

## AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD BLANK: ELOQUENCE IN WORD AND IMAGE

### I. Introduction

Richard Blank is the director and screenwriter of “Parzival”, based on the work of Wolfram von Eschenbach and broadcast on West German television on 11 November 1980. Since that time it has been unavailable on video, but through the good graces of my colleague Ulrich Müller I obtained a copy of the film on DVD for the purpose of giving it English subtitles. This undertaking was of great interest to Blank, and after several e-mails from Ulrich, Alan Baragona and myself, he consented to an interview at his home in Munich in July 2012. The opportunity to converse with Richard about his life as a writer and filmmaker was not only enjoyable, it was a chance to meet a true individual who is generous in sharing his experiences, at times with disarming frankness.

“I believe he is unbendingly upright, sometimes kind of a maverick, but most of all: truly original, there is nothing derivative in his work. He doesn’t imitate. He’s himself.”

- Prof. Christoph Bode, friend, e-mail 3 August 2012

### II. Beginnings as Writer

„Ich wollte nie Filme machen, ich wollte schreiben“

[I never wanted to make films, I wanted to write.]

--Richard Blank, 17 July 2012

Richard Blank is first and foremost a storyteller, whether at home or behind the camera. But this many-sided gentleman, who received a doctorate in philosophy in 1968, started even earlier as a writer. He received a scholarship from the Ford Foundation to study at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin (LCB) in 1964, when he was 25 years old. The LCB was founded by Walter Höllerer in order to encourage young German writers after the Second World War. In Berlin Blank was introduced to many aspiring writers, among them the Czech-born playwright Tom Stoppard. Blank credits the format of the instruction, which consisted largely of discussion with fellow participants, with conveying a sense of collegiality and confirming his belief that there is no one way to write, nor is it – in his opinion, at least – at all productive to read texts on how to write well.

Ich habe nie eine Filmschule besucht und bis vor einem halben Jahr nie eines der Bücher über das Verfassen von Drehbüchern gelesen. Mit der dramaturgischen Praxis kam ich erstmals 1964 in Berührung. Ich hatte ein halbjähriges Stipendium der Ford Foundation im Literarischen Colloquium Berlin, Abteilung ‚Drama‘, wo zur Übung kurze dialogische Szenen geschrieben und besprochen wurden. (Blank, Richard. Drehbuch: Alles auf Anfang – Abschied von der klassischen Dramaturgie. Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2011. 87).

[I never attended a film school and up to six months ago I had never read any of the books on how to write a screenplay. I first came into contact with the art of drama in 1964. I had a six-month scholarship from the Ford Foundation at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin in the „Drama“ section, where I learned to write dialogues by means of short scenes that were then discussed.]

This collegiality is still evident today in his approach to films; his work on screenwriting is full of references to actors and their preferred methods, all of which Blank not only tolerates, but embraces as independent observations and interpretations of that elusive notion called “reality”.

Es wurden für die Abteilung Drama Stipendiaten aus englisch-sprachigen (6) und deutsch-sprachigen (7) Ländern ausgesucht. Für die Englischen war die ganze Zeit (1/2 Jahr) James Saunders der „Lehrer“, für uns Deutsche Heinar Kipphardt und Peter Rühmkorf. Wir trafen uns täglich zur Besprechung. Wichtig: wir bekamen Aufgaben gestellt, kleine Themen (etwa: „Ein Hausierer kommt“) und hatten dazu eine kleine Szene zu verfassen. Das wurde dann besprochen, umgeschrieben, etc. Es zeigte sich, dass alle völlig verschiedene Ideen hatten. Wie lernten so nicht nur das Schreiben, sondern auch die Toleranz anderen gegenüber und die Tatsache: es gibt nicht die eine Lösung, es gibt nicht “die Realität“. Lehrbücher zum Schreiben sind Quatsch. (e-mail 10 Jan 2013)

[For the drama section, 6 participants were chosen from English-speaking countries and 7 from German-speaking countries. James Saunders was the instructor for the English speakers for the semester and for us Germans Heinar Kipphardt and Peter Rühmkorf. We met daily for discussion. Important to me was that we were given assignments that were short subjects (such as “Encounter with a Peddler”) and then we were to write a scene. This was then discussed, re-written etc. We discovered that everyone had completely different ideas. In this way we learned not only how to write, but how to tolerate criticism and to understand that there is never one solution – there is no “reality”. Textbooks on writing are nonsense.]

### III. What typifies Blank’s films?

He is both writer and director, staying true to his first calling. His work is varied, ranging from a novel to stage plays to more theoretical books on the craft of actors, writers and directors. Because of this variety, I believe that it is more profitable to discuss Blank as an individual than it is to attempt to categorize his writings and films.

