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# THE GERMAN ROOM

The US Writers' Room  
in German Television Landscape

Abridged summary of

Chapter I: The Germans and their series  
Chapter II: The development of TV series in Germany  
Chapter V.5: The Danish Room

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## Why We Wrote This Book

These are exciting times, not only for the German series landscape, but for everyone involved in the production of TV series. Writers, producers, editors, directors, DoPs, actors, and production companies face new and wonderfully challenging opportunities in these changing times. An increasing number of German production companies are creating content for a worldwide market. Something that rarely happened in the past is emerging: content “Made in Germany” is binge-watched across the world!

TV series have always been popular in Germany. There is a long history of producing serial content for the domestic German, Austria and Switzerland markets. Some of these products have reached other European markets, but rarely did they capture global audiences. But a few years ago the modern German series graduated into the top class of audiovisual storytelling and has since positioned itself confidently within the global market. At the same time the gap between traditionally developed formats, aimed at the domestic market, and those created through more up-to-date ways of story development has become increasingly noticeable.

The German TV industry is experiencing a global series hype and locally undergoing a period of local transformation at the same time. In Germany, it is traditionally not the producers, but the TV channel that finances the product, and its executives ultimately are on top of the hierarchy in any given production. This system, in which the executive is key even in the creative process, is called „Redakteursfernsehen“ and it still dominates the German production landscape. However as of recently it has been challenged by a rapidly growing new series culture which is globally oriented whilst at the same time raising new expectations among domestic audiences. These recent products have a different quality and production standard. In the process the influence of „Redakteursfernsehen“ is waning.

For decades this way of creating a TV series seemed written in stone in Germany, because of the way these productions were financed. Now new distribution channels, models of financing and, above all, new ways of story development have been emerging.

In this process the global influence of the US is evident: "Writers' Rooms" are springing up everywhere and there is increasingly talk of “showrunners” - although not everyone necessarily means the same thing when they use this term. Obviously the US is a different market. Nevertheless it is important to understand the ways in which US colleagues are successfully operating within a broad and generally accepted consensus about how TV series can be developed and produced in a way that is both high-quality and economically efficient. The quality of their products is largely a result of the complex working model of the Writers' Room. It was created for purely economic

reasons, which in the US - unlike in Germany and Europe - is not assumed to be in contrast to being relevant and aspirational.

After the first years of the new German TV series boom, the initial glamour seems to have faded a bit. Now the initial enthusiasm should be followed by the necessary and consistent professionalization of new working and development models. In order for this to happen, we need a uniform understanding of the processes and working methods that are the basis of this new development model: a knowledge of what a Writers' Room is, how it works, what tools it uses, and what the job of a showrunner actually entails.

The need for a standardized definition of these concepts and methods, coupled with our professional passion for this extremely efficient story development model, is one of the reasons why we wrote the book *THE GERMAN ROOM*.

Let's be honest: it is not easy to combine this very American way of working with our traditional approach to script development. And there are many other reasons why integration of the US model is difficult to apply to the traditional German setting and our European storytelling culture. We discuss this in detail in the first chapters of this book.

Therefore our goal is not to copy the US system and apply it to the German market, but to understand the principles and the mindset of the Writers' Room approach - and to work out how applying it may make sense for us: for which format, in which context - and for whom. The decision to work with the showrunner/Writers' Room model has far-reaching consequences, in terms of creative development and writing, as well as in terms of production, organization, finances and structure. It changes our way of storytelling. To be clear: we are not idealizing the US model as the only possible approach and are not suggesting to unceremoniously throw all our traditions overboard. On the contrary, we are suggesting to combine the best of both worlds in order to find a way to align specific European artistic characteristics and traditions with the professional and economic efficiency of the US model. In the end, German TV as an industry will have to find our own way and define our (future) standards. We are convinced that the trend towards consistently collaborative development and the long overdue reevaluation of the role of the creator will lead to progress in our industry.

In a time of permanently increasing global and local demand, a competitive market and increasing quality (among creators and audiences) it should no longer be taboo to think about optimizing and economizing structures and processes which come from another era – a time where, just to name one example, there was no serious lack of personnel, time or money. Another obstacle as we move towards a 'German Room' model is our cultural mindset in Germany, which makes the transfer of many of the Writers' Room principles a particular challenge for us.

For this reason, the first two chapters of our book deal with the question of the cultural and historical concepts, traditions and working methods that still define the development of fictional formats in Germany. We take a look at how in many respects the US system works differently as we detail how the “US Writers' Room Toolbox” is organized. In the subsequent chapters we introduce the ‘Danish Room’ as well as analyzing various current Writers' Room approaches used in Germany. We show how the different systems are compatible and where new ways of working may need to be found.

We aim to clarify terms, eliminate possible misunderstandings and also propose new definitions – in short: we are on the search for a vision of the GERMAN ROOM.

Our book is not intended to be dogmatic or serve as a “one-size-fits-all”, but rather to stimulate and empower our domestic series industry AND professional entertainment audiences all over Europe. We’re convinced that all parties involved can profit from this approach – let’s talk about it!

Katrin Merkel & Timo Gößler

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# I. THE GERMAN ROOM

## 1. Cultural mindset

Art versus commerce – this is a difficult and at the same time very formative relationship. This apparent contradiction is so deeply embedded in the German mindset that, in order to survive in their respective industries, creatives and media professionals have normally to decide where and how to position themselves so as not to come into conflict with either ‘camp’. From the one there is recognition, from the other, as a rule, there is money. Whether this dichotomy makes sense or is appropriate is rarely questioned.

Even if reality teaches us otherwise and works of art have been traded, judged, sold, and also viewed in a highly commercial manner for centuries, two concepts are above all formative: artistic expression as an inner need of the artist on the one hand and the quasi prohibition of making a material profit from it. In short, it is part of the German artistic self-image to a) see yourself as predominantly misunderstood, b) perceive judgments by others as personal and inappropriate and c) feel that material success is by no means an impetus but rather suspicious.

The disparaging attitude toward the entertainment industry in Germany is also based on the distinction between E&U which means serious (germ.: *ernsthaft* -> E; i.e., relevant or worthy) art on the one hand and entertainment (germ.: *Unterhaltung* -> U, trivial/not worthy) on the other. This distinction originated in the music industry and is still in effect. Especially in the media-critical discourse of the 1970s and ‘80s in Germany everything - including most television series - that was not aimed at education and edification but primarily at entertainment was branded as trivial, ordinary, meaningless, or low-level, and without remarkable original content.

While the high-quality or sophisticated German arthouse film was (and still is) valued as an art form, the locally produced, modern, high-quality TV series is a commercial product that often seeks credibility by identifying with an arthouse DNA. In contrast, since their beginning, American series industry has always focused on commercial success and mainstream audience appeal. The content is designed to satisfy the audience. This is what the principles of ‘storytelling’ are about. And the value is measured in the currency of "commercial success". This is just the opposite of how the German system of values was set up in its early days after WW II. While US audiences came into contact with advertising-financed television as early as the 1940s, exposure to television in divided post-war Germany took place through charge-fee-financed (West Germany) or state-financed (East Germany) public broadcasting.

