

## “Film Has Turned from a Cultural Asset into a Commodity.” A Conversation with Noemi Ferrer Schwenk

Few people know the European film market as intimately as Noemi Ferrer Schwenk. Over the past twenty-five years, she has worked in almost every part of the film production value chain. She started out with German film distributor Prokino Filmverleih in 1999 and later worked in film funding, first for the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland) and then for Eurimages, the Council of Europe’s film support fund. Afterwards, she switched to the production side, working for Zentropa, the production company founded by Danish director Lars von Trier, where she was, among other things, involved in financing *MELANCHOLIA* (DK/SW/FR/DE 2011, Director: Lars von Trier) and *EN KONGELIG AFFÆRE* (*A ROYAL AFFAIR*, CZ/DKDE/SE 2012, Director: Nikolaj Arcel). Today, she works as a consultant for various institutions and boards, including the Icelandic Film Centre and the European Writers Club.

*Do you think the attitude towards spoilers has changed in your line of work over time, and if so, when did the shift occur??*

I think it has. Since I’ve been living in Ireland, I’ve been reading Peter Bradshaw’s film reviews in *The Guardian*, even though I rarely agree with him. And here, as well as in trade magazines like *Variety*, *Screen International*, or *Deadline*, there has been a visible shift in that they all now include spoiler alerts. That must have started after 2010. I think it’s interesting that this development more or less coincided with the rise of trigger warnings and political correctness. In a way, it seems quite contradictory. On the one hand, people are averse to spoilers, which means they don’t want to know anything about the movie they’re about to see. On the other hand, they want to know as much as possible, because there might be something in it that will affect them negatively.

*As Kristina Busse argues in her chapter in this book, spoiler alerts and trigger warnings are closely linked. According to Busse, both are signs of a changing relationship between author and audience: Audiences don't just accept what they are handed by the author anymore, they want to decide for themselves if, when, and how they experience a work.*

That makes a lot of sense to me, because it is in line with how audiences have changed in general. In the past, we all watched the same stuff on a limited number of TV channels. Now, everyone can be extremely selective and basically curate their own programming. We all create our own niche, so to speak. But at the same time, and this is quite paradoxical, we still want to be surprised.

*In your work, you often have to select promising film projects. Has the fear of spoilers led to any changes in this area?*

I have noticed a change in the way projects are presented, whether I'm involved as a distributor or as a member of a funding agency. There has been a distinct evolution in the way log lines, the one-sentence summary of a film, are written. There must be a cliffhanger in the log line now. In the past, the focus was more on explaining what the film was about, on describing its essence. Now it's not just about describing an interesting, suspenseful, or creative story, but also about delivering it in a way that creates suspense. Now there's always something that's going to draw the reader in, because the cliffhanger is already in the log line.

I guess there are two main reasons for this. One is that plot twists have become an integral part of storytelling; so in a way that is related to spoilers. Second, the competition has become much fiercer. You have to make a mark with your project, stand out. In general, filmmakers have become much more aware of the audience, and I, as a representative of a funding body, am basically treated like a normal audience member.

*Do you have an explanation for where this might be coming from? Is this a development encouraged by the funding agencies themselves? Or does it come from the filmmakers, who think they need to be better at selling their projects?*

We probably have to differentiate between different countries and film cultures. Here in Scandinavia, people are extremely good at pitching their ideas, and there is a strong awareness that you are not telling the story to yourself, but to an audience. I exclude Lars von Trier from this, although he is a real conundrum in this respect. He may seem very unpredictable, but he is actually the most talented marketer in the arthouse sector. If you look at the

teasers and posters for *MELANCHOLIA* or *NYMPHOMANIAC* (DK/DE/FR/BE 2013, Director: Lars von Trier), which von Trier is always closely involved with, you see how brilliantly they target their audience.

In most Nordic countries, there is a kind of functional approach. You want to be successful, you want your movie to find an audience, you want to sell your product. Especially in Denmark: after all, Copenhagen literally means “city of trade” in Old Norse. It’s similar in the UK and Ireland, and now also in Germany and Spain. France, by contrast, is very different. Here, the idea of the auteur still dominates. In a way, this is related to the changing role of the author that we talked about. If the author is no longer the one and only god serving you the work, then the audience becomes more important.

*Does the fear of spoilers also affect how scripts are developed? Are writers now more concerned about protecting a plot twist?*

I’m not sure whether this is the case, but the way scripts are written has certainly changed. I started in the film industry right before the turn of the millennium; this was the heyday of script doctors and gurus like Linda Seger or Robert McKee. For a time, their books were our bibles, and everything was about the concept of the three-act structure they promoted. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy, of course. Because we were drilled this way by our gods, we also preferred movies that followed the concepts they advocated. And with the three-act structure, which is always headed for a clear resolution, spoilers suddenly become an issue.

*Is that really true? Couldn’t you argue that the classical three-act structure can’t be properly spoiled because you always know how the story is going to end? There is no surprise in John Wayne killing the villain and getting the girl.*

I see your point, but I would still say that this very rigid structure with its one-dimensional hero depends on maintaining suspense. It is true that in a way you always know how it’s going to end, but you still don’t want to know it in advance. I think *GLADIATOR* (US/UK 2000, Director: Ridley Scott) was a big turning point in that respect, as it was one of the first blockbusters telling us right from the beginning that the hero is going to die in the end. This goes completely against the grain of how big commercial films used to work. By announcing the death of the main character, it becomes a tragedy of sorts.