A distinctive trait of Blank is his attitude, which is one of both confidence and tolerance. Perhaps everyone is interested in the lives of artists, particularly the details which fill the tabloids, but Blank is experienced in the real work of cinema and speaks with authority about how to approach actors. He writes in his book on the screenplay about where one should meet an actor or actress – not in a public place, but at his/her home, where there is no need for putting oneself on display. Respecting their independence is also a hallmark of the Blank treatment, as is evidenced by this remark on the lead actors in his film *Friedliche Tage* (1983):

Zuerst dachte ich, die unterschiedliche Methode, sich in eine Rolle zu finden, sei bestimmt durch Temperament, talent, persönliche Konstitution. In Wahrheit befand ich mich im Spannungsfeld unterschiedlicher Berufsbilder. Ich merkte bald, wie die Vorbereitung auf eine Szene sich im Spiel niederschlägt.

Branko Samarovski kam es darauf an, gefühlsmäßig in seiner Rolle aufzugehen. Katharina Thalbach verfügte mehr über ihre Rolle, setzte die Gefühle ein, ohne sich darin zu verlieren.

Ein Zusammenspiel kann unter diesen Voraussetzungen schwierig sein, und der Regisseur muß verhindern, daß aus einem Dialog zwei Monologe werden.

(Blank, Richard. *Schauspielkunst in Theater und Film: Strasberg, Brecht, Stanislawski*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2001. 7-8)

[At first I thought that the different methods for interpreting a role were based on temperament, talent or constitution. In fact I found myself torn between opposing views of the acting profession. I soon took note of how one’s preparation for a scene manifests itself in the performance.

It was more comfortable for Branko Samarovski to feel his way into a role. Katharina Thalbach acquired her role, then added the feelings without dissolving into the role. Cooperation is difficult under these conditions, and the director has to make certain that the dialogue does not deteriorate into two monologues.]

When I asked Blank about how his children appreciate his work, we had some lighter moments. There is clearly an understanding in his family not only of “What does your father do?”, but of his total involvement and enjoyment of filmmaking. In contrast to the more objective statements during our conversation, none of the family remarks is found in any of the three books on film which he wrote, and this gave our meeting a truly personal quality. A statement by one of his children upon seeing a Richard Blank film was: „Was dir einfällt, ist ja furchtbar.“

[The things you think about are just awful.] This brought a hearty laugh from the director, who showed that his tolerance of different opinions begins at home. When I asked about his work habits and routine, he replied – again with a self-effacing remark – “Die Familie meinte, ich war arbeitslos” [My family thought I was unemployed.] When Blank’s children were growing up, they did not have the typical concept of the father leaving for work in the morning and returning in the evening, since he has always typically done his writing during the morning at home. Also, when he is involved in a project, he is sometimes away from home for weeks at a time.

Blank has been described by many critics as original, and this is borne out very clearly – speaking as both director and screenwriter – in his defense of the filmmaker as an artist whose independence is constantly under threat from the biggest studios (read “Hollywood”). While the name Hollywood has a certain meaning to most filmgoers, to Blank it represents a persistent kind of dollar-fueled pressure. As a screenwriter he is totally against the assembly-line process of the big Hollywood films. Blank maintains that for each of these films there are at minimum six people who work on the screenplay, which he finds insulting to the artistic process. The model of good guy, bad guy and happy ending is something he also finds in the American desire for happiness which manifests itself in various aspects of life, including our politics. This model is bound to be preferred by a certain type of audience, but because of the economic power of the large studios, Blank sees it as a threat to filmmakers and their creativity all over the world.

This was echoed by his daughter, Katharina Rennhak:

Concentrating on the story-level of the movies, I did not really look into this aspect of the film business, but my father never tires of talking about how dangerous such a quasi-monopoly is for the diversity of European and, more generally, Western culture and art.(e-mail 25 July 2012)

When his son Sebi chose to follow Blank into the film business, he received this fatherly advice: if he really wanted to understand film, he should not choose it solely as an academic exercise, because as Fellini said, whoever claims to understand film is deceiving himself. I interpret this to mean that film is a medium to bring a story to life; a means, not an end. What is really worthwhile, according to Blank, is the attempt to make a statement as storyteller and artist through film. And whatever the critics say, either in the newspaper or at home, he stands by his work. “Was ich schreibe, ist für mich normal.” [What I write is normal for me.]

#### IV. Blank's Parzival

So entwickelte ich zuerst – mit Unterstützung des Germanisten Hubert Gersch – im WDR eine neue Art von Literaturfilm: in einer Mischung aus Spielfilm und Dokumentation sollten historische Texte dargestellt und in Bezug auf unser heutiges Interesse gedeutet werden.

