

"ALL IS CHANGING": INTERVIEW WITH JOACHIM KOSACK ON DEUTSCHLAND83 AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE GERMAN TV SERIES INDUSTRY

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Since 2018, Joachim Kosack has been one of the Managing Directors of the UFA Group, which includes UFA Show & Factual as well as UFA Fiction and UFA Serial Drama, both central production companies for television series and films in Germany. Kosack worked as managing director and as a producer in both production houses. Together with Markus Brunnemann, he continues to run UFA Serial Drama, which specialises in daily soaps (now officially titled "Daily Drama"). Since 2005, he has also led the Series Producing / Series Dramaturgy department at the Ludwigsburg Film Academy. From 2007 to 2011, he was chief editor of original fiction for Sat.1, one of the biggest commercial, advertiser-funded broadcasters in Germany, and eventually became the channel's managing director. From 1996, Kosack was already working as head writer, director and producer at several UFA production companies, like teamWorx, which has since become part of UFA Fiction. teamWorx was particularly well-known for its historical event mini-series, like the two-part

drama *Die Flucht* (*March of Millions*, 2007, ARD), produced by Kosack. They discussed National Socialism in the setting of a "historical-political melodrama" (Dörner 2008, see also Cooke 2016) and have been repeatedly criticised for this approach (see e.g. Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2011, Saryusz-Wolska and Piorun 2014). These period dramas by teamWorx became widespread outside of the German-speaking television market, too. The recent UFA production *Deutschland83* (2015-, RTL/Amazon Prime) carries on this tradition, but also moves away from it in a way, with its 80's setting, popular culture references, and lighter tone. With its popularity in English-speaking countries and some similarities to US series in terms of production methods, the show marks an increasing transnationalisation of TV series production in Germany. This interview discusses this particular example, as well as German television fiction in general, and the current changes regarding texts and production methods both in and outside of UFA.

I Mr Kosack, how did you end up working in TV series production?

K In the mid-1990s I chose to stop working in theatre and made the move to television. At the time, the market was booming in a similar way to today, but not with something that you would now call “quality series”, but with daily series. People that were already established in the television industry didn’t want to produce such series at that time. That’s why lots of new people like me, from the theatre, from journalism, etc., were “flushed out” into this area. I spent the first five years of my television career working on industrial series like *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* [English: *Good Times, Bad Times, 1992-*, RTL, the longest-running and most popular daily soap in Germany] or *Hinter Gittern – Der Frauenknast* [English: *Behind bars – The Women’s Prison, 1997-2007*, RTL, a weekly soap opera about a women’s prison]. And I then went on to work in various roles on local series like *Danni Lowinski* [2010-2014, a legal dramedy for Sat.1], and on high-end projects.

I You’ve just mentioned some terms: industrial and local series and high-end series. How do these fields of German TV series production differ from one another?

K Industrial series are especially “Daily Drama” productions, which have 250 episodes a year. However, this category also includes “Weeklies”, which consist of 26 episodes, or in some cases 50 episodes a year which are broadcast each week. The method of production in this field features a systemised division of labour. Large parts of the team, including the writers and supervising or executive producers, heads of production, etc., only work on this series. Local series that have fixed prime time broadcasting slots, mainly in the prime time, are less industrialised in terms of their production methods as they usually only consist of ten to thirteen episodes, but they are clearly geared towards having several seasons. The budget for each episode is between 500,000 and 750,000 euros. The costs are even higher and the number of episodes is usually lower with high-end productions. These series have developed from the traditions of the so-called “event films”. Through streaming platforms and pay TV, there are now more customers in this area. See *Deutschland86* for example, the follow-up to *Deutschland83*, which is produced for Amazon Prime Video, or, if you look outside of UFA, *Babylon Berlin* [2017-, a historical series from Sky Deutschland and ARD] and *4 Blocks* [2017-, a mafia-drama series about Lebanese gangsters in Berlin Neukölln produced for the pay TV broadcaster TNT Serie]. Corresponding high-end programmes differ from traditionally broadcast se-

ries in terms of plannability and regularity, and the creative development process is completely different.

I How exactly do high-end series differ from local series in terms of plannability and development?

K Local series are produced season by season and so with a certain degree of regularity. This allows [the producer] to make more precise financial calculations which isn’t possible with a show like *Deutschland83*, for example, as it wasn’t certain that it would lead to *Deutschland86* afterwards. With local series, the aim is to keep it on the [German-speaking] market for as long as possible, to continue to develop and evolve it, but also to ensure that it has some stability. With high-end segments, that are more substance-focused and less broadcasting-spot-dependent, innovation is central and there is less pressure on developing a very long-running format as a project is often completed after two or three seasons. This means that there is also a higher risk for the producer. In order to minimise this risk, the mixed calculation of the stability and innovation of large and small projects is central for UFA.

I Is series production at UFA clearly divided according to the three types of series that you have just mentioned?