After the National Socialists had so thoroughly abused public broadcasting for their own purposes, there was a great distrust of uncontrolled mass media and therefore, there was heavy post-war legislation for the "media education" of the German public. While in the West television became regulated by public law and is still controlled by a democratic, non-government commission, TV in the East was consequently state-controlled.

### **The self-image of German TV writers**

The cultural-historical claim that artistic and commercial aspirations are basically incompatible naturally affects the self-image of German content creators and their attitude toward their products. The job title of a TV or series writer is by no means regarded as a seal of quality in Germany and can even be perceived as deficient in certain (creative & intellectual) environments: "Can't he/she write a movie?!" really means "Cinema is the Real Thing". Although German audiences have been entertained by TV series for many years, they have long been considered the red-haired stepchild of cinema. As a result the self-image of the writers has suffered. It's only been in about the last ten years that Germany experienced a really widespread enthusiasm for series that has been shared by the media and the public.

It's true that the comparatively new recognition of the genre of "quality" series is now ensuring a certain degree of appreciation but by no means does that mean acceptance across the board. Historically, a kind of universal genius based on the notion of the ingenious *auteur* was manifested in various cinematic trends in Europe from the mid-20th century onward. Beginning with Italian Neorealism (from 1943) through the Nouvelle Vague (from 1959) and the New German Cinema (from 1962) to the Dogma movement (from 1995), in all these stylistic forms, the filmmaker (predominantly male) as *auteur*, stood at the creative center of cinematic art. In principle this focus on a creative mastermind is certainly conducive to understanding the Writers' Room mindset but this creative personage was interpreted less as a mastermind in terms of content and production and more - in a typical European way - as an artistic genius. And this is no coincidence. The idea of genius also has a deeply rooted tradition in European cultural discourse: creativity and genius are (seemingly) inseparable. In this respect the idea of genius has haunted TV authors who are expected to be artists in the traditional German sense from the very beginning - and unsurprisingly this also determines the general cultural reception of a TV series.

The value and thus the prestige of successful (West German) TV writers was thereby for a long time seen in fine gradations. Based on the tradition of the "artistically valuable" *auteur* film which finally brought back international cultural attention to Germany in the post-war period, European filmmakers (primarily male) were at the top of the reputation ladder for a long time if they made a series, even on television. Similarly respected was the ingenious novelist (also of course, male) who had the

talent for broadly effective but upscale entertainment and wrote German TV history in conjunction with an equally ingenious (male) director. More respect is paid to the series judged to be of “high quality” than to the pure entertainment format such as a long-running series or daily soaps.

Accordingly, TV writers are not given the same recognition as novelists who also write screenplays. In fact, the job title of a TV or series writer has only existed for a few years. The only exception here are the legions of (self-confessed or anonymous) soap writers who have been doing their job extremely productively and successfully since the early 1990s. But in terms of reputation the "soapies" are at the bottom of the esteem scale in Germany. Outside their own cosmos they are largely denied professional recognition and since their works have no artistic pretensions whatsoever but are commercial products, they are considered trivial and therefore artistically worthless – in the broad public perception and even in parts of the (film) industry. Which is in fact quite wrongly: They are highly specialized and extremely well-trained professionals who are ideally equipped to work in the writers' room system.

In addition to the concept of “The Genius “, another stumbling block on the way to the US Writers' Room is the interpretation of fictional writing of any kind as a work of art. A typical German contract will define a screenplay first and foremost as a "work" from a legal point of view. In itself this term is value-free, but it can also be misleading: When we use the term "work" in Germany or Europe, we tend to think of a work of art rather than a work of craft. But artistic interpretation is also supported on the factual level. Just as an artist certifies the authenticity of a work of art with his or her signature, screenwriters must assure by signature that they are the sole authors of their work. This fixation on the individual performance and the finished screenplay as the commodified end product also negates, both structurally and financially, the creatively much more important and time-consuming process of development.

## **2. The emergence of the Made-In-Germany TV Drama**

In the early years of cinematic storytelling at the start of the last century, the Germans' passion for the crime genre was so evident that it still has a lasting influence on our (analog) television programming today. Several so-called (cinema) *serial films* enjoyed great popularity between 1916 and 1926. Interestingly the episode length of these first silent film-series formats was already between 60 to 70 minutes, and the number of episodes between 16 and 36. However, the production of these first series' precursors disappeared with the end of the silent film era.

It was not until after 1945 that a series culture worth mentioning developed again and this was initially on the radio. In the 1950s, some efforts were made to increase the



cultural value of television. But limited financial resources and the division of program production among what were initially six (later nine) state broadcasting stations meant that only one long-running German family series was produced under the ARD umbrella in the 1950s.

US TV series increasingly made their way into the main evening program on West German television in the 60s. Eventually, the competition between ARD and ZDF, which continues to this day, stimulated business in the West with original programming. The onset of audience expansion not only provided the TV stations with better financial resources but also encouraged more stringent organization. Instead of a few planned live productions, the focus was increasingly on pre-produced programs. While TV commercials had been broadcasting in the US since 1941 and sponsored programming was the order of the day, it was not until 1956 that the very first TV commercial flickered across the few TV screens in West Germany. In the GDR the TAUSEND TELE-TIPS started in 1960 and introduced consumers to domestic products of the planned economy. However, this only lasted until 1975 after which the GDR's TV programs were free of advertising.

The first generation of consumers who grew up in the 1960s (in the West) lost their hearts to American series characters when various animal and family shows made their way into West German afternoon programming (like LASSIE, FURY, FLIPPER and BONANZA or THE WALTONS). The increasing success of these longrunning foreign formats on the one hand and the public's desire for domestic productions and actors on the other (not to mention the extremely successful Edgar Wallace adaptations in cinema) ensured that the program makers opted for "suspenseful entertainment" in this regard, alongside several other successful formats. In the GDR a very popular crime format started in 1965 and lasted there until 1991 with around 140 episodes. It is worth mentioning mainly because it featured citizens who did not conform to the socialist ideal type. Unlike POLIZEIRUF 110 (*Police Call 110*, 1971-present) which survived the reunification in 1990, the focus here was not on solving crimes but on what caused them. It's an approach that seems quite natural to us today but was very unusual and courageous for GDR television of the time.

The German audience's second favorite genre, the family series, found expression in the West in various formats – same in the GDR although less frequently than in West Germany. The vast majority of all these early German series had in common their limited number of episodes – today we would call them mini or limited series. It was precisely this limitation that made these formats special, both then and now, and set them apart from the long-running (American) commercial series, at least in the West. It is also quite significant that they were announced in the program guides as "one-off events" rather than as multi-part series – as if there was something disreputable about the serial form even back then. Even on this subtle level the German attitude to

television entertainment which still pops up today, manifested itself by favoring the limited event and tending to classify it as more sophisticated. At the same time, the long-running commercial series which only satisfied the "trivial" longing of the broad masses was from the beginning stigmatized as inferior.

It wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that long-running in-house productions for prime-time programming were tackled, unsurprisingly mainly in the crime genre. One of the most successful German series exported internationally was DERRICK (1974-1998 with 281 episodes). At the same time, the family series genre flourished in the West. But serial storytelling was still frowned upon not least for program scheduling reasons. Even the longer-running series were told mainly in self-contained episodes. German broadcasting executives continued to aspire to the "king" of German TV production, the high-quality, 90-minute TV movie format known as *Fernsehspiel* (TV Play), which to this day is still considered by many to be the pinnacle of public television entertainment. And so, in addition to long-running formats in the 1970s, many mini-series and "Reihen" (movie series) continued to emerge. The two most prominent examples which are still successful today are the iconic TATORT (started 1970) with more than 1200 episodes and the still very popular eastern rooted POLIZEIRUF 110 (1971) with more than 400 episodes. But the 1970s and early '80s were also the decade of socially critical formats in both West and East Germany like Fassbinder's BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ (1980).

In the mid-1980s another genre gained a lasting foothold alongside the hitherto unassailable duo of crime & family series: the medical drama. While a dentist's series was extremely successful in the GDR, the ZDF launched the mother of all West German medical series: DIE SCHWARZWALDKLINIK (Black Forest Hospital, 1985-1989 with 70 episodes). The crime and family format duo had now become a genre trio which in good German fashion was poured into entertainment concrete for decades to come. At least a new genre format also saw the light of day in the West: starting in December 1985 the ARD audience was served a new weekly format on Sunday access primetime: LINDENSTRASSE by Cologne based producer Hans W. Geissendörfer, that went on the air and stayed there with impressive 1758 episodes until March 2020.

### **End of an era**

While US television was already entering the so-called *Second Golden Age of Television*, with a wave of innovative content and narrative starting in the 1990s, the freshly reunited German viewers had only just started getting hooked on the promise of private/commercial television with the start of RTL and SAT1. Meanwhile, public broadcasters continued to stoically rely on tried-and-true genre pillars of crime, medical and family series. In terms of storytelling, the episodes on prime time remained self-contained and rather introspective, driving younger audiences in particular straight into the arms of the private broadcasters. With the exception of the

very successful daily soap operas, the public broadcasters largely ignored the far more diverse genre preferences of younger people for too long.

So, by necessity, German TV viewers hungry for entertainment got to know not only commercial breaks but also discovered unusual settings and new genres like RTL's still running highway action series ALARM FÜR COBRA 11 (since 1996). Unlike the daily soap, the telenovela had not really been able to gain a foothold on continental European television up to that point. At the turn of the millennium this genre which had been extremely successful especially in South America made its way into German TV living rooms. Public and private networks made their first steps and some of these early formats are still running today like GUTE ZEITEN, SCHLECHTE ZEITEN (Good Times, Bad Times, since 1992 – a remake of the Australian soap THE RESTLESS YEARS) and UNTER UNS (Among Us, since 1994). The necessarily extremely efficient way of working in the development and production of daily formats and the horizontal storytelling format thus finally entered the German production landscape, even if, until recently, they were limited to these industrially produced genres.

After private broadcasters Sat1 and especially RTL pioneered successful series trends in the 1990s, they enjoyed no less than 20 to 25 percent of the prime-time market share especially among the advertiser's beloved demographic slice of viewers between 19 and 49. But the Cologne-based network slowly had to relinquish its supremacy in the noughties. New and surprising fresh formats came from other networks that tried to vary the old familiar genres with a funny twist or an unusual set-up such as the recently revived format MORD MIT AUSSICHT (Murder with a View, 2008-2015/ARD – about a very special police unit somewhere in the woods), DER LETZTE BULLE (The Last Cop, 2010-2014/Sat1 – about a cop from the '70s waking up in the new millennium), DANNI LOWINSKI (2010-2014/Sat1 – about a hairdresser who becomes a lawyer and sells her service in a shopping mall) or last but not least TATORTREINIGER (2011-2018/NDR – about a crime scene cleaner who is as eccentric as he is shrewd). This innovative trend was also noticed internationally and rewarded with various adaptation deals.

But apart from these outstanding formats, TV program makers, as well as the viewers, seemed to have fallen into a kind of waking coma. Although the new, exciting (and horizontally narrated) HBO series such as SOPRANOS, SEX AND THE CITY and SIX FEET UNDER were freely available, they were initially not widely noticed but remained insider tips among series nerds. It was much more convenient and above all more lucrative to satisfy German viewers' taste for light entertainment in the afternoon with cheap talk shows and in prime time with a never-ending supply of US series deemed suitable for the masses.

Notwithstanding the very different nature of the television markets and the associated financial resources of each country, we can say that for a long time, German

broadcasters simply relied on US broadcasters to not only deliver high-quality mainstream programming for the masses but also take on the risks of focusing on diversity innovation, and writer-driven originality.

### **The awakening**

It seems that the need to create original, fresh home-grown content was only awakened with the advent of streaming platforms and the successful entry of pay TV into the local production landscape. International competition not only invigorated business but obviously also fueled creative ambition. With some initial successes, tone-setting network executives quickly turned to the new players who tended to follow the US showrunner model which values and employs creators in a way only experienced in exceptional cases in Germany. The small pay-TV station TNT set new standards under the lead of its executive producer Anke Greifeneder in 2012 with Germany's first pay-TV in-house productions ADD A FRIEND and the mystery thriller WEINBERG (2016) created by Jan martin Scharf and Arne Nolting. TNT also commissioned the first German gangster epic 4 BLOCKS (2017-2019), created by the writer trio 'The Haribos' (Hanno Hackford, Richard Kropf and Bob Konrad).

Curiously, the first German series to arouse Amazon Prime Video's desire was the originally for RTL developed DEUTSCHLAND '83 from the first showrunner couple Anna and Jörg Winger. For RTL it was not a big success and so the series migrated to Amazon Prime Video where the second season (Germany '86) was shown in 2018 and the third in 2020 (Germany '89). It was an absolutely novel process but one that already foreshadowed what was to become possible in the new TV series world in terms of collaborations and, above all, exploitation chains. The first original German-commissioned production for Amazon Prime Video was the thriller series YOU ARE WANTED in 2017, where Netflix got into the original German production business with the complex mystery science fiction series DARK from the other successful showrunner couple Jantje Friese and Baran bo Odar, which attracted even more recognition and attention. All of the formats in this first generation of pay TV and streamer series appealed specifically to a young male audience – precisely that part of the audience that the public broadcasters gave up on decades ago and that private broadcasters have increasingly lost despite fighting back.

