

# ART AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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## REFLECTIONS ON SCREENWRITING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

In 1930, Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht created the political-satirical opera with its famous "*Alabama Song*": "*Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*" ("*Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*"). The composition was by Weill, the libretto by Brecht. *Mahagonny* (abbreviated title) was intended to be a parable of capitalism, stripped of its veneer of bourgeois respectability, as it "*arose to meet the needs and desires of the people. It was these same needs and desires that brought the city to destruction*". Mahagonny is the story of three criminals in the US, creating a city where everything is permitted, except being poor. The opera was a commentary on the state of Weimar, Germany; underneath the facade of prosperity and happiness lay corruption and savagery.

(Retrieved from:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rise\\_and\\_Fall\\_of\\_the\\_City\\_of\\_Mahagonny](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rise_and_Fall_of_the_City_of_Mahagonny))

The audience was shocked. I went to see the opera version in Antwerp on October 2011. What was once a shocking piece of art about outcasts and criminals as the main characters, has now become a commercial blockbuster, loved by many "bourgeois".

[www.google.be/#hl=nl&output=search&client=psy-ab&q=mahagonny+utube&oq=mahagonny+utube&aq=f&aql=&aql=&gs\\_nf=1&gs\\_l=hp.3...3197.10090.1.10260.21.17.1.0.0.87.87.1.1.0.frgbld.&bav=on.2.or.r\\_gc.r\\_pw.r\\_qf..cf.osb&fp=bcae813c4ba8856a](http://www.google.be/#hl=nl&output=search&client=psy-ab&q=mahagonny+utube&oq=mahagonny+utube&aq=f&aql=&aql=&gs_nf=1&gs_l=hp.3...3197.10090.1.10260.21.17.1.0.0.87.87.1.1.0.frgbld.&bav=on.2.or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf..cf.osb&fp=bcae813c4ba8856a)

Comparing this version to other interpretations across Europe, the Flemish performance is more like a "pornographic opera", a reflection of the modern world, a new way to entertain an audience: an audience that wasn't shocked at all, but rather entertained. Might this be a new form of high culture entertainment? (as opposed to low culture). Or is this only my personal, generalising interpretation?

Flemish Press reactions:

[www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/mediatheek/nieuws/cultuurenmedia/1.1115111](http://www.deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/mediatheek/nieuws/cultuurenmedia/1.1115111)

<http://vlaamseopera.be/nl/#!/nieuws/mahagonny-positief-onthaald-1>

Looking more closely at the press releases, the audience was prepared to be shocked. I wondered: is this performance diminishing the distinction between high and low culture because it is reflecting our unconscious irritation with globalisation and Western individualism, a world of consumption? And... is Europe unconsciously becoming a modern Mahagonny?

## REFLECTIONS OF A SCREENWRITER

These are reflections, starting from that opera; reflections as a screenwriter who teaches screenwriting in this “European Mahagonny”. I know my classics (I know Brecht). But as the director of the Antwerp Mahagonny version said in an interview: *“compared to the world today, Brecht’s story is a fairy tale. I want to entertain the audience with the rottenness of this world”*.

I am not a playwright and neither are my students. I write for the screen, for movies, for television: and this is hardly considered art, or is it? Television is not considered to be high culture. Maybe some experimental movies are. We are the underdogs. Writing for movies and television *is* culture, but it *is* also technology and economy; and consequently a modern bourgeois way of swallowing up critical art.

Weill and Brecht were criticizing their society. They had to run from the Nazis. Screenwriters don’t have to run. Our work can only reflect our unconscious relation to our society, in the choice of characters, in a plot, a conflict, an action, a dramatic goal for heroes, in a story structure ultimately inspired by Aristotle or not... All this should appeal to a wide audience.

