

“Advanced Screen writing Analysis”

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The readings undertaken for this small portion of research into script analysis and writing are perfect for any student undertaking the task of advancing their skill in the art and form of cinematic writing. There are many levels in a script and the writer must be aware of each while creating their work. What is important to the writer? What does a writer need? What is screen writing? Pitfalls and amateur mistakes are sure ways to put new scripts on the *slush pile*. It's best to know what screenwriting is and requires of the would-be-screen-writer, as considered by professionals in the industry, hopefully other screen writers with experience. Such help from others in the industry is therefore priceless guidance. The point of this endeavor is to identify, structure and form, expectations of the screen writer role, mistakes in my own writing and help improve my process in order to write a viable spec for option with a production company, as exemplified in a rewrite of my own script. This course is also designed to inform my process for my final project in my master's studies, in which I will adapt my own novel to a screenplay.

The expectations of the role of a screenwriter which the student must be aware of can be summarized in form and function. A screenplay should never contain stage directions, as that is the purview of the director. Therefore, the writer must be able to describe the scene with finesse. However, screen writing goes beyond just pleasing egos and fitting the form of the industry. A writer should understand where film stands in their culture and its history. This experience gives the writer a rich tool chest from which to ply their trade. They will need to use all this to construct a screenplay through visual and auditory signs, as well as dialogue.

I was once told by a professor that if you want to write, then you sit home and read. Advice like this never made sense to me, especially when many authors strung a list of degrees and accolades after their name, but also that the educational system seemed a neat frame in which to work and learn from those who were masters of the field. The professor, of course, was advising students to experience what has come before them and to learn from those who have published or had their work produced what formula, if any, works in the industry. This is a priceless thing to obtain for a writer. However, experience writing through the repetitious output of creative writing works, essays and research papers for several years is the only thing that will perfect the writer's craft, and the educational system provides a platform to do so. Along these lines, Robert Gessner has this to say about screen writing, "Unfortunately for Cinema and education, as well as students and teachers, the subject has resided too long in other contexts, such as a commercial art or a vocational science," (90). This quote explains a little of the conundrum faced by the writer. Am I learning a vocation, to which the belief is there is a pattern to follow, albeit creatively? Or, am I an artist to which the belief may be that anything goes? They are at once cultural art and commercial business. So here, you see the difference in my belief in the statement by the professor and the professors understanding of their field. I view writing as crafted cultural art to be studied and learned, eventually perfected, as many writers do. Many more don't realize the commodity aspect that also hangs on such work, which can influence the material contained in a work to maximize profits. For the sake of brevity, I will focus mainly on the crafting aspect of screen writing and what the books herein reviewed have to offer the

writer seeking assistance from them, after a brief examination of the business of writing for cinema.

Despite their creative or artistic focus, screenplays are a business proposition. The writer is writing what the industry refers to as a spec (speculation) (Hulseberg 59). As with any business proposition, a clear plan should be laid out for the party being offered the product. David Howard and Edward Mabley in *Tools of Screen Writing* state that,

The most rudimentary plan for a screenplay should contain the following elements: who the central character is...what he or she wants; who the other principal characters are and what they each want; the actual outline of the general sequence of events and the act divisions; and formulations of the main tension, the culmination, and the resolution.

(77)

This *rudimentary* plan should be in the mind of the writer from the very first. In order for the writer to answer these questions, they must clearly have in mind what they wish to accomplish, much more than *I want to write a screenplay*. The writer must envision the journey from point A to point B, asking questions as if he or she were the producer to which it will be shopped, and even thinking of how the product will be received by the intended audience. Who is the intended audience? This matters in the *rudimentary* planning stage because it will make the answers to the questions of how the screenplay will be structured much clearer. Screenplays are all about structuring.

What is screen writing? From a collegiate focus, screen writing is likened to the theatrical play: the written form of a recorded play. Krzysztof Sielicki in his article,

“Stagecraft, Rhetoric, Debate,” tells the reader that “the primary purpose of theater is to bring about change in the spectator's consciousness as well as to lead to social change,” (218). That’s highly profound for either the cinema or the stage, when the aim of most productions is entertainment. However, Sielicki isn’t all wrong. A good number of artists intend to affect change through their work, some completely oblivious to the possibility until it happens. For example, George Lucas and the *Star Wars* series was written as an entertainment, but has had a unifying effect on worldwide culture, even going so far as highlighting sexism through the character of Princess Leia. So, screenwriting is, more simply put, the written architecture of a movie.