Der letzte Film in dieser Reihe war 1979 die Verfilmung des Parzival von Wolfram von Eschenbach. Der Film arbeitet mit mehreren Elementen:

Der Darsteller des Parzival (Wolfram Kunkel) und die Darstellerin (Eva Schuckardt) sämtlicher Frauen mit Ausnahme des jungen Mädchens Obilot, treten häufig aus ihren Rollen, besprechen, deuten das Geschehen, und zwar nicht im Kontext des historischen Werks, sondern auch in Bezug auf ihr heutiges Interesse und ihre jeweilige Situation im Film.

[In this way – with the support of the Germanist Hubert Gersch – I developed a new kind of literature film for the WDR: historical texts are portrayed as a mixture of entertainment and documentary and interpreted according to our modern interests. The last film in this series was Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival in 1979. The film is based on several elements: The actor playing Parzival (Wolfram Kunkel) and the actress playing most of the women (Eva Schuckardt) with the exception of the young girl Obilot, often step out of character to comment on the events – not in the historical context, but as modern people in their respective situations in the film. (Drehbuch 88)

When I asked about his decision to make a film based on Wolfram's Parzival, Blank responded that he finds Parzival to be one of the best, perhaps the best story from the German Middle Ages. Before accepting the project, he had not read Wolfram's Parzival, so he had to research both primary and secondary sources in order to prepare for the actual film. Blank intended to continue with his treatment of literature which he had started with Peter Schlemihl (1976) and Dracula (1977) – “a mixture of past and present”. What fascinated him in Parzival were the changes wrought by the crusades – a touch of the foreign, the introduction of coins in place of bartered transactions, the end of the agrarian economy and the rise of cities with their own currency. Blank feels that Wolfram is critical of the culture of competition (particularly economic) and makes a connection to the masculine combat of knights. Blank sees Parzival, or perhaps we should say Gawan, as „part man and part woman“ who truly begins to love because of the disarmingly frank Obilot, who guilelessly offers her love to Gawan. Blank lays great emphasis on Obilot, as Anke Wagemann points out in her interview from 19 August 1993, from her article „Wolframs von Eschenbach Parzival im 20. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen zu Wandel und Funktion in Literatur, Theater und Film“. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 646, 1998:

Die entscheidende Reflexion hat ja das Kind, Obilot. Das darf man nicht vergessen, das ist für mich die wichtigste Frau. [The decisive statement comes from the child Obilot. One must not forget this; for me she is the most important female character.](179)

Blank also referred to the line uttered by Parzival – „Trust women more than God” – as potentially the most succinct summation of the masculine / feminine dichotomy that obtained during Wolfram's time. Wagemann mentions this line also and emphasizes Wolfram Kunkel's amazed expression as Parzival, as if he truly understands its significance.

Ein Kernsatz der mhd. Vorlage ist für Richard Blank in diesem Kontext die Aussage Parzivals, die jener nach seiner Verfluchung durch die Gralsbotin gegenüber Gawan trifft: *friunt, an dînes kampfes zît / dâ nem ein wîp für dich den strît* (332, 9f.), in nhd. Übersetzung auf die prägnante Formel gebracht: „Trau den Frauen mehr als Gott.“ Kunkel, der diesen Satz verblüfft ausspricht, erkennt in dieser Szene, daß die „Haudegen“-Mentalität der Artusritter in dieser weiblichen Welt nicht bestehen kann, daß also auch Parzival sein Verhalten ändern muß.

[A key passage in the Middle High German source for Richard Blank on this topic is Parzival's statement which he delivers to Gawain after being insulted by Kundrie: *friunt, an dînes kampfes zît / dâ nem ein wîp für dich den strît* (332, 9f.), which is rendered in New High German forcefully as "Trust women more than God." Kunkel, who utters this line with amazement, recognizes in this scene that the "old soldier" mentality of the knights of the Round Table cannot continue in this feminine world and that he, as Parzival, must change his behavior.] (Wagemann 175)

--Note also Zeydel and Morgan's translation: "Friend, when thy time has come for strife / Then may some lady pledge her life"

I was curious about the street scenes, all of which were filmed in Cologne; Blank's script, which he sent to me (and was essential to the subtitling) did not include these scenes in which Kunkel interacts with the people around him, nor did Blank include the 20th-century poems of Walter Mehring, which Kunkel also performs in the film. Blank let me in on a trick of his trade regarding the street scene at the very beginning of the film, where Kunkel sings Wolfram's text to the accompaniment of his hurdy-gurdy. The scene is actually guided by the director, who is on camera and can direct the conversation with Kunkel inbetween songs. In fact, when Kunkel says "Don't touch", he is actually speaking to Blank! I mentioned also the scene in which Kunkel yells and curses at the children on the steps of the cathedral, which made Blank smile – it was a spontaneous reaction to the children by Kunkel which made for an effective contrast to Parzival's lack of ability to ask Anfortas about his suffering.