I teach screenwriting at the MAD-faculty in Belgium. My students are young “participants of society”, young “participants of the today version of Mahagonny, a “rotten” society, according to the Spanish director. The spontaneous imagination of my first-year Bachelor students can almost be predicted. Male students often choose for an imitation of a theme of American – (globalised?) – Inspiration. Female students often choose for what I call “variations of soaps”: falling in love, relationship problems... In their own way, they are *reflecting* their relation to society. Some are *idealizing* our “consumption” pattern. It is not easy to make them aware of their “precast” inspiration; it is not easy to give them a helicopter view, a critical view on our society. I try to make them aware of their spontaneous but predictable way of thinking. The conflicts in their creations are often individualised. Is this how critical artwork is being made harmless by our bourgeois society? The “rottenness” of the world (I am consciously using the opera director’s words) does not always inspire my students. They have never left the safety of our European Mahagonny. Once, Europe was considered a model of civilisation. Maybe this no longer appeals to them. Or... is this the influence of American dominance in the movie and television industry?

## WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE

A screenwriter writes because he hopes his work will some day be shown on the screen. He pitches (sells) his dreams and therefore has an audience in mind. Not all screenplays are turned into a movie or TV-series. For many of my colleagues it is a way of thinking, a way of postmodern writing (as a colleague screenwriter once said). Starting a screenplay you think of an interesting plot, and a hero about whom you are passionate. The hero could be a criminal, an outcast, just like Brecht created. But in the back of his mind a screenwriter who is creating a criminal hero, is always aware of the fact that movies or TV-series have to be financed.

## AUDIENCE AND CULTURE

Who is my (target) audience? Screenwriters write for an audience aged between seven and seventy-seven. In Europe, the consequence of this question is: in what language shall I write? On this old continent, screenwriters in the first place write in their own language for an audience they know, their neighbours. European screenwriters don't write for *European cultures* (Scandinavians may be the exception). Is the EU, besides an economic unity, also a cultural unity? Do we understand each other's cultural codes? Or are these questions redundant in our globalised individualised world? But for my own safety, hadn't I better write in my individual language, for my individual town, for a small audience, in a language only some people understand... as long as I, as a screenwriter, am paid. Why should I write about Europe, for an audience that does not understand my small local problems? "I like screenwriting, I have got to pay my house, my car; my kids have got to go to school.... So bye bye globalised world, bye bye Europe: the street where I live is full of individualised problems I can write about.

## INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

Mahagonny is about "outsiders of society", those who are not really participating in society, criminals who create a new town where everything is permitted. Crime movies or TV-series are traditionally popular subjects in screenwriting: but they are often a variation on "*a police inspector searching for the murderer*". Professionals call this: "variations on *who done it?*". Of course this is not the only genre about "outsiders". Movies by the British Ken Loach and Mike Leigh for example; their films are not "krimis", they deal with ordinary people and everyday real life. They manage to survive and get broad distribution. Their subjects relate to British society. Magda Olchawska, creative consultant, author and filmmaker, summarized my personal thoughts in her blog: *Mike Leigh is the head representative of British social realism. He is often mentioned in the same breath as Ken Loach, with whom he shares an interest in social matters. Leigh is called a "tragi-comedian of everyday life" and a "film humanist" amongst modern directors.*

(Retrieved from  
[www.magdaolchawska.com/entry/160](http://www.magdaolchawska.com/entry/160)

But aren't they also examples of British dominance in the media? Let me compare this with other themes in movies and TV-series. Let me warn you, some thoughts of mine may surprise you.

When I was writing this paper I read in a newspaper that a Flemish movie (called: "Ben X") would be remade into a new Swedish adaptation. The original story is about a Flemish autistic child. The remake will be depicting a Swedish autistic child.

(Retrieved from:  
[http://www.hbvl.be/krantenkoppen/zoeken/remake.aspx?q=en\\_HvdUOpNSA!Q=&q=remake](http://www.hbvl.be/krantenkoppen/zoeken/remake.aspx?q=en_HvdUOpNSA!Q=&q=remake)).