Intellectually, the screenplay has run into some snags through the years since cinema was invented. Judith Haag and Hillis R. Cole tell their readers that “defending the screenplay as a form of literature” has its adversaries. They go on to point out that “critics maintain that a screenplay is not an end product,” (Haag, i). Haag allows them this point, but then challenges their way of thinking, comparing screenplays with artist sketches and the like, which are held in high esteem by many art critics (Haag, i). I go further and view the screenplay as the blueprint. Architects don’t build their buildings, but are revered as the artisan who birthed the final structure, and respected as masters of engineering art. This adversity to regarding cinematic writing (the screenplay) as another form of literature or even art is embedded in the refusal to regard cultural phenomena such as cinema as high art, except in rare cases like art house films. Part of the rub for these adversaries comes in the fact that film is mass produced by enormous corporations for the sole purpose of profit. That can be argued against just as easily (Hulsberg, 59).

Because of this art versus business contention, the commercial aspect of the process may or may not be in the back of the writer's mind as they undergo the writing process. The writing process is more important than any other piece of the puzzle, but it is informed by several perspectives, one of which is the commercial viability of the resulting product. The numerous perspectives are what inform the production of the screenplay into film: "film production is the process of executing the choices of film form that the screenwriter has written into the screenplay," (Mehring, 3). This is why I refer to the screen writer as architect. Through their writing, "it is the function of screenwriters to seduce, to influence, to affect," readers and viewers along the production chain (Mehring, 224). The process of screen writing is therefore, the drawing of blue prints for a fully immersive tale that will sell to a producer, lay out a plan to directors, actors and crew and then take the viewer on a journey, making use of all known human senses and playing emotions like a piano virtuoso. No small task!

Although there is still resistance to regarding screenplays as art or even important, the business of cinema has realized that there is merit in studying what the screen writer does. Suffering a "loss of audience is why there is such an enormous renewed interest in the theory and practice of writing scripts," (Howard, xx). So it seems, according to Howard and Mabley, that the industry senses the structure, seeking a formula, which can help the industry to make more box office successful films. They also state that what has been found is "the total abandonment of the screen writing *métier* in the past thirty years of unrestricted rule by the director-as-auteur theory has led to an unhappy result," (Howard, xx). Howard and Mabley support the screenwriter as the originator of the story. They also illustrate throughout the introduction short examples of snares facing the

screenwriters, such as this ideology supporting formula and worthlessness of the writer in favor of directors, producers and actors (Howard, xx-xxi). Reading reviews of readers of the tome suggested that many are still convinced that a formula exists which will catapult their story to the top of the pile, despite the constant dialogue otherwise (Howard, ix-xxii, 3-11). Throughout the readings, whether it is bias to the position of screenwriter, which many of the authors are, there is a consistent call to respect the written words on the page, as placed there by the screen writer. This call is to the entire industry, including producers, directors and actors, because it is the writer who makes their position viable. Therefore, it is suggested that screen writing is a carefully crafted art form to be respected and, being of letters, warrants closer scrutiny on the intellectual level. It's purposeful, structured human expression. The latter half of the Howard and Mabley book, starting on page 100, is analysis of popular successful films that the authors chose to review as examples of successful writing in the final product stage. I found this to be useful to my research, but reader reviews displayed a mixed reaction, as mentioned above. Making use of such analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach which begins with seeing the work as a structure. What you fill it with will be a mixture of interior design and necessary functionality.

Screen writing is a highly structured endeavor. The form and function of the form equates to the teachings of structuralism. The writer intentionally places the words to carefully make meaning which is hoped to translate to the audio/visual frame of cinema. Roy Huss and Norman Silverstein write that “the further one delves into the heart of cinematic structure and movement the nearer one comes to discovering something that is very much like poetry,” (Huss, 567). In addition, Howard and Mabley quote Aristotle:

The structural unity of the parts is such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole. (58)

Just like poetry has rules of form so too there are rules for the cinematic spec. The Haag guide goes further to provide concise reasoning and examples on the form. To center the would-be-screenwriter's mind, she states "the form follows content," (Haag, ii, 13-107). Then, the guide provides exactly what its title promises: how to correctly format your screenplay for spec submission, from the cover to the final scene. I found the walk through thorough, and the information easily returned to for later reference. A glossary of terms is included for consistent understanding of industry terms. It doesn't benefit the writer to construct their own terms, because many of them will be used in the script itself to convey meaning to the envisioned production team. Such terms are already in wide use through the industry and the expectation is the screen writer will make use of the established terms.

