graduated from the University of Vienna with a MA in Theatre, Film and Media Studies. Involved with film, art and design projects since mid 2000, as a PR agent (Ana Berlin Communications), project manager (Medien Kultur Haus Wels, Music Unlimited Festival), journalist (A-List, Freunde von Freunden, The Gap, Insider, Edition Die Presse, Vice), author (CINEMA Zurich), editor (Medien Kultur Haus Wels) and curator. From 2009 till 2014 he was the co-director of YOUKI International Youth Media Festival Wels. Since June 2015 Peter is the co-director (with Sebastian Höglinger) of Diagonale — Festival of Austrian Film.**

**Sebastian Höglinger was born in 1983 in Linz. He studied theater, film and media. From 2009 till 2014 he was co-director of YOUKI International Youth Media Festival Wels. Since June 2015 Sebastian is co-director (with Peter Schernhuber) of Diagonale, Festival of Austrian Film in Graz. Höglinger looks back on many years of experience in program selection/consulting for numerous festivals. He is regularly publishing as a freelance writer focusing on film for various media.**

**Katharina Mückstein is an Austrian filmmaker. She was born in 1982 in Vienna. After two years of studying philosophy and gender studies, she studied film directing in the class of Michael Haneke at the Film Academy in Vienna. In 2010 she founded — together with Flavio Marchetti, Natalie Schwager und Michael Schindegger — the film production company La Banda Film. For her first feature film "TALEA" she was awarded**

**the Prize of the Saarland Prime Minister at the Max Ophüls Prize Film Festival in 2013.**

**Gernot Schödl was born in 1975 in Vienna. After studying law at the University of Vienna, several professional positions followed: in law firms, at the Chamber of Commerce in Lower Austria, the Austrian Chamber of Commerce and several years as deputy managing director of Copyright Collecting Society Literar-Mechana. Since 2012, Gernot Schödl is managing director of VdFS — Collecting Society of Audiovisual Authors in**

**Austria. Schödl regularly teaches as a lecturer in schools and universities in the field of copyright and publishing law.**

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