Even though it was already possible to watch a series in one go on video (or later on DVD), binge-watching only really became mainstream with the rise of streaming providers. The new competition revitalized the traditional broadcasting business and brought about an initial tentative reorganization of fixed structures, more openness in terms of content and entirely new cooperative ventures that had previously been almost unthinkable. In 2017 for example, ZDF experimented with new models of broadcasting both analog and simultaneously via Mediathek (VOD) and ARD collaborated with German pay-TV veteran Sky which was then also the first to

broadcast BABYLON BERLIN - a gigantic project in many respects. Sky developed into a series producer with a considerable output of big-budget genre formats - only to regrettably withdraw completely from fiction production in 2023. The same happened with Paramount+ that stopped local production only one year later.

After the first phase of a new series boom, German streamers continued to adapt their strategies to the demands of the market and deliver content in previously unimaginable quantities. Netflix in particular quickly learned to appreciate the added value of national productions for tapping into the respective markets. After an initial wave of production that primarily served a young male audience, they started to focus on other target groups, genres, and content. The result was remarkable formats such as the mini-series UNORTHODOX (2020) or BARBAREN (2020).

Since netflix lost customers for the first time in 2022 and thus passed the peak of its success, the flood of new formats decreased significantly. In its most recent phase of development, successes are clearly judged with a stricter measurement rate and second seasons are no longer commissioned so lightly. Generally now there seems to be a trend toward smaller, low-budget series that are special in idea or tonality, appealing to more niche audiences and even more on IP.

### **3. Network landscape**

Founded in 1950 on the model of the BBC, the ARD (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) is usually referred to as "The first (German television)". It's an association of nine so-called state broadcasting corporations (*Landesrundfunkanstalten*), which are operated by the respective federal states. A part of the program is created jointly, but there are also windows for local content. In 1963 a second network started broadcasting – this is why it's called "The second (German Television)" or ZDF (*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*).

Only in 1984 two advertising-financed private networks, Sat1 and RTL, began operating in Germany and started to challenge the public broadcasters. Now viewers suddenly had a much wider choice - not only of TV programs but also of entertainment philosophies because the private networks catered to an obviously unquenched desire for triviality. Until the launch of these first private networks in the West, public broadcasting was absolutely unrivaled on both sides of the iron curtain. It was not until now with the emergence of the so-called *Duales Rundfunksystem* in West Germany (dual broadcasting system – meaning the coexistence of public and private broadcasters) that the audience and its needs became a priority of economic importance - a trend that finally came to full fruition with pay TV in the 1990s and streaming platforms in the new millennium.

For decades, German TV formats were primarily produced for the domestic market. The window to the world and the international series market was finally thrown wide open with the launch of Amazon Prime Video and Netflix in 2014. People started talking about TV series not only in the schoolyard or university cafeterias but also at the office coffee machines and corporate conference rooms. There was now discussion about the current favorite format. Even the leading press, which still sets the tone in Germany, started to notice something beyond the esteemed TV film, and expanded its coverage. In addition to art, literature, music and film you would now get informed in almost all relevant media not only about the latest TATORT but also all the latest series hits. The first international successes of new German productions awakened audience hunger for more and also put for the first time pressure on the established networks.

The offering has grown exponentially in the last decades and, in any case, has become significantly more colorful and diverse: over hundred pay-TV and pay-VOD channels are today receivable in Germany of which not only moving into in-house production (and retail) but almost all are producing or commissioning content that reflects ever greater diversity. Established broadcasters are also diversifying their offerings or licensing fare more and more in line with special-interest channels and streaming portals. An overview (selected):

<b>Name</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Start</b>
<b>ARD</b>	Public network	1952
<b>ZDF</b>	Public network	1963
<b>RTL</b>	Private network	1984
<b>Sat1/Pro7</b>	Private network	1984/89
<b>RTL+</b>	digital pay TV / VOD channel from private network RTL	2007
<b>TNT series</b>	Pay TV	2009
<b>Sky (WOW)</b>	Pay TV	2009
<b>Amazon</b>	Streaming / VOD platform	2012
<b>Netflix</b>	Streaming platform	2014
<b>Disney+</b>	Streaming platform	2020
<b>Paramount+</b>	Streaming platform	2022

#### 4. Development of TV series

The increasing fragmentation of the market, the global series boom, the international success of modern German series, changing viewing habits and an increasing number of globally active players are having a massive impact on processes and procedures in German series development that have been in place for decades. The vast majority of German series are still created within the traditional structures of public and private broadcasters – they are still the largest and most reliable clients and commission around 80% of the total production volume of fictional content. In consequence, most of the players in the industry have to position themselves in the "old" and at the same time in a newly constituted production reality.

The cultural mandate of public broadcasting in West Germany long limited the number of foreign, especially commercial U.S. series in its programs. Although they enjoyed immense popularity from the start, at the same time there were repeated warnings against an oversupply of foreign formats and the excesses of commercial interests on German television. On the other hand, continued success and generous funding made institutionalized economization of processes unnecessary, creating not only giant organisms strongly focused on their self-preservation, but also enormous self-confidence. And a certain lethargy paired with arrogance.

From the very beginning, the private networks had to put up with the accusation - at least in public discourse - that their standards were too low or even lacking, and that the quality of their formats was determined by a rather educational bourgeois benchmark. The only thing they had in common was that both the public and private networks in the West German television landscape were and still are free-to-air. The first attempts to establish pay TV in Germany (1990 with the pay TV Premiere) were turbulent and ultimately - in terms of perception as a provider of fictional programming - not particularly successful at first. Especially in the early years of the (West German) so called *dual broadcasting system*, public perception often lacked a differentiated assessment of the completely different (economic) principles and, on the other hand, respect for the successes of the other system. On the other hand, working methods were similar, especially since private television copied the established structures of public broadcasters in many respects.

This double standard pervades the German film and TV landscape to the core and permeates all areas of work, from material development to financing and funding, from production to exploitation: ambition and commercial success are only perceived as compatible in exceptional cases and yet they are always supposed to be - a mindset that is only very slowly beginning to change.

### **The comissioning network**

The value system of public broadcasting is absolutely fundamental for understanding German television culture. Its mandate was based after WW II on the standards of the BBC and is laid down in the so-called *State Media Treaty*: With its program offerings, it is to contribute "to information, education, advice, culture and entertainment in order to ensure diversity of opinion and thus to the formation of public opinion". In the course of decades of monopoly and economic supremacy, a system has developed that is diametrically opposed to the strictly hierarchically organized US American showrunner system: the typical German 'editor's television' (*Redakteursfernsehen*).

Since fully financed commissioned production is still the predominant model in Germany, it is only logical that a system has developed in which the highest authority in the process of script development is the representation of the commissioning broadcaster - and this applies in Germany to both public and private broadcasters. Interestingly, even the working methods and also structures of the new broadcasters and streamers in Germany are increasingly influenced by this system – among other reasons because the new players ultimately recruit their (German-speaking) representatives from precisely this system.

Historically, the system of editor's television has developed from the tradition of the public broadcasters acting as studios; in addition to news and major entertainment shows, fictional formats were also produced inhouse for a long time. In this respect, the position and thus the self-image of German editors has grown out of the role of executive producers. But the extent to which editors today intervene in the creative processes depends entirely on broadcaster-specific traditions, but also on the personal preferences of the individual actors. However, active input in the development and the creative lead is explicitly part of the job profile of an editor, but is neither mentioned separately (per credit) nor paid separately. The exception is individual (senior) editors who are named as executive producers.