I think suspense is essential, even for arthouse films, although that’s a different kind of suspense. If you look at an extreme example like Jonathan Glazer’s *THE ZONE OF INTEREST* (UK/PL/US 2023), there is also this constant tension. You are constantly wondering if they are going to show the horrors.

And no, they don't, but the tension remains. Or take *ANATOMIE D'UNE CHUTE* (*ANATOMY OF A FALL*, FR 2023, Director: Justine Triet), which also stars Sandra Hüller. It is an arthouse film but also a murder mystery, a kind of family murder mystery.

*Since you differentiate between blockbuster and arthouse movies: there is this almost paradoxical phenomenon that the fear of spoilers seems to be much greater with big blockbusters like *STARS WARS* or *Marvel* movies. For arthouse films, spoilers are much less of an issue. This seems strange, since the latter are supposed to have less standardized and therefore more surprising plots.*

Maybe this indicates that spoilers only become an issue when an audience no longer thinks of itself as an audience but as consumers? What it comes down to is that we don't want something we've paid for spoiled. The younger generations have grown up in an environment where they are constantly flooded with content. Yes, they can carefully select what they want from this flood, but in most cases that also means having to pay for it. And paying doesn't necessarily mean a paid subscription, it can also mean having to watch advertisements. And once you've paid for something, you are much more sensitive about whether it corresponds exactly with what you expected. So, maybe spoilers are a consequence of the fact that film has turned from a cultural asset into a commodity.

This brings me to something that Thomas Eskilson, the former CEO of Film i Väst, Scandinavia's leading film fund, has been preaching for some time. According to him, in the last twenty years, everything related to public film funding has developed in only one direction: from the promotion of culture to economic development. We see this most clearly with tax rebates granted to film productions. It started with 20 percent; now, many countries give 25 percent. Ireland gives 32 percent, and in the Canary Islands, we are now at a 50 percent rebate. Politicians like to do this because economic development is easier to justify to voters than the support for culture. But what this also leads to—and this brings me back to my original point—is that film is no longer regarded as culture but as an economic asset, a consumer good. And this is where the fear of spoilers comes in again. Because you mustn't spoil something that's meant to be consumed.

*One development that has considerably changed how we consume films is the advent of streaming. Would you say that the rise of streaming services has also changed the content being produced?*

Definitely. But we have to distinguish between different phases. In the beginning, there were prestige productions like *HOUSE OF CARDS* (US 2013–2018, Creator: Beau Willimon). Lots of interesting, innovative content. Back then, the streamers' economic model was to attract subscribers and gain as much market share as possible. But that model has hit a wall; there are just too many streaming platforms, and no one can afford to subscribe to five or more services. What's more, some regions are already oversubscribed; there's simply no room for growth anymore. The strategy of these global streaming services is dictated by the stock market, and when it became clear that they couldn't grow anymore and they risked losing shareholders, they radically changed their model. About two to three years ago, they all switched from expensive, high-quality productions to mostly very conservative, schematic genre fare. I remember a representative of Viaplay saying in September 2020 that they were "looking for something that can make noise." One show they co-produced at the time was Lars von Trier's *RIGET: EXODUS* (*THE KINGDOM: EXODUS*, DK 2022, Creator: Lars von Trier and Tómas Gíslason). Or Netflix produced the fourth season of *BORGEN* (DK 2010–2022, Creator: Adam Price), internationally known as *BORGEN: POWER & GLORY*. That was three and a half years ago. But they didn't succeed in gaining more market share, which led them to cancel all their boutique productions. Netflix, however, is now introducing advertising-supported video-on-demand. And once you do that, the advertisers want to know what they're buying into. So the productions become cheaper, less adventurous, more schematic. In a way we are back to good old private television—except everything is on demand now. The difference is that the productions are even more schematic now because everything is driven by algorithms. The streamers know exactly who is watching what, and the shows they produce are fine-tuned accordingly. They know exactly what needs to happen at every moment, what music is needed, and so on.

*In big Hollywood productions, it's become common to make actors sign non-disclosure agreements, or to only hand out portions of the screenplay to them so that it can't be leaked. Do you see similar things in European productions?*

Not at that level. But in general, everyone has become much more sensitive. One reason is that film funding is under constant pressure, especially when there is a conservative government. You have to prove that there will be return, that your film will find an audience. And there is a fear that leaking

a spoiler, for example in the case of a thriller, will lose you 10,000 or 20,000 viewers. Whether that fear is justified is another question, but it is definitely there. Especially PR departments have become very concerned about not leaking anything. With social media, the stakes are much higher. There are no minor slips anymore; any slip is a major screw-up now.

## Filmography

ANATOMIE D'UNE CHUTE (ANATOMY OF A FALL). Director: Justine Triet. FR 2023.

BORGEN (BORGEN: POWER & GLORY). Creator: Adam Price. DK 2010–2022.

GLADIATOR. Director: Ridley Scott. US/UK 2000.

HOUSE OF CARDS. Creator: Beau Willimon. US 2013–2018.

EN KONGELIG AFFÆRE (A ROYAL AFFAIR). Director: Nikolaj Arcel. CZ/DKDE/SE 2012.

RIGET: EXODUS (THE KINGDOM: EXODUS). Creator: Lars von Trier and Tómas Gislason. DK 2022.

MELANCHOLIA. Director: Lars von Trier. DK/SW/FR/DE 2011.

NYMPHOMANIAC. Director: Lars von Trier. DK/DE/FR/BE 2013.

THE ZONE OF INTEREST. Director: Jonathan Glazer. UK/PL/US 2023.