Form includes the three act structure, capitalized directions for the sound crew, one page equals one minute, and dialogue centered on the page. It is the job of the screenwriter to understand the function of this form. For instance, "the division of a film into acts is not something that viewers are consciously aware of," (Howard, 25) and I struggled to understand the concept, intimidated to ask the question from those who would know the answer, because I felt I should already know the answer. It's so straightforward that it ceases to be obvious. This book clarified the idea of three acts and

also dismissed them as not entirely necessary to write into your screenplay under such rigid form. The act structure parts the work into three segments, two 30-minute segments at each end with a 60-minute middle. Easy enough! (Howard, 24-26; Mehring, 56-59). The purpose of it is to keep the viewer in their seat. This is a time tested rule of plying the patience of the viewer versus trying the patience of the viewer. The reason that it is not always necessary, some writers use more acts, is that the writer uses some other form/structure to keep the viewer interested, (Huss, 567). For example, a writer can use several plants and payoffs (show a letter being read, show the letter and then wait for the information of that letter to reach another character which will result in an action/reaction (Howard, 72). Plot and development hinge on such structures.

Howard and Mabley suggest that all writers start with an outline and not be concerned that it will hem them in, but that it will reduce distractions that will send them off course, so they can think on the scenes they have outlined and allow their creativity to fill that space (Howard, 77). Mehring's first chapter guides the student through some activities to *get their head in the game* and provide tools for better writing, such as the paper visual frame perspective activity (Mehring, 15-39). In fact, the entire work can be described in this manner. A perusal of the table of contents lays out tasks of thinking and reviewing film from the perspective of how it's put on paper, not how it exists in a finished film. Watching films isn't the best way to learn how to write them, despite the examples provided by Howard and Mabley. Sielicki agrees with this formula, citing the playwright Barrie Stavis, who he says is of "the few contemporary playwrights who think in stage terms long before they put down on paper the first word of the play. These few playwrights have the supreme skill of being able to transform a literary composition into

a stage performance,” (Sielicki, 224). This quote also shows that such thinking is imperative for the undertaking of an adaptation, such as taking novel to the screen or fleshing out a poem for similar ends. The writer must see it and hear it to write cinematically.

Once the structure of a screenplay is understood, the writer often struggles with what to fill it in with. What do I write into my scenes? According to Jean Benedetti, who wrote *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, “the magic *if* opens the way to the creative process,” (Benedetti, 33). Though this was said of actors portraying a character on the stage or screen, it applies to writers as well. The outline suggested by Howard and Mabley will help the writer to brainstorm the question of what to write and what will happen through the magical *what if*. Again, the writer must see it and hear it to write cinematically.

The authors of the guides and articles cited herein had a good number of suggestions to help the writer focus and answer the questions listed at the start of this essay. Who, What, Where, and When? I call these the tools or what is needed or important to the writer. In order to craft a good spec, it is necessary to see that “the plot alone does not make the screenplay or the film. Often a story’s plot is neither new nor particularly innovative, but that fact doesn’t necessarily diminish the film if the story is told well. It is how a story is told that truly matters,” (Howard, 71). How you tell a story on film is through dialogue, visuals, actions and sounds. It’s imperative to tell your story well using all these elements because the intention is “to present the stimuli that will elicit a response consistent with content,” (Mehring, 39). If the story is not written well, the language of the cinema has failed writer and viewer. In other words, meaning was not

made somewhere along the lines. Outside of plot, which is simply point A to point B, the writer must have an understanding of cinematic language. This can be problematic, especially if one takes the advice of my former professor and sits home watching movies and reading screenplays with little or no instruction/discussion on the observed material. This is because...

precious little has been spelled out. What is a visual language, what makes Cinema a language, and what is the language of Cinema? ...Cinema is primarily and foremost a language because it conveys meanings in terms of time, place, and cognitive recognition. (91)

This is the toughest piece of the puzzle, because it asks the student to learn a new way of “cognitive recognition” that is meaningful. Without instruction on the grammar and language of cinema, a writer might flounder in attempting to convey the meaning of their scenes, why they’re important to the overall work, or even how to produce them. Gessner adds, “Grammar is the most important leg of the three-legged stool. Without it we would not be teaching a liberal art called Cinema,” (Gessner, 93). What Gessner is saying is that the language of cinema requires the perspective of many disciplines. It’s rife with semiotics and intertext. As Huss states, “movies provide us with fictions to which we make free responses. They share with our dreams the private world that becomes public, exposing the emotional concord of moviegoer and movie,” (Huss, 566). It is not just cinematic language and grammar that a writer must understand, but how it relates to the culture at large, and play translator.