In addition to the development itself, the filling of all leading creative positions traditionally takes place in close coordination with the editors or is approved by them (i.e. cast, direction, camera, costume, set, make-up, music, editing and post, etc.). In Germany, editors combine all the creative decision-making powers of a showrunner/executive producer in their position, except for financing, authorship and the writing. However, they do not bear any production risk (i.e. organisational and/or financial risk). For the production company, the supervising editor is the direct contact person, but the final decision-making power usually lies with the head of department or even the management of the broadcasting company. Especially in the case of public broadcasters, additional hierarchical levels are directly or indirectly involved in the process.



Normally, one editor is in charge of a format, but in the series sector in particular, several (usually two) editors occasionally share this task. Who has the final say in such a constellation is determined individually; in general, the type and scope of communication is determined anew by the editorial team for each project. The same applies to the timeline: which documents have to be available in which form at what time is usually determined by the wishes and/or specifications of the editorial team (and not by production conditions). Even if the design of programming schedules at the private networks is much more directly influenced by viewer interest or advertising partners, the function of the supervising editors there is the same: the format must be adapted to the broadcasting scheme - accordingly, the historically evolved program structures determined the thinking and working methods of editors quite significantly. But with the increasing number of evaluation channels, these requirements are also changing massively.

The way the new players (especially the streamers) worked was initially characterised by flatter hierarchies, in contrast to the linear German free programs. The influence on content tended to be oriented towards the US-American model of more commentary feedback. In the meantime, however, the mechanisms of German editorial television are increasingly being copied. At the beginning, this may have been more out of necessity – since German TV producers and creatives were not used to developing and producing independently or on their own creative responsibility right down to the last detail. From a structural point of view, this is basically a 'germanisation' of the processes of globally operating companies, which are actually more oriented towards US standards. Nevertheless, the US way of thinking and thus also the legal and economic requirements are always noticeable and continue to put the German industry under some pressure.

### **The producer**

To a large extent, German TV producers still act quite often primarily as executing bodies, the commissioned production is still the predominant model. In most cases, writers develop an original idea, but often this is done in close cooperation or even on behalf of a producer or at the suggestion of a broadcaster. Whoever had the original idea for a series: only in exceptional cases is a concept paper passed on to a broadcaster without the producer having contributed his or hers input; they usually take over the design and layout costs of the documents to be submitted.

How closely producers accompany the process, both in terms of content and organisation, or even intervene creatively, depends - just as with the editorial team - entirely on individual preferences, and of course also on the standing / experience of the creatives. As they are the only ones who accompany both development and production throughout, they are much more the keeper of the vision than the initial

creator is. Experienced writer-producers who can fully act as showrunners still are the exception in Germany.

### **The Director**

In addition to the editors and producers, the director is traditionally also involved in the process of series development - usually, however, only when there is a greenlight or when the concrete preparations for production begin. This means: Even if all the scripts have already been written and approved by the commissioner, the entire concept may be put to the test again. Within the German system this also seems logical, because writers are only expected to a very limited extent to be able to write for a defined budget - this is perceived as restricting creativity. Only the director is the ultimate switching point where the vision of the format finally finds its concrete (aesthetic and productional) realization. While the creators/writers usually put their vision down on paper largely untroubled by the day-to-day business of production, it has so far been the director, together with the producer and the production management, who has ultimately had to face up to the concrete shaping and the challenges of feasibility. They are the ones who translate what has been written into concrete images. And (together with the production management) reconcile it with the constraints of the budget and above all with a realistic shooting schedule.

This task is certainly a great challenge. Much more effective, however, is the attitude (due to the tradition of European auteur cinema) of seeing the director as the creative head of the production. The real creator so to say - regardless of the fact that series directors are usually only responsible for a limited number of episodes and not for the entire season or the format itself. Nevertheless, both the production company and the editors usually expect them to give the format a specific signature – to deliver their interpretation of the vision. This conditioning has its origins in the cinema tradition already described, which entrusts them with the creative direction of the entire film work. This is now slowly changing, but their prominent position is hardly shaken, at least in traditional production contexts. In the hierarchy, they are on a par with the network executives and executive producers, and are generally accepted to be the final deciding authority in creative and production matters.

The claim to overall creative direction, derived from an extremely powerful tradition, sure does not stop at the scripts: the final revisions of episode scripts traditionally belongs to the director in German series development. In this respect, the shooting script is usually more of a director's version, since it is often created by the director himself, depending on his ambition and/or ability. Depending on the type and extent of the influence on the content, it is not uncommon for an writing credit to be demanded - and often granted. This fee is usually deducted from the writers' fee - which is one of the reasons for the seriously damaged relationship between German screenwriters and directors.

## **The Writer/Creator**

Since until a few years ago German TV productions were almost without exception purely commissioned productions for specific programming, the search for ideas and writers in practice has for a long time been oriented mainly towards whether they are able to serve specific formats or timeslots. Especially in recent years the image and also the appreciation of TV writers have changed. This is not happening across the board; rather, two parallel worlds have emerged: here the good 'old' (West German) TV world, there the seemingly unleashed universe of streaming providers, digital platforms and 'new' pay-TV players. The majority of established TV authors, however, still live and work in the 'old' world. But suddenly things seem possible that were unthinkable for decades - and this is fundamentally changing the attitude and self-image. This is also reflected in the increasing importance of the authors' association DDV (Deutscher Drehbuch Verband), which has once again gained in significance and self-confidence, especially after the union with the powerful authors' initiative *Kontrakt 18*.

Since the German remuneration model is consistently geared to the script that has been shot, the mostly freelance authors can only earn money with scripts that have been commissioned and, ultimately, with scripts that have actually been produced: they are the actual and ultimate service worth money. This is one of the reasons why it's so difficult for many German writers to see a script as a collaborative effort. It is customary to pay one third of the fee upon the contract, one third upon delivery or acceptance of the first draft and the last third upon final acceptance or start of shooting. There are also models that sometimes require a much higher proportion to be paid only at the start of shooting. The weeks, months and sometimes even years that precede a first draft of a script are given comparatively little credit, let alone payment. The fee for the actual development and conceptualization is usually hardly more than 10 % of the total fee and is offset against the first stages of the work if the script is commissioned.

Due to the comparatively sparse funding for concept development, the willingness for endless rounds of revisions tends to be low - for good reasons. The same applies to the timely delivery of the agreed written works; agreements on the type and scope or timelines for feedback from the commissioners, on the other hand, are not common or usually only exist in binding form for industrialized formats with high quantities, which make a tight organisation and adherence to fixed schedules imperative (such as daily and weekly productions).