K Until few months ago, Markus Brunnemann and I were joint Managing Directors of UFA Fiction. We are still working at this position at UFA Serial Drama, which specialises in industrial series. At both companies we structured the fictional productions into so-called “divisions” which go beyond the three previously mentioned main areas: One group deals with Daily Drama programmes for the daytime and access prime time, another deals with the long-term production of local series and sitcoms and another with “Reihen” [90 minute long loosely-connected television films, often in the crime genre; these programmes are a series and TV film hybrid and are a particular feature of German public-service television fiction]. A new label within UFA Fiction has also been created for new films and series. It’s named after Freder Fredersen, the protagonist from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). Then there is also another group that deals with high-end drama and cinema. These two have been combined due to the similarly high budgets, and the fact that the people involved in making the programme have to stay in close contact with the distribution partners to discuss and clarify whether funding may be needed. [Film and media funding, which is primarily federally-structured in Germany, is increasingly opening up for series, particularly in the high-end segment.] These divisions are looser groups that each have at least one or two manag-

ing directors as strategic leads. We, the managing directors, regularly exchange ideas and opinions. It's not always the case that everyone can do everything, so it's crucial that we communicate with each other and see where there are overlaps.

I Alongside these “loose groups”, a subsidiary of UFA Fiction has also been created and is now under the leadership of Jörg Winger, the producer and creator of *Deutschland83*. Does this mean that there is a move away from centralisation in the UFA group and that the group is orienting itself more towards high-end series?

K The consolidation of former subsidiaries into three central productions units – UFA Fiction, UFA Serial Drama and UFA Show & Factual, for non-fiction programmes, six years ago – was certainly important and it was definitely the right thing to do in order to bring the subsidiaries closer together. The downside to centralisations such as this is that they can often be a little confusing. Care must be taken to ensure that specific processes and energy flows are not brought into line and made equal, but instead that they keep their independent forces, just like Jörg Winger has kept his own personality in a very particular international series. His subsidiary should allow him to position himself differently in the market. That is somewhat of a balancing act for a large company like UFA, networking different areas and people on the one hand, while making sure that creative people who are more solitary and who want work alone, have sufficient space to do so, on the other. Incidentally, *Deutschland83* is a result of structures within UFA being torn down and different energies coming together in new combinations.

I What new combinations was it exactly that led to the creation of *Deutschland83*?

K In particular, unusual combinations of energies from long-standing, local series and high-end event television. Jörg Winger was a successful producer of *SOKO-Leipzig* [2001-, ZDF], a primetime crime series broadcast by ZDF with the budget of an early evening production, and wanted to try his hand at producing something in another field. Nico Hofmann led teamWorx and had little to do with Jörg Winger. As teamWorx and other subsidiaries worked together producing fiction television shows, new discussions suddenly came about. It was also a question of timing: For example, Anna Winger, Jörg Winger's wife, who was also one of the masterminds behind *Deutschland83*, wrote numerous other scripts at the same time [including a 90-minute episode of *SOKO Leipzig*]. As the new head of RTL, Frank Hoffmann wanted to repeat the

success of the ZDF mini-series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* [Generation War, 2013], in the belief that it made no difference where projects like this are broadcast.

I In retrospect, would you agree with this assessment, that today it doesn't really matter where a series like *Deutschland83* is broadcast?

K No, I would not. This was exactly the problem with the RTL broadcast. [After selling the programme to other countries and following positive reviews in the USA, the numbers that watched the first German broadcast on RTL was below expectations.] Everyone knew that *Deutschland83* wasn't a perfect match for RTL's programming and regular viewers. The idea was to reach other viewers that wouldn't normally watch this channel. Unfortunately it didn't work in this particular case. But I suspect that the similar objective is rather successful with *Babylon Berlin* in the analysis by public-service ARD. [Babylon Berlin was initially broadcast on Sky Deutschland and was then shown almost a year later on the public-service broadcaster ARD, where it was also available online for a limited period of time.] Of course it really matters where a series is broadcast, at least with the private advertising-financed broadcasters. Their actual problem is that the number of regular viewers is continuously decreasing. Viewers simply don't expect to see high-end formats on regular broadcasting channels or they want to watch the episodes all in one go and without being interrupted by ad breaks. This is precisely why RTL is currently intensifying its online distribution with the platform TV Now. [2019 TV Now released its first original production, the German-Austrian adaptation of the Fritz Lang classic *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*, *M – A City Hunts a Murderer*; The Austrian public-service broadcaster ORF is the coproducer.]

I *Deutschland83* was broadcast in other countries, including English-speaking countries. To what extent was the international distribution planned?

K That *Deutschland83* would be broadcast as the first German series on a network in the US, namely the pay TV broadcaster Sundance TV, was not planned from the beginning. *Deutschland83* started almost four years ago, and since then, the market for TV series in Germany has changed significantly. During the development of the programme a greater interest in German TV series developed in foreign countries due to the success of the three-part event film *Generation War*, that could have actually also been broadcast as a series. As a result, distributing *Deutschland83* in other

countries started to become more part of the strategy. With earlier event films and multi-part programmes, like *Dresden* [2006, ZDF], global sales and distribution had already begun to play a significant role in the overall financing.