Much of the advice given by the sources studied for this course seem heavy, deep, and perhaps beyond reach when first examined. Though this can be taxing, interpretation of their meanings into a language that is more easily understood is therefore also necessary, but not impossible. I found that “keeping the meaning of the play perpetually in mind, of building characters round the ideas,” (Benedetti, 21) was the general crux of the advice being given by these guides. A screen writer must keep in mind form and function, and weave their story into the form functionally, sort of like wrapping a yarn around pegs to weave a textile. As intimidating as this seems, I found it making increasing sense, and to be indispensable in crafting the spec.

The use and understanding of semiotic strategies can therefore be one of the greatest tools in the screen writer’s tool box. By semiotic strategies, I mean the signs used to construct meaning in the writing as well as the finished screen product. Paul Dwyer and Marco de Marinis explore this in their work “Dramaturgy of the Spectator.” One might wonder why other perspectives are necessary, but then they’re forgetting that penning a script is done with the intention of sharing it with a viewer and a crew who intend to make a film out of it. The spectator isn’t the only individual that should be considered. Howard and Mabley write that “the screenwriter’s three most important relationships are with the producer, the director and the actors,” (Howard, 15). After all, these are the people who bring a spec to life, move it along the conveyor belt of production, so to speak. Unfortunately, they leave out the viewer, one of the most important considerations, as this is WHO you will ultimately tell the story to. Thus, the dramaturgy of the spectator, as well as other perspectives like the director, is a

consideration during the process of spec writing. Dramaturgy is another of those words that falls out from the *dictionary theater*. Dwyer and Marinis define it:

Dramaturgy can now be defined as: the techniques/theory governing the composition of the performance-as-text (*testos pettacolare*); it is: the set of techniques/theories governing the composition of signs/expressive means/actions which are woven together to create the texture of the performance, the performance text...there clearly exists a dramaturgy of the director and a dramaturgy of the performer. (100)

In this way, it becomes evident again that structuralism can provide insight into the writing of specs and how to create them effectively. Dwyer and Marinis write, “Putting to work a range of definite semiotic strategies, the performance seeks to induce in each spectator a range of definite transformations,” (Dwyer, 101). However, the writer should also be aware that “the spectator is a relatively autonomous "maker of meanings" for the performance,” (Dwyer, 102). The intertext that exists in the writing will vary from viewer to viewer, so much so that it may be impossible to clearly make a particular meaning in the way the writer intends. For instance, the ribbon in *Barry Lyndon* (1975) is a sign. It means something and directs viewer attention to itself and that meaning. Much like a literal street sign, the ribbon can say, “I represent the lust with which Barry’s cousin ties herself to him, plaguing the rest of his days until I come undone.” The ribbon is a sensual object, feminine and functional. Once a part of his cousin, it is a removable piece of her soft, supple beauty (as he sees it) which Barry can own. It ties things together. It can tie a

package. It can tie hair. It can tie a heart to another heart. It can also tie the focus of the audience to the meaning of the scene and elicit a response, either “don’t do it, Barry” or “Go for it, Barry!” It can also stand in as an effigy. The ribbon becomes Barry’s cousin through proximity. Even the color matters in framing meaning. What it means is essentially the same to the viewers, though their reaction to it may vary. Most screenplays include several signs and symbols of this kind.

Examples of structuring responses from spectators are numerous. They can be “the manipulation of the theatrical space,” such as objects, actor movements, and shots (Dwyer, 106-107). What the author should know is, “the spectator nearly always does this automatically and unconsciously,” (Dwyer, 107). A grasp of the cultural meanings of their signs should help to focus the spectator and narrow the myriad of meanings effectively (Dwyer, 107). This is no small task. Dwyer and Marinis list emotional responses that can be gained by a well written scene, which are innumerable, suggesting an understanding of the cultural psychology and psychology in general. The result of successful attempt can be documented in “electroencephalogram levels (EEG), sweating, changes in heartbeat, muscular tension, pupil dilation, etc. This state leading up to the actual focusing of attention can be termed a *state of interest*,” (Dwyer, 109). In other words, the writer must attract the audience’s attention, retain it and manage to elicit physiological responses that help to repeat the process throughout the film, as if they were literally going along for the ride. In truth, this isn’t accomplished by the writer alone. Many of the crew, directors, cinematographers, foley artists, actors and the list goes on, play a part in this spellbinding. However, none of it would be possible without the writer first putting the instructions down on paper for each. They are the architect of