With regard to working papers, the faithful implementation of annotations in the system of editor's television has absolute priority, as expected; acceptable intermediate steps such as outlines or beatsheets are equally disliked by all actors in Germany. They are considered exhausting to read, pleasing reading flow in prose is

clearly preferred. In this respect, German writers have also learned one thing above all: it is not the timeline or the decent plotline that is important, but the reading pleasure of the decision-makers (who are not used to deciphering process-optimized working papers). On the other hand, over decades they were able to write undisturbed and were rarely confronted with the demands of financing and/or production necessities. Accordingly, German TV writers are usually inexperienced in financial, production and directing matters.

### **The process of script development**

At the beginning of the development process is the formative idea/vision, which is first put in writing by the creator and shaped into a pitch or short concept, for example. There are no uniform agreements on what these concept papers should look like and what they should contain. A good relationship with the broadcasters can certainly shorten the waiting time for a response, but binding timelines or even unwritten agreements do not exist here either - it can take days, weeks, months or even years.

This attitude, too, is certainly a result of the decades-long monopoly position of the linear broadcasters. The processes and decision-making structures within the networks are extremely diverse and precise knowledge of them is one of the producers' most valuable assets. While the hierarchies at the private broadcasters are usually somewhat flatter, at the other end of the complexity scale is the mentioned joint editorial department of ARD, which cannot be shaken by anything or anyone in its timelines. The personnel and responsibilities at the new players and streaming providers are extremely volatile - which leads to great uncertainties, but also to new connections. However, most of the newer players act much more flexibly and usually come to a result (and thus feedback) much faster than the traditional German networks.

Usually, the production company first receives a development contract. With this initial financial and plenty of creative input, the concept paper is now developed further. It is still quite rare for German production houses to commission a (further) development or even a pilot script completely on their own costs. If several episode scripts are included in the development contract, other writers now come into play. But a greenlight for production can usually only be expected when all those involved in the story development process (i.e. also the bosses of the editors) have made their comments and these have been satisfactorily incorporated. We are talking about possibly up to ten people here (not including the writers) trying to 'agree' on one vision.

The development and production of a new series in this 'traditional' German way can take three to five years. Although the pace for new series is still usually much slower than in the US, more and more formats, even for established players, are now being

created in a period of one to two years at the most. So the "new" world has already had an influence on German development structures, especially in the development of new originals.

However, German producers (and creatives) have already developed distinct survival techniques, especially in the development and production of second seasons. Since production and broadcasting normally do not overlap (only in the daily and weekly soap sector), further seasons are usually only commissioned *after* successful (and complete) broadcasting of the first one. Broadcasters or the editors who represent them do not usually feel bound by any production conditions, and the time frames for commissioning a sequel are often not fixed or are not adhered to: it can happen very quickly and then put the production under a lot of (time) pressure - or it can take just as agonizingly long as the greenlight for the first season. This hardly production-friendly attitude is certainly also a result of the long-lasting absolute supremacy of the linear broadcasters.

### **Financing**

The public broadcasters ARD and ZDF are financed by licence fees and advertising revenue (dual financing). The private broadcasters are mainly financed by advertising revenue; pay-TV channels and streaming providers by fees: either in a subscription model (flat rate), through individually priced video-on-demand offers or both. Under certain conditions, various state subsidies are also available to all players in Germany. The Federal Government promotes German film industry: Over 40 million euros flow into funding programs and awards every year.

The willingness of producers and creatives to accept far-reaching creative interventions has, in addition to the cultural-historical roots, very tangible economic backgrounds: Until a few years ago, television productions in Germany were almost exclusively fully financed. The broadcaster in this case is not only the highest authority in terms of content, but also bears the entire production costs and receives all exploitation and utilization rights in return. If producers provide part of the production costs themselves (as is usual with cinema productions) and retain exploitation opportunities in return (e.g. VoD or foreign licences), this is referred to as a *partially financed commissioned production*. Partially financed TV service productions have also been possible in the series sector for some time. But even in this case, the broadcaster usually has more or less complete control over the content.

For a long time, the second most popular model for German producers was the so-called subsidized production. Originally established as film funding, the aim was to promote locations and film art - culturally and economically. Focused for many years on feature films and cinema productions, today most funding institutions are increasingly promoting series productions and other media formats (e.g. games).

However, fully financed commissioned productions are generally not eligible for funding, but partially financed commissioned productions and co-productions are, and these are then referred to as funded productions.

International co-productions have long been the exception in the German TV landscape. And there were and still are of course other possibilities for financing, e.g. crowdfunding, film funds or private financing. But as long as German TV series were mainly produced for the (manageable) domestic market and, with a few exceptions, hardly promised recognition abroad, the more organizationally and legally demanding options of a possibly international co-production were not very tempting - compared to the convenient commissioned production. But this is also changing rapidly: in the case of the originals of the German streamers and the pay-TV channels, in addition to (classic) fully and partially financed commissioned productions and co-productions, there is now also the model of the so-called *producer series* (the production company as the major financier acts like a studio) and international licence sales (pre-sales) are also becoming more and more important.

## 5. Inside the German Room

In the meantime, more and more German series are also being created beyond the daily soap system in collaborative structures that follow more or less the principles of the U.S. system - not only, but especially in the area of quality series. It goes without saying that each of these approaches is referred to as a writers' room, even when essential aspects of the U.S. model are hardly used or not at all. Despite all the individuality of these different approaches, some commonalities can nevertheless be found in these *German Rooms*:

### Team

In Germany, the number of writers on a drama series (depending on the number of episodes) is around three to six plus a showrunner/head writer. In many German writers' rooms that we know of, a writers' assistance is now employed, although their tasks vary depending on the project. The leadership position of a room also varies: In most cases, the showrunner/headwriter takes over the leadership and moderation and also at the boards. In other cases, a producer, an experienced dramaturg or a development producer takes over this function. It is also becoming increasingly common for specialist consultants or other trades to be invited into the room at this early stage of development. At the latest when pre-production has already begun and the heads of department have been appointed.

### **Rooms and equipment**

In the German writers' room 'light' version, most rooms actually consist of only one large conference room; there are still hardly any additional workspaces for the staff writers. Since there is seldom a really long collaboration (see below), this one room only in a few cases actually and exclusively remains a Writers' Room until the end of the production or development work. Usually, external rooms are rented for a certain period of time or an office of the production company is used. Accordingly, these rooms are not so much an "exhibition of the vision" as they are set up as a temporary workspace. As in the U.S., most of the rooms work with index cards or whiteboards, but mostly in a greatly reduced form. Overall, these 'light rooms' are more to be understood as improvised short-term rooms that only in rare cases really give the series a home.

### **Working method and duration**

The work processes in the German light rooms we analyzed vary greatly, but as a rule they can be clearly divided into two different phases - similar to the *Danish Room*: a plotting phase, which takes place obligatorily with everyone in the room and in which the authors are exclusively available to the format, and a writing phase that can be individually designed for the authors - at home or wherever. Sometimes the vision is first discussed or perhaps even worked out together (which is why we call this approach *Concept Room*, since it is not about plotting out episodes). The common phases in the room are about plotting, first the season, then the individual episodes. And this also takes place in very different ways: The goal of a plotting phase can be an extremely concrete and completely built act beat board of one or more episodes, in another case perhaps only a kind of rough orientation about what should happen where and when. And of course the time needed for the room phases depends on this.