The author (writer-director) Nic Balthazar comments in an interview: it 's a pity it 's a Swedish adaptation, it had better be an American one. It's clear he wants to be identified with American movies. The same newspaper announces that another Flemish movie ("Hasta la Vista", by Geoffrey Enthoven) will be remade in Holland (Flemish and Dutch are regional varieties of one and the same language). Can I conclude that, although we speak the same language (Flanders and the Netherlands), we obviously don't experience this as belonging to the same culture?

May I ask you: how many adaptations have there been of Ken Loach or Mike Leigh movies, in any other country? You don't say: *give me the Mike Leigh screenplay for a Swedish adaptation*. Is a Mike Leigh movie art and the others are not? Or is it about cultural dominance? Could you imagine a movie made in one American state receiving an adapted version in another American state? Don't we, in Europe understand each other's culture, unless we make adaptations? Or are there any other reasons? Is it because some subjects are individualised and others relate to society?

The Swedish series "*Millennium*" was shown on Belgium TV (in Swedish, not in a Belgian adaptation). By August 2009, it had been sold to 25 countries, outside Scandinavia.

(Retrieved from:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennium\\_\(miniseries\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennium_(miniseries))  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Girl\\_with\\_the\\_Dragon\\_Tattoo\\_\(2011\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Girl_with_the_Dragon_Tattoo_(2011_film))

This "Millennium miniseries", based on the work of the Swedish author and journalist Stieg Larsson, was adapted for an American audience in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, directed by David Fincher (the same director who made "Seven", a movie about a mad criminal manipulating police officers).

While many adaptations lose their original setting, in this American version, although romanticised, the Swedish atmosphere was kept: the actors speak

English with a Swedish accent. What is the difference with the Flemish movie (Ben X), which will lose its original setting totally, when it is being adapted for a Swedish movie? Does this tell us anything about “art and its relation to contemporary society?” I am aware of the fact that my thoughts may be pure speculation but my mind keeps playing with these ideas.

Another example: the Danish movie “Brødre”, (*directed by Susanne Bier and written by Susanne Bier herself and Anders Thomas Jensen*) was adapted into an American movie (*Brothers, directed by Jim Sheridan*). It has been reset in America. On the other hand, the TV-series *The Killing* became a Scandinavian hit with viewers in many EU countries.

(Retrieved from:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Killing\\_\(Danish\\_TV\\_series\)#Plot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Killing_(Danish_TV_series)#Plot))

Peter De Maegd, a Belgian producer is at this moment producing a five-episode TV-series, which is a coproduction between six EU countries (Belgium, Holland, and the four Scandinavian countries) that was recently joined by Arte as well. The production is called “The Artists”. The series focuses on an international artist community (an internet community). This thriller starts with the disappearance of one of its members. Taking advantage of the Multitasking trend, the production decided to allow the audience to discover the story and characters through various [Internet](#) media. So, it’s an Internet and television “co-production”.

(Retrieved from:

<http://www.transmedialab.org/en/storytelling-transmedia-2/the-artists-a-new-european-union/>)

The article has an interesting heading:

*“THE ARTIST, A NEW EUROPEAN UNION”. The Artists”, realized by the Belgian director Hans Herbots, aims at simultaneous broadcasting on six televisions networks and on Arte).*

The series is shot in English. Right from the beginning, the producers aim at an international audience. There will be characters from the different countries, speaking their own English. But I am surprised about their announcement: “*a new European Union*”. They probably mean “*a new cultural European Union*”.

It is an excellent idea using artists from different countries as main heroes. It is a perfect construction to avoid local requirements from different European countries. Traditionally, every country wants its own culture reflected in TV-series. And let us not forget every country’s economic demands for staff employment). I am afraid that the opportunities to create a mix of characters from different cultures are rather limited.

I interviewed producer Peter De Maegd (a man I respect a lot). He told me

that if you want to write a contemporary European TV-series, you should write a crime series. *The European culture doesn't have any common ground for any other genre.* I was shocked to hear this. I was even more shocked hearing that, while they announced “*a new European (cultural) Union*” in their advertising, an American screenwriter wrote the final version of the screenplays. I do like American screenwriters, but to say the least, this sure is a contradiction.