I *But are the often relatively small sums earned from overseas sales economically relevant?*

K It's an important part of the overall picture, even if the individual sums are perhaps not so large. It's these sales that we can then use as investments in new developments. There are currently new financing models that have arisen in connection with international distribution and which still need to be refined further. Classic providers, like public-service broadcasters, have a new openness for joining forces with platforms like Netflix, Amazon and Sky – see *Babylon Berlin*.

I *With mixed financing like this, there has been a clear move away from 100% financing from a broadcaster, as has mostly been the case in Germany for a long time. Has this also changed the role of production companies like UFA?*

K As a production company, we must invest in the high-end sector and put more money into script development. One may try to take this money from the production budget later. But that's not easy as the quality of the production is fundamentally the most important thing. This is currently the subject of a big discussion between producers in Germany, led by the producers' alliance [*Allianz Deutscher Produzenten – Film & Fernsehen, the largest alliance of German film and television producers*] with the question: How can producers make better investments so that they can benefit financially from the success of formats later on? The debate is about issues like rights shares, geo-blocking and so on. Right now, there is a *Kulturkampf*, a cultural battle regarding this, with the producers on one side and the broadcasters and platforms, including the established public-service and advertising-financed ones, on the other. They often tend towards the assumption that: “The productions are completely commissioned by us. Thus, ultimately they belong to us. It's us that bear the financial risk”. I think that the producers, large and small, should be in a better position to invest more money in script development as broadcasters often do not do this themselves. [*Commissioning editors from broadcasters, with whom the author has carried out further interviews, paint a somewhat different picture of this issue.*] As such, it's really important that we get away from this “buy-out” way of thinking or just pure commissioned productions. The producers' alliance has negotiated the first models for this with pub-

lic-service broadcasters [*like the key issues paper with the public-service broadcaster ARD, according to which an increasing number of part-financed productions, alongside purely commissioned productions, should be possible*].

I *To what extent is the move away from pure commissioned productions and revenue models relevant for authors too?*

K For an author it's less secure and usually also less lucrative to work on a concept for a new series for months or years, than writing a number of scripts for an ongoing local series like *SOKO* [1978-, a German crime procedural with various local versions, ZDF]. As a producer, I can only really win an author over by saying: If it's a hit, you get to be a part of it. This now changes their job description and value.

I *Scriptwriters in Germany are increasingly complaining about their supposedly bad position, like last year in the public pamphlet and voluntary commitment Kontrakt 18 [contract 18], in which they called, amongst other things, for the right to co-determine the director and to see and comment on rough cuts. Are writers' activities and their value now changing?*

K Traditionally, the power of the commissioning editors and the power of the directors in Germany has been very great, also because the key role of the single TV film that has often been associated with a particular director. But this is all changing because, amongst other things, streaming platforms have brought about a completely different view of script development. It's absolutely not true that the streaming platforms, as many people have claimed, barely exert influence on the script, but they have a more strategic view of the overall picture than individual editors. Writers and collaborative methods of screenwriting are becoming more important due to the current popularity of serial narration. In these cases, the writer, showrunner or creative producer is at least just as important as the director. For people working in the high-end segment and for younger authors, it's much more normal to work in a team. If you work on a crime series that has one case per episode then it is still more common for the writers to work alone, but even here more often they are in creative teams in one place. But every series with an ongoing dramatic continuity is nowadays developed in any way in a writers' room.

I *But in my impression a variety of fairly similar processes ultimately all are referred to with the term writers' room.*

K There you're completely right, “writers' room” is simply a generic term. There are some writers' rooms that have a

central head writer and other members operating for him/her. Other teams all work together at the same level. In other cases, there is someone who has the role of a “Player-coach”, to use a term from football, who structures and guides the work. In other writers’ rooms there may be someone that gives out tasks or someone that also remains on set during the shooting. In UFA, there are various different writers’ room approaches used, and we are still very much at the beginning. However, in terms of the division of labour for the Daily Drama production process, all story editors have worked on storylines together since the 1990s.

I Another term that you used is one that has already been circulating in the German television industry for several years – the term *showrunner*. How would you summarise the role of showrunner from your point of view and with regards to the production of series in Germany?

K As the centre of a creative vision. In a construction as big as the production of a TV series, the showrunner is the one that pulls all the different components together. As someone that gives and supervises ideas. The term is still quite vague in terms of meaning, particularly in Germany. The showrunner could be the head writer that is really involved in the production. Or the producer, who again heavily takes part in working on the story. That showrunner can sometimes consist of two people. I would generalise the role of the showrunner by asking: Who’s *in the driving seat*? This can change, especially with projects that are developed over long periods of time. Although here at UFA, we believe that the person that came up with the original idea should be part of the process for as long as possible. Even if they get stuck with a project and it is then continued by other colleagues after a long time, the work that they did before was not for nothing. The further developments were only possible because of the work that had already been done. The original vision – whether it be fully-formed or just a rough initial idea – must already be in existence for this to happen. The visionary primordial cell has therefore to exist, in whatever intensity.

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