As a rule, each writer writes one episode in script form. The writing phase is usually not exclusive and is subject to the individual availability of the writers (as is usual in Germany) - accordingly, the writers usually need more time than in the classic Writers' Room in the US system. Plotting with beats hardly ever takes place. Depending on the project, it is now also quite common for the showrunner/head writer to take over at a certain point, i.e. to discuss the books alone with the editors, the director and the other trades and to make final revisions (thus effectively dissolving the Writers' Room). It is rare for staff writers of a German Writers' Room light to take on or be involved in production tasks themselves.

Another fundamental difference to the classic US system: Many German head writers/showrunners, especially at the beginning, rely less on clear hierarchies, detailed structural announcements, concrete guidelines and quick decisions.

### **Contracts and Credits**

Until a few years ago, it was common for freelance writers to work in the rooms on the basis of classic contracts and not to be paid extra for the additional work involved in being present. More and more often, the authors receive additional daily fees for their presence in the room, which, however, are still too often offset against the payment for a script. In more and more rooms, the time spent in the room is now paid extra and is added on top of the production fee.

However, the question of who gets what credit for an episode (and beyond) and is thus also entitled to subsequent remuneration, for example through VG-Wort shares, often leads to disputes. But here, too, there is a lot of movement in the industry. In the meantime, streamers in particular, but also other clients, are coming up with various credit variants, some of them creative, that at least try to take collaborative working methods into account. Also, more and more headwriters/showrunners are now enforcing an additional creative or executive producer credit. However, there is still a lack of industry-wide uniformity.

## **6. Summary**

Even though more and more new series formats in particular are being developed in various forms of collaborative cooperation between creatives, production and commissioners, the predominant system of series development in Germany is still the so-called editor's television, as developed by the public broadcasters and adopted by the private networks. In this way, a time- and resource-intensive system has been established without creating universally valid and binding structures. The resulting financial risks were consistently passed on to the production companies and the creatives. In fact, script development in Germany has so far mostly taken place at close to zero budget. But the consistent underfunding of development not only causes great frustration, but has also had a negative impact on the quality. In our opinion, this lack of funding often and at all levels prevented the necessary professional diligence in the development of commercially successful series - not only in Germany, but throughout Europe.

In Germany, many participants traditionally have creative influence on the series development and understand it as part of their responsibility. For a long time, writers were not involved in production processes and accordingly were hardly able (or willing) to develop decision-making competences. This is currently changing, not least on the initiative of corresponding associations and interest groups. The creative control of the development process in Germany continues to lie primarily in many hands for the clear majority of formats – sharing the powers and sharing the risks is the predominant mindset. But this also leads repeatedly to considerable friction losses,



long development times and consensus-orientated formats that rarely leave the domestic market. Unlike those formats that have emerged in other contexts and working models.

However, with the increasing success of self-produced (high-end) series for international markets and the pressure of the new players, it is not only the demands of the creatives that are rising. New financing models and (international) co-productions are becoming more and more popular and are also giving TV producers more independence. Especially with high-end formats that want to be internationally marketable, unusual collaborations arise that were previously unthinkable. Thanks to this new flexibility, it is no longer only industry giants that benefit from the German funding system, but increasingly also domestic TV companies and creatives who think and act more and more internationally.

Writers' Rooms are increasingly being used in Germany in a wide variety of ways. Some features of the US original have been adopted - others not. The time periods are significantly shorter, and writers' rooms are generally used more for concept development than for the actual creation of episodes. Real showrunners are still the exception, but head writers are being used more and more often, and writer's assistants are also more common. In addition, separate payment for presence in the room is slowly gaining acceptance. Clear and consistent hierarchical structures, on the other hand, are still in short supply, and the awarding of binding credits has still not been established.

However, an increasing professionalization can be observed in the ranks of creatives. Producers have not yet really discovered the (financial and production-related) advantages for themselves. And the commissioning broadcasters are generally happy to use the terminology, but without really taking a serious look at the necessary structural changes. Last but not least, there is hardly any significant interest or understanding on the part of the directors - the reservations are great because of the loss of power, which can hardly be negated.

The German serial industry is still far from a uniform protocol and binding agreements and, above all, from the provision of realistic financial resources for the development – and thus of truly functioning *German Rooms*. It can be assumed that the showrunner model will not necessarily prevail across the board in the future. Instead, similar to the Danish approach, executive producer and head writer will work even more closely together and probably give the director more space than the US model. And the broadcasters will hopefully learn to trust in the creative power of one vision. If not out of an accepting understanding, then possibly due to structural and financial constraints. Because one thing is undeniable: the German editorial television model is a cumbersome colossus from the last century that burns up a lot of time and money...

## V.5. The European Game Changer: The Danish Room

First of all: the Danish television industry is very small. In addition to the public broadcaster DR (Danmark Radio), there are streamers and private TV providers (e.g. the pay TV channel TV2), but DR is still extremely dominant and produces the most TV content by a large margin, so their approaches always have an impact on the entire Danish industry.

DR is responsible for the Danish series revolution, which began as early as the mid-1990s with Lars von Trier's *GHOSTS (RIGET)*. DR's executives flew to Hollywood as early as the late 1990s and took a very close look at how the new generation's high-quality series were created. With the knowledge they gained, DR's station executives experimented using various development models and gradually designed a kind of *Danish Room* that adopted some key aspects of the U.S. model. Before we look at the content aspects, let's briefly trace the structural measures DR used to revolutionize the Danish series production landscape so sustainably.

One of the most radical changes grew out of the observation that outstanding writers in particular are largely responsible for the quality of a series - and that they need freedom and creative decision-making power. And since DR is not only the commissioning broadcaster, but also at the same time the (at least majority) producer of its program, it was possible to consistently change the way it works. Another decisive factor was the insight that quality can only be created if a vision (and that of an author) is followed as consistently as possible. As a result, there was a self-imposed shift in hierarchy and power, not only in the relationship between editorial and creative staff, but also among the series creators: away from the director as the authoritative creative decision-making body, and toward the writers. These first new approaches were laid down in an initial guideline paper in the early 2000s under the then DR "Head of Drama" Ingolf Gabold.

### **New self-image of the editorial office**

The Head of Drama thus curtailed his own decision-making power (including that of producer) and partially handed it over - for the sake of quality - to the creatives, especially the writers. Gabold wrote that although he, as the commissioner, retained overall responsibility within the network, he was only "in charge" but not "in control". This principle also found its way into the *15 Productions Dogmas* to which DR committed itself (see below). This model corresponds to the idea of a broadcaster as a curating commissioner. Similarly to Germany, for many decades in Denmark, permanent dramaturgical editors held a leading creative position, and they too had

enormous influence on the content of fictional development - until this position was abolished at the beginning of the 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the 2000s, DR also became intensively involved in promoting young talent, working together with the state-run Danish Film Academy, where series development and production had not previously been part of the curriculum. New workshops were established, and TV professionals were hired as lecturers. New talents were also encouraged and paid to think about series material and discuss it with DR by means of a kind of scholarship lasting several months after graduation. At the same time, DR managers developed the aforementioned 15 production dogmas, which, in addition to a few aspects of content, stipulate above all that the vision of a writer who has the final say creatively must be followed. The producers (usually employed by DR or DR Fiction) are free to choose the creatives and heads they want together with the head writer.