## SCREENWRITING AND CULTURE

As screenwriters and filmmakers we are producers of culture, living in a society. Inevitably, we will write stories about this society: characters we know, stories with a beginning, middle and an end. But we work with the values of the culture we live in. What culture is that? In my case: Flanders, Belgium, industrialised Europe, Western Society? Is culture related to language? Or is culture a vague and complicated word, meaning everything and nothing specific?

According to Wikipedia culture is a term that has many different inter-related meanings. Culture is the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization, a group or society. Any form of independent group with a homogeneous existence and coherent social structures has its own, coherent feelings, values, standards, ideals, and objectives.

Originally "cultura" had an agricultural significance, meaning cultivation of the land, the care of the cattle. Later, people use the term metaphorically to describe education; giving people values of the community they live in, the group they belong to. In the nineteenth century, culture came to the fulfilment of national aspirations or ideals. Some scientists use the term "culture" to refer to a universal human capacity.

As a screenwriter what group or organization do I belong to to express my values? There is western society with explicit dominating common economic values. There are subcultures with specific feelings. Sometimes our neighbours are cultural strangers. There is the so-called “high culture, with values conflicting with the so-called “low or popular culture”. TV-series are mostly considered popular culture. And there is cultural globalization.

(Retrieved from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture>)

To make a living out of writing, it is much easier to write about cultural values close to home.

## CONFLICTS

But a screenwriter creates drama. He creates conflicts of values. In my view there are four kinds of conflicts in drama. There is the conflict arising from the inside of the character (the individualised conflict, the conflict of the tragic

hero, for example).

Secondly, there is the conflict of values between characters or between a character and society, mostly applied in Melodramas and Comedies. A third one is the conflict of a character with exterior circumstances (like a disaster). Finally, there is the combination of the previous categories.

Basically, conflicts are a complex of contradictions coming from the inner self, inter human or between character and society. Conflicts are about the confrontation of a character 's values with the values of his neighbours.

I asked my students to do some research on dominant values in TV-series. Principal values are for example love, affection, idealism, acceptance, security, career, success, fame, deviant behaviour and power. Alternative values are made visible, but in the end the traditional values of society are confirmed; law and order is restored. These values are mainly embodied in middle-aged men and women.

## **OUTSIDERS IN AMERICAN MOVIES**

My American friend, Tom Pope, teacher and screenwriter, indicates that American screenwriting can only be understood by a character's relationship to society.

*(Tom Pope, 2009, Future Films, Predicting the Future of screenwriting, unpublished manuscript, Lecturer Minneapolis, College of Art and Design)*

At the simplest level, he argues, it's the culture, laws, psychology, beliefs, religion, and economic system which, taken together, support, sustain and control us. "Society is the significant unit in our species' struggle for survival in which the interests of their component members...are subordinated to those of the entire group...and where the activities necessary to the survival of the whole are divided and apportioned to the various members.

Society is an ideological system of ideas and beliefs, which legitimizes our behaviour. It is a technological system of skills and arts, which enables us to produce an organizational system that allows us to coordinate our behaviour. It is the umbrella, which protects us from the storm of barbarism. It is the classroom that tells us what we believe, and the felt-lined prison in which we live. If we reject society we're thrown out of the safe island and cast adrift in a leaking lifeboat on a storm-tossed ocean of madness (Do you recognize Mahagonny?)

But the embrace of society creates tensions and conflicts. Tom distinguishes different characters, whose values are in collision with values of society, characters that reject society. He makes a distinction between the insider (characters who stay inside the embrace of society) and outsiders: those whose values conflict with society.



## LEAVING THE SOCIETY'S EMBRACE

It is the story of the quiet, little businessman. One evening he says: "I am going out for cigarettes". He closes the door behind him and is never heard from again, no phone call, not even a postcard. He just vanishes. He leaves society with its values.