Was fang ich nur mit Wagners Amfortas an? Ich fühle mich außerstande, an Leute, die aus der Seite bluten, Fragen zu stellen.

[What can I do about Wagner's Amfortas? I feel unable to ask questions of people whose sides are bleeding.] –Richard Blank, Review of Wagner's Parsifal, Wiener Staatsoper, 1991.

The conversation with Blank continued with the question „What really motivates you?“. We spoke of the ‚musée imaginaire‘ (Malraux) and Blank's mix of past and present, such as the dead body of Herzeloide with the modern buildings in the background. Blank sees the historical and ahistorical as inextricably joined in the mind. He referred to the ahistorical as "Heilszeit", or "sacred time".

Vielleicht liegt der Grund für meine Abneigung gegen die ‚klassische‘ Story in meiner etwas eigenartigen Auffassung von Zeit. Der normale Ablauf der Uhrzeit wurde in meiner Entwicklung früh ergänzt durch andere Zeitvorstellungen. Von Kind an glaube ich an die Realpräsenz Christi in der Liturgie der Messe. Diese religiöse Alternative zur ‚historischen‘ Zeit erfuhr zu Beginn meines Studiums eine profane Ergänzung: Ich las André Malraux und übernahm seine Theorie vom ‚musée imaginaire‘, von der Gegenwärtigkeit der historischen Epochen in unserem Bewusstsein.

[Perhaps my rather odd concept of time is the reason for my aversion to the "classical" story. I developed concurrent notions of time from an early age along with the normal course of chronological time. From childhood I have believed in the real presence of Christ in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass. This religious alternative to "historical" time was complemented in a profound way at the beginning of my studies: I read André Malraux and took on his theory of the musée imaginaire, the idea of historical periods as present in our consciousness.] (Drehbuch 87-88)

Let us give the last word on interpreting history and literature to Richard Blank himself, which shows how effective he can be in person. From Wagemann's interview with Richard Blank, 19 August 1993: „I consider literary analysis from a purely historical standpoint not so much as a falsification, but it is deceptive to the viewer. For the person who performs the analysis makes the claim that he knows what it was like at that time, which is nonsense.“ (Wagemann 166)

## V. Conclusion

When you speak to Richard Blank, there is a certain difficulty in finding the right label for him. He is certainly no stereotype. He has few if any affectations that a movie buff might expect from someone in the film industry and in fact has a wonderful sense of humor, which has kept him sane throughout his career. My conclusion from the interview with Richard is that he communicates for a living and he has succeeded because he knows his own mind and realizes that this is where true communication must start. In fact I have met few people who have been more faithful to Polonius' charge to Hamlet. One senses a deep contentedness, but no complacency.

The most serious moment in our conversation offered me a chance to bring together Richard's life and art. He spoke of his son Sebi, who had just directed a film before he died suddenly at the age of 29. Richard voiced his belief that, though he still feels the loss acutely, his wife has felt it— and will always feel it— even more so because of the physical and emotional bond that all mothers have with their children. I find this attitude not only admirable but also consistent with Richard's theme in *Parzival* of respecting and trusting women. One could conclude that the film is an honest expression of Blank's convictions.

Something I found out at the end of my stay was that he was very touched by an American scholar's visit to Munich to interview him. When I introduced myself to Christoph Bode, a professor of English at the University of Munich (and a close friend of the Blanks), he already knew the purpose of my visit and told me, "This means a great deal to Richard." This helped me understand just why he received me as he did, picking me up at the airport and feeding me a substantial breakfast on the Sunday I arrived before my body realized what time it was at home. He gave me three of his books on film, all of which explain what he brings to a project. "Film and Light", published in 2009, perhaps his best-known work, has just been published in English translation and represents Blank's effort to fill a void in film literature. The interview ranged from actors to families to money to tricks of the film director's trade and it is my sincere hope that my paper at this session will do justice to this very accomplished gentleman who invited me into his home, treated me with respect and made me feel very comfortable.

Blank is an excellent storyteller in every sense; he always introduced his anecdotes with "Pass auf", which usually translates into English as "Watch out" or "Pay attention". And pay attention I did. Richard Blank has maintained a dignity and a clear focus in a world which is too often known for dysfunctional relationships. He will criticize the Hollywood establishment, but holds no grudges. He is not interested in looking over his shoulder at other filmmakers.

And when I began to read the books, in particular Blank's treatment of the development of the film story (*Drehbuch*), it occurred to me that his vision is not only clear concerning his own time, but also concerning Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. By taking issue with modern received opinions he has revealed what Hemingway once called "a fully functioning crap detector" and a refreshing approach to film in theory and practice.