Another dogma is that a crossover of talent is desired, i.e. that creatives from the independent sector, such as cinema, are also welcome. This can be explained by the fact that Danish cinema was one of the best in the world at the time, not least thanks to "Dogma 95," while Danish television was mainly made by creative staff employed by the broadcaster. By bringing in cinema talent, it was hoped to create new impulses and overcome the artistic divide between television and cinema - which has undoubtedly succeeded. This may have been primarily due to the fact that the creator's vision was explicitly placed at the center of appreciation.

The relationship between producer and writer was also defined: the producers bear full budget responsibility for the respective series and are to act like a 'coach' in their relationship with the creatives. The producers, for their part, maintain contact with the Head of Drama at the broadcaster, who in turn acts like a coach to the producers. literally, the dogmas include the formulation quoted by Gabold: "Our motto as leaders is: not in control - but in charge." This attitude avoided consensus-driven or compromise decisions.<sup>2</sup> So it was radical structural changes throughout that made it possible to integrate the collaborative working methods of a Writers' Room in a meaningful way - something that was not at all common in Denmark at the time.

### **Headwriter/Producer-duo instead of one Showrunner**

The term "showrunner" is not common among the Danish colleagues, they rather speak of the US position showrunner being split between two people: the head writer (usually also creator of the series) and a producer permanently employed by DR or in

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<sup>1</sup> Dramaturgs in Denmark today work as consulting freelancers hired by the head writer or producers rather than as influencing editors.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Redvall, p. 78. The dogmas not mentioned here essentially refer to DR-specific structures, which are of less interest in our context. An overview of the 15 dogmas can be found in the appendix.

the DR Fiction production department. The latter bears financial and production responsibility and should be involved in all creative decisions by the head writer. Ideally, this duo works closely together in a spirit of trust, usually deciding jointly on the casting of the director, the head of department and the actors, for example, and as a pair corresponds to the US showrunner position in terms of competence, responsibilities and duties. Following the dogmas, producers are supposed to give feedback on storylines or script versions, but not in the form of obligatory acceptance or content-related influence, but rather as a supportive sparring partner at eye level - just as head writers can do for producers on production issues.

The creative say is held by the head writer, whose job (as in the U.S.) is to protect and preserve the vision of the series through to completion. Accordingly, a Danish head writer may also spend a lot of time on set, in the editing room, or in the sound mix - depending on how much responsibility he or she delegates to the director. The head writer always has the final creative say, his or her work is not done until the series airs. However, he or she has a strong partner at his or her side in the form of the producer, which - at least in the case of a happy collaboration, of which there seem to be many in Denmark - makes him or her less lonely at the top than US showrunners usually are.

In case of doubt, a producer can fire a head writer, but only for production-related financial reasons (because specifications are continuously not adhered to), not for artistic reasons or because people disagree on the content. In such a case, the head writer will always prevail in case of doubt.

### **Small Rooms**

Danish writers' rooms traditionally consist of small teams: the head writer (= creator) and two staff writers, who usually write the first versions of the working papers and scripts. Although head writers sometimes write from the beginning, they may also do the final rewrites of the scripts. Head writers are in charge of the writers' room and make all final organizational and creative decisions there.

Danish Writers' Room teams do not constantly work together in one place. There are usually clearly defined work phases in which the joint plotting process is decoupled from the writing process. As a rule, each episode writer can work alone - in the home office or wherever, but exclusively for the format and with a comparatively tight schedule, which usually provides more time than is usual in the US system. Sometimes episodes are swapped between writers in the process - the second version of the script may be written by a different episode writer.

At the beginning of new horizontally narrated series or new seasons, there is a joint season-plotting session, in which the season as a whole is developed in terms of its essential plots. With ten episodes, this usually takes four weeks. The entire

development and writing process of a classic DR season (ten episodes of 60 minutes each) takes about a year, although pre-production, production and post-production of the first episodes begins within this year.

Structurally, modern Danish series do not always work with a fixed act structure, but as a rule with beats, and in some cases exhibit an enormous narrative density that is oriented toward the U.S. narrative style. In addition, Danish writers' rooms like to integrate experts and consultants into the work in this plotting phase (in BORGEN's case, for example, someone who is familiar with Danish politics and its processes) in order to detect logical or factual errors.

The broadcaster stays completely out of the development process; there are no sign-offs. As a rule, station representatives or the Head of Drama have the opportunity to make commentary notes on the head writer's versions of the scripts (usually the third version). However, these notes must not fundamentally call into question anything that was previously conceived, nor do they have the character of instructions to be followed.

### **Production**

Overall, the development and production processes are not quite as closely interlinked as in the classical US 2-years-cycle - if only because of the longer development phase. Nevertheless, in the course of restructuring, DR has also built up an infrastructure that brings the various trades into spatial proximity to one another. For example, studios were created that not only house the filming, but also the offices of the set designers and costume designers, as well as the writers' room. These short distances make it possible, when pre-production or production is underway, to spontaneously and quickly invite the heads of the various trades into the room and integrate them if necessary. A step towards the Studiosystem, so to speak.

DR has very consciously established that writers are the ultimate creative decision-makers for the series - and of course this has implications for the relationship with the director. It makes an immense difference whether it's the conceptualizing director - directing the first two episodes of a new series - or a director hired later for the rest of the episodes.

The head writer and the producer choose the directors together - and they will always do this very carefully. The task of a conceptualizing director is to locate the series aesthetically and in terms of staging in the sense of the vision and to develop the "right" visual language together with the DOP (Director of Photography). To that extent, in terms of his or her series, a head writer will naturally choose someone whose extraordinary talent can bring the vision to the screen and involve her or him early in the development and pre-production considerations. Not as another writer or

decision-maker, but as an artistic partner with appropriate freedom and room to develop. Episode directors in Denmark usually come in from the third or fourth draft and then have to subordinate themselves to the established style and even more so to the vision of the series.

### **Summary**

Denmark was among the first European TV nations to celebrate global success with non-English-language series. We claim because the Danish colleagues took an early interest and also understood why the U.S. model was so successful, especially in story development. But instead of simply implementing the US model 1:1, they analyzed exactly which aspects are crucial for quality. Based on this, they developed its own model, which takes into account national peculiarities in production and work culture, and has produced outstanding series in variants to this day. One of the reasons for this success was that the key players in the system had the courage to radically restructure their production landscape and limit some of their own powers in order to increase the quality of their series. With success.