Most of us never walk out the door, never to return. Most of us remain part of society. We try to understand ourselves, seek love, pursue a career, decide where to sleep, what to wear, when to eat, all within the embrace of, in reaction to, or in spite of, that elegant straitjacket "we call society". The complicated and ambiguous relationship between society and us, is our primary human concern, it should come as no surprise that it's also the traditional concern of movies.

On page 229 of his manuscript (Future Films), Tom argues: almost all American screenwriting is defined by the relationship it draws between society and those characters who must decide whether to lie within or without that tender trap.

But what if society does go wrong? What if it no longer functions as that felt-lined prison? What if the myths suddenly seem hollow? If the value of existence within society evaporates, then we're all faced with the challenge of whether to stay or to leave. I add: then you leave for the city of Mahagonny where your individual needs are most important, and having no money is the biggest crime.

Tom distinguishes different characters in American movies in relation to society: the insider, the loser, the anti-hero, the outsider, the outcast, the outlaw, the other.

The Insider is someone who believes in, resides within, gains identity from, and finds moral comfort through society. The Insider is society's cheerleader.

Beginning in the late 1960s, screenplays have increasingly featured people who find themselves outside the embrace of society.

*(Tom Pope, 2011 The Good Guys and the Bad Guys", unpublished manuscript, manuscript submitted for publication, Lecturer Minneapolis, College of Art and Design).*

As many movies are about "good and bad" characters, Tom wonders what is good and bad. I try to summarize his ideas: the normal philosophic and religious ideas of good and evil don't tend to apply to drama. The simpler idea that good is resisting temptation, while evil is giving into temptation, is rarely seen. Rather good and evil tend to be social and/or psychological in origin and form. Good in movies tends to be about social and mental stability, while evil is about social and mental instability.

A good guy embodies conventional social patterns and cultural beliefs. The bad guy represents neurotic and/or socially un-integrated behaviour. He is arrogant, abusive, blames others, lacks shame and betrays his subordinates. While pure evil seems completely insane, the tragic bad guy has different



values. He is often deformed as a representation of inner distortion.

This idea of "good guys & bad guys" keeps me busy in my work. In traditional movies and TV-series, society's values are violated but at the end of the story these values are restored. The insider becomes an outsider because he violates society's values, but at the end he desires to be reintegrated.

In his paper Tom defines many different social and psychological good and bad guys (examples: Good guys with Super human Abilities, like Superman, Jesus), extraordinary abilities like James Bond, or the simple good guy, who lacks complexity and therefore becomes boring, unlike the complex good guy, or the cowardly good guy who is forced to undertake a journey; the epic good guy, the mythical good guy, the Marxist good guy... and many others.

He defines bad guys: bad guys in a good society, bad guys in a bad society, the Freudian bad guy, the super ego bad guy, the end justifies the means bad guy... the Marxist bad guy, and many others.

## **THE CRISIS OF THE GOOD AND BAD GUY**

A typical good guy can defeat between three to four bad guys. However with the growth of the corporate state the ratio has changed and a typical good guy confronts more bad guys than he can believably defeat. In that ratio lies the end of the traditional hero/villain battlefield and the introduction of the fantasy landscape and the fantasy hero and villain. The relation between good and bad guys lies in their goals. The good and bad guys could even merge.

*(Tom Pope, 2011 The Good Guys and the Bad Guys", unpublished manuscript, manuscript submitted for publication, Lecturer Minneapolis, College of Art and Design).*

In his second chapter he distinguishes different heroes:

THE TRAGIC HERO: he evolves like the Complex Good guy; he fails to succeed and falls into destruction Example: Hamlet, Oedipus.

THE SOCIALLY UN-INTEGRATED, unable to fit into a society, which does not support. He fits into several sub-categories:

- THE LOSER. (Often in film noir). He faces and is defeated by social forces destructive of his soul. He is the darker destiny of "The Outsider". Example: Leonard in Memento.
- THE ANTI-HERO. While he does not want to be destroyed by society, neither can he integrate with it. Never failing, never succeeding, forever alone. He is the outcast without a tribal connection. Classic example: Rebel Without a Cause.
- THE OUTSIDER. Unable to join society, he must reinvent himself by re-entering society or becoming a LOSER or transforming himself into either an OUTCAST( Bonnie and Clyde) or as an OUTLAW (Michael Corleone).
- THE OUTCAST. He has skills or values which society takes to be radioactive to its well-being. Magnificent Seven. Mission impossible, but also Ocean's Eleven.
- THE OUTLAW. He has abandoned society, which he considers irrelevant

or even antagonistic to his well-being. He lives on his own terms, a self-invented autonomous "wise" man. Vito Corleone, Marcellus Wallace, Hannibal Lecter.

- THE OTHER. Hating society, which is destructive of his well-being. He has powers, which can potentially or actually threaten to destroy society. Jesus, Spartacus, Neo in The Matrix.

## **CONCLUSION. GOOD GUYS, BAD GUYS IN EUROPE**

In his paper (and future book) Tom Pope analyses the characters' relation to the embrace of society, and more specifically good and bad in modern American movies. How about European movies, in contemporary society? Do we unconsciously express a society in crisis?

In the introduction of her book, Dara Marks on p. 14 describes the relation between external actions and internal need: External actions are always driven by internal need. Our conscious existence is based on two distinct yet simultaneous realities: there is an external world where activity occurs, and there is an internal reality where we process what has taken place and give value to it according to our own individual perceptions.

*(Dara Marks, Inside Story, Three Mountain Press, 2007)*

p. 18: Story is not the passive experience we perceive it to be. Stories teach us through symbolic experience how to be human. We (and our characters) grow and evolve internally in direct relationship to the conflicts and obstacles that we face and overcome in the external world. Dara Marks' "external world" is what Tom Pope describes as "society".

Reflecting about characters and their relation to society is our conscious or unconscious activator of what we experience in life. As screenwriters we can support, justify or criticize society and we reflect this in characters and their relation to the embrace of society.

In my conclusion I want to come back to Tom Pope's questions "*What if society does go wrong? What if it no longer functions as that felt-lined prison? What if the myths suddenly hollow? When the value of existence within society evaporates.*" And now I am thinking of Europe.

Weill and Brecht created an artificial "bad town Mahagonny" led by criminals, outlaws for whom society is irrelevant. The characters in Mahagonny are purely evil bad guys, self-invented and exempt from social or cultural rules, amoral bad guys without any moral compass, or ethical basis. They left society and live on their own terms.

In the thirties this opera was shocking. Now it has become a popular opera. Are these characters part of our unconscious feeling of our European society in transition?

Most characters in European movies and TV crime series are "insiders". Although they have individualised conflicts, in the end law and order is

restored. I think these movies will easily find an adaptation from one EU country to another.

But what if Europe goes wrong? What if our technology-driven civilisation has not fulfilled its promise of prosperity and equality or that the achievements are not nearly as delicious as we hoped they would be? In the TV-series *Millennium* the journalist Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander are outcasts. They are socially not integrated and - what is more important - they have skills, they are radioactive for the well-being of the insiders in power. Especially the sympathetic character of Lisbeth: as a young woman she has the power of an outcast, although this is an individualised power. Is this one of the unconscious reasons for the success of this TV-series? Are we creating European outcasts because we feel that Europe is failing? Is there a lack of such characters and themes in European cinema? I remember, years ago the Danish movie "The Idiots" (writer/director Lars Von Trier); these characters were "*the other*" as outsiders. But at the end of the story law and order is restored.

In an interview, the Belgian producer of "The Artists" told me that the only common TV genre so far in the EU is "a crime TV-series". Maybe it is time to reconsider our *individualised* conflicts, our next-door inspiration and search for shared genres. Maybe it is time to leave this traditional platform of crime series and start research for new interesting characters, insiders, outsiders, radioactive for Europe or not, characters leaving the embrace of society. Maybe it is time for screenwriters to think together about what moves the European citizen. Maybe it is time we had more common research and education in screenwriting.