

How does a book get to be a film? In an interview with the Newsletter editors, Petra Hermanns from the «Scripts for sale² agency talks about the trade in literary material for film adaptations.

Together with Elke Brand, Petra Hermanns set up the media agency “Scripts for sale” in 1999. Based in Hamburg and Frankfurt, the agency has specialised in representing screenplay and novel writers and negotiating exclusively the film rights held by publishing companies.

In the immediate run-up to the Book Fair partnership with the Berlinale involving a joint programme of events at the Film Festival from 10 to 20 February 2005, we talked to Petra Hermann about her experiences in brokering between the film and book industries. *Newsletter: A successful novel often turns up again in the cinema. What happens behind the scenes in the meantime?*

Petra Hermanns: Publishers, authors or agents – depending on who owns the film rights – try to sell film rights to producers or television companies and to place material. The more well-known and the more successful the book, the greater the interest among film-makers, of course.

How is the market for film material organised in Germany?

The market is not organised. It's like any license business. The license holder, in other words, authors, publishing companies or agents, and the licensee – producers or broadcasters -, get in touch, develop their contacts and try to do business together.

How much cooperation actually exists between the film and book industries? Are the two actually on a friendly footing?

When it's a matter of mutual interest in commercial terms , of course they have a great deal in common and there are the same interests on both sides. What author doesn't hope for a successful adaptation of his novel, what publishing company isn't pleased to do a good deal and what producer is not delighted to have a good box-office success or good viewing figures?

Of course there are differing individual interests and they make themselves felt during contract negotiations. It's like any other business: everyone represents their own interests. But the numerous successful film adaptations worldwide demonstrate that despite some marathon negotiations, the film and book world depend on one another.

Where do you see potential for improvement in networking between the two industries?

The markets have their own rules, customs and sales markets. It is important to recognise these differences and to know what works well on the book market and what on the film market – and why.

Improved communication is what improves networking. People simply have to get to know one another and talk about it amongst themselves, at forums and festivals for

example, as is now the case with the partnership between the Frankfurt Book Fair and the Berlinale film festival.

Patrick Süskind's "Perfume" involved one of the most expensive film deals ever to have been negotiated on the German market. How much is good film material worth?

It's difficult to say. In the case of world bestsellers, there are of course good chances of a world success in the cinema and in turn, commercial success, but there's no guarantee. Otherwise, everything is settled according to the laws of supply and demand.

What was the most expensive material you have ever handled?

Discretion is one of an agency's most important virtues!

What's the situation with placing the film rights for German books in other countries?

In Germany we're only just starting to pursue these routes in an active and deliberate way. The first hurdle we have to overcome is the language barrier. If the books haven't been translated into other languages, I scarcely need to bother to speak to a foreign producer.

And naturally enough, foreign film markets are looking for different themes and contents. In my estimate, this means that there are only a few titles that are suitable for direct sale to foreign producers. And of course, there is the option of looking for a producer in Germany who then himself goes for international production.

All the same: for titles that are suitable, it is worth boosting efforts to look beyond the confines of your own market.

On the German book market, rights agencies are becoming increasingly important. Is this also true for the film industry?

As far as brokering original material to TV-companies and the film business is concerned, agencies have played an important role in Germany for some time. In terms of adaptation rights for literary material, it depends whether and how the market continues to change when it comes to rights purchasing.

Publishing companies have to fight today to be granted the film rights for novels in the first place. They have to prove to authors and agents that they have the know-how and the capacities to give these rights a strong showing on the market. The successful selling of film rights calls for considerable commitment and continuous positioning on the market.

An agency that specialises in the film market acts as a professional interface between the markets. Without any additional costs in terms of personnel, publishing companies can organise the sale of film rights and are not running any additional investment risk. To this extent, I can imagine that publishing companies and literary agents are more likely in future to increase their cooperation with film agencies.

With the launch of its Forum Film & TV two years ago, the Frankfurt Book Fair began to support networking between the book and film industries. Has this first move had an impact?

The initiative was important and came at the right moment. I think that in the first instance it's about bringing the two markets closer and focusing once again on the common ground and potential for success for the two markets, rather than the difficulties.

It's already difficult to imagine the Frankfurt Book Fair without the Forum Film & TV.

The Frankfurt Book Fair is continuing to back the theme of film and set up a partnership with the Berlinale film festival in the autumn of last year. What do you expect from this?

I am hoping for more contacts and thanks to that, the opportunity to set the agenda for cooperation with international partners. We have again found new material in our rights pool that we will now be introducing in Berlin on the international stage and we are very keen to see the feedback. In Frankfurt 2004, we already had encouraging response to some of the material we presented in our pitch.

Interview for the newsletter of the Frankfurt Book Fair 2004

www.frankfurter-buchmesse.de/en/index.php?content=/en/buchmesse_frankfurt/film_und_tv/