the final product. Visuals (directions), though the purview of the director, producer and cinematographer, must be “put there by the writer, with forethought, knowledge, and more than a little delicacy,” (Howard, 89). Howard and Mabley say delicacy because the attitude in the industry is that direction is given by the director, and ego can be the end of a spec’s production. By this I mean, the writer must keep to their job and the parameters of their duty in the chain of production, but they can *direct* through the proper structuring of the material they create.

Much like the actor must portray a “sincerity of emotions, feelings that seem true given circumstances,” (Benedetti, 33) the writer must put them on paper through several interdependent scenes that equate a story. Thus, a review of acting theories would benefit any screen writer, giving them the language and framework to *speak to* the actor who is cast in any one of the parts. Jean Benedetti states that prior to Stanislavski, “there was no agreed terminology,” among actors, much like the lack of an agreed upon terminology in cinema (Benedetti, 37). For example, Stanislavski used Yoga, both for terminology as well as preparation for the stage (Benedetti, 41). Why understanding this perspective is so important is that actors view their role in the production as autonomous, yet cooperative. Benedetti writes, “the shift of responsibility from the dictator-director...to the creative performer means that the actor needs much more sophisticated reading skills...[and] keep a broader view of the coherence of his role,” (42). In other words, the actor is looking to the author of the screenplay for direction first, not solely to the director who will additionally guide them by his or her interpretation of the written blue print.

This is not to say the writer need be an accomplished actor. However, understanding how they prepare and create the role can make the job of the writer clearer and the understanding of the actor even clearer. For example,

Stanislavski describes three stages by which an actor gets into a part. First he must clearly reconstruct in his mind all the experiences delineated in the text and which he has filled out with his own imagination, down to the smallest detail. Second he must identify with the character and with the décor which surrounds him. Third comes the through-line of the work and the character. (43)

Stanislavski has stated exactly what he needs from the writer to do his job as the actor. This statement clarifies the job of the writer, but also gives them greater control over the material, despite not being able to write director focused stage directions. The dialogue, movement of the actor and setting in which they're housed must all be considered in the greater context of the work. Why do they say what they say, and what are the intonations and purpose of intonations in that manner? Why would they be in a dark room, as opposed to a light room? Does the actor need to move to a window, a chair or not at all? Is there meaning in this movement? Does the object in their hand state something and should attention be brought to it, otherwise, why have it there (Benedetti, 44)? Why is all of this necessary? Because, as Benedetti states, "the unconscious cannot be commanded. Feelings have to be *lured, enticed*," (66). If the signs are corrupt, the meaning from them will be corrupt and then understanding also corrupt. A zigzagging bunch of stuff becomes noise and the audience will find it impossible to focus or make sense. It's the creed of

modern, *good* writing: Show, don't tell. The actor cannot tell the audience that they feel sad, they must show they are sad, through words, manners, expressions, objects and movement, but each of these are sparing for clarity sake.

How does a writer show, not tell, inner emotions like this? Juxtaposition is one of the tools that Howard and Mabley cite for providing “the clearest picture of the inner world of a character” (Howard, 31). Juxtaposing pits differences against each other to make meaning, visual irony. The authors share an example from *Rocky* (1976) to show how writers take the protagonist's struggle and mirror it through the other characters interacting with him or her (Howard, 57). They advise, “It is a good idea to remember that the characters don't know who the protagonist is, who the antagonist is, and who the supporting players are,” (Howard, 65). Characters on film in order to communicate their inner thoughts and feelings, “externalize their thoughts through actions,” (Mehring, 51). Juxtaposing requires understanding sign making and meaning, otherwise the effort can fizzle into meaningless disconnects for the viewer.

In addition to juxtaposition, the writer should keep in mind that “Characters don't win or lose at all—they change,” (Mehring, 62). The growth of your characters, through characterization is the large part of the story being told through the screen spec. So when it is advised to outline your story, this journey will play an integral role. This is where, too, the writer will find the majority of his creativity loosed. Despite having an outline, the author must still choose how these events will take place and the specifics of their unfolding. How a character looks and emotes to display their character. Julian Murphet writes in more complex terms: “*characterization* - the literary or dramatic representation of *acting in conformity with the desire that is in you* - can only take place in determinate

conditions of possibility,” (Murphet, 124). Murphet’s statement more clearly says that “how we think of our” characters is framed by the social and intellectual conditions of the author’s culture, and is “embedded” in that intertextual narrative. Character is a vehicle of meaning making, central to the overall communication of the script, which is reflected in the questions that a writer must ask at the outset of the project: Who, what, where when...and so on (Murphet, 106). Murphet is not talking about overall truth and conformity to the standards of the world in which we live, but the world in which the spec exists. Each spec creates a truth of its own, within a world of its own. Murphet writes, “a truth-event can only *happen* if it emerges from within the prevailing situation, the laws governing *reality*, via an agent who *inhabits* those conditions: a *character*,” (Murphet, 122). In other words, the scene is believable because it makes sense within the character and world of the film. The advice here is to keep your characters acting in character. To do so, the writer must yet again see and hear them clearly.

Dialogue is an essential vehicle of characterization and storytelling. Howard and Mabley write that “good, effective dialogue arises out of the character, situation, and conflict; it reveals character and moves the story forward,” and that it should be “short and sweet,” (Howard, 85, 87). The writer must sparingly use dialogue, because the form relegates it to lesser space denoting its lesser importance in the overall story. In addition, the writer does “not *select* dialogue to communicate information to the other players in the story,” (Mehring, 175). Though the play of the dialogue on screen is between characters, the information in it is intended for the viewer. There are no arbitrary lines. The function of dialogue is to display something: characterization, clues and cues. Likewise, “Sound is music, dialogue, narration, and sound effects. Sound can be silence,”

(Mehring, 155). Silence can be as meaningful as the song of a bird. Whether naturally occurring or foley added, sounds are additional signs, points of meaning and dialogue of another nature, and should be handled in a similar manner. Benedetti points out that despite all of his work with emotion and body, Stanislavski still struggled to realize the failure of past roles, eventually determining that delivery of the words through the voice had an additional impact on the performance, (Benedetti, 45-47). How the words sound is important to what they say. Being clear in the writing of a scene assists the actor in facilitating good portrayals.

Writing action can seem like writing direction. In fact, it is. This is where the writer can find additional control over the material that is eventually produced into a final product called a film. Understanding the meaning of movements and actions is therefore another necessary tool of the writer. For example, writing a chase scene might look like:

EXT. California Highway – Day

At belly level, we see Charlie’s muscle car SPEED along,

WEAVING through traffic. The SOUND of POLICE SIRENS

gives chase.

In life, “we seek a measure of harmony by acting purposively to achieve certain general ends,” (Withey, 233). Therefore, the actions in the spec should generally conform to this same protocol. The above example is brief and to the point, but gives a clear picture to the reader of what is seen and heard: Charlie, his revving muscle car, police sirens, a car

chase. Additionally, what isn't written is 'signed' into the meaning of the image. The movement infers something desperate is happening, the lighting suggests that Charlie might not be the bad guy, although he is running away, and so on. Movement and action are other signs meant to convey meaning to a viewer. J.A. Withey writes, "Dramatic action...can be more readily perceived, and thus made more accessible to the understanding, than life action," (Withey, 233). When carefully orchestrated (structured), movement complies to the meaning intended throughout the world of the film. Action and character are tightly interwoven. It is the actor who portrays the character through voice and movement. Action "develops as the character develops, requiring no division of attention between character and action. This unity of character and action fosters clear perception," (Withey, 235). Through this dichotomy the writer accomplishes plot and holds the attention of the audience through the "[tensions developed] from this opposition between the known and the unknown," (Withey, 233-234). Each unknown that becomes a known causes further questions, leading the viewer on to the pay off. I bet you want to know why Charlie is running from the cops.

In the tempo of rising and lowering tensions, like waves on a beach, the temporal state of the cinema is revealed. Unlike a novel, the writer of a spec has a limited number of pages in which to tell his or her tale. Normally equated to one page per minute, the expected length of a spec is approximately 120 pages or two hours—give or take cuts in editing (Haag, i-ii). This can be overcome with scenes that jump from one to the next using a visual ellipses. Ellipses are an effective means of getting from point A to B in a fashion that keeps the audience interested, instead of boring them with a character walking for fifteen minutes or an hour drive to get to the next place action occurs. Unless

there is some extenuating reason to do this, it will kill your story. Howard and Mabley caution the spec writer in the use of ellipses, though they are really quