

Cinekid scriptwriting seminar *Creating Modern Heroes*

On Thursday 23 October the Netwerk Scenarioschrijvers (Dutch Screenwriters Guild) and Cinekid organised an international seminar - *Creating Modern Heroes* - in The Movies in Amsterdam.

Participants were Ella Lemhagen (*IMMEDIATE BOARDING*, *PATRIK 1,5*), Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko (*AVATAR*, *THE LAST AIRBENDER*), and the Dutch scriptwriter Robert Alberdingk Thijm (the *DALTONS*, *DUNYA & DESIE*). Maya Götz, an internationally acclaimed researcher from Munich and head of the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI), was invited to present results from her research into the role of gender, presented as *Girls and Boys and Television*. Sarah Meuleman, journalist and editor in chief for culture and media at the weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland*, was present as moderator.

The central question was: is writing and creating screen characters for children a different trade than writing for adults? The central question was: Who are the heroes of our children and who are creating them? A high percentage of the seminar's audience were Dutch screenwriters and directors.

Kids like challenges

Maya Götz presented her findings. She has conducted extensive research into how children react to all kinds of series for the young. American series dominate the world of television, and the leading stereotypes are male super-fit Caucasians. There are hardly any traces of imperfection or of children with a handicap. With regard to the over-sexualized female figures in series like *WINX CLUB*, Götz concluded that boys aged up to twelve, in tests she conducted, don't like to be confronted with references to sex. Boys prefer to look at tomboy-like female figures. The creation of super-slim, super-sexy, idealized animated females reveals more about the sexual obsessions of their creators than about the imagination of the young viewers. Götz asked the audience to keep this in mind when writing. Analysing Dutch programmes and comparing these to international programmes, her conclusions were critical of Dutch drama for the young: in general, Dutch drama doesn't deviate positively from international drama.

She stressed that what one should take into consideration is that kids like challenges. From a child's perspective almost everybody is bigger, the demands are high, and it's others that make the rules. Kids like to overcome their fears. Take for example *SpongeBob*: he wants to be a grown up, but remains too young. Yet at the same time he manages to turn his initial weakness into a strength. Which is what kids love about *SpongeBob*.

After this informative lecture it was time to move on to hear what the scriptwriters had to say.

Soft porn *WINX CLUB*

Robert Alberdingk Thijms' hero was Roald Dahl's *Danny The World Champion*, the central figure in a coming of age story. The screenwriter of *DUNYA & DESIE*, a series and a

feature film about two girlfriends from a Moroccan and Dutch background, explained the working of his heroine Dunya. She develops emotionally and is observant, while Desie is the more active party. Kids love Desie, but prefer to be Dunya. His other success series is the DALTONS, with its (little) hero Tim. The perspective is Tim's, and although Tim tries to understand his big brothers, he usually doesn't succeed. Alberdingk Thijm stresses the importance of an emotionally active main character who is at the same time a passive hero. He also notes that film funds or producers tend to look at the level of physical activity, and shows the audience an example of a scene with few words, in which Tim was just observing. Alberdingk Thijm admitted that it is sometimes difficult to judge on paper if such a scene works, but nonetheless makes a plea for devoting greater attention to the emotional development of modern heroes. And he remembers being shocked when he first saw WINX CLUB, which he mildly describes as a sort of porn for kids.

Accepting who you are

Ella Lemhagen confessed she had never given the subject of this seminar much thought. Her starting point is that she wants to tell stories, and when she is ready to do so she just starts writing. Her favourite childhood heroine was, perhaps because she's from Sweden, Pippi Longstockings. Pippi is brave and wants to be a boy, and for Lemhagen that's what made Pippi so attractive.

The idea of creating heroes made her think again about her main characters. She distinguished three types: the rebel/female, the ordinary hero next door, and the lonely outsider. To illustrate what she meant she shows the audience a few scenes, and concludes that a very important characteristic of all her heroes is that in the end they learn to accept who they are.

Honesty and integrity

Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko are the creators of the hugely popular animated series AVATAR, THE LAST AIRBENDER. The hero is Aang, a little Chinese boy roughly modelled on DiMartino's own physique. Aang is 12 and is the new Avatar, torn between his mission and his wish to be just a regular little guy. DiMartino and Konietzko were inspired by Japanese animation films, and the secret of their success is that they have created something they wanted to make for themselves. They have only used test panels once, in the presentation of the pilot show for the series Avatar, and they don't like the use of test panels. But they don't think they are very useful. Integrity is a catchword in this respect: be honest with your characters. Their heroes are neither white or black; they have both good and evil sides. Plus, being a hero is a status you have to earn by developing your abilities, which is an ambition and process that kids respond to. The visuals are very impressive, adds Alberdingk Thijm, noting that the series was made by more than 100 people, leaving DiMartino and Konietzko with the feeling they were generals commanding an army. They can't talk about the end of the series because this has yet to be screened, but they do reveal that there was a conflict because Aang is a vegetarian...

It's a shame for the fans, but DiMartino and Konietzko will not be writing more than the existing trilogy: that was enough for the AVATAR story to be told. They simply didn't want their series to go on and on and on. Good news for the fans: they are now writing the

script for the live action feature film about Avatar, and they are also working on a new low budget project.

Some concluding remarks

In conclusion, there is a difference between writing for children and writing about children (for adults). Think carefully about the perspective you chose to write from. Bottom-line for writing for kids is that you can write about a lot of disturbing subjects as long as you give the story a reassuring end. Think about BAMBÌ, who loses his mother but stars in a film that has a happy end. Give hope, so that kids dare to engage.

For aspiring screenwriters there was also some advice: never give up, keep on pitching your ideas, and, why not, write a novel. To close the seminar, everybody agreed it is of the utmost importance that writers get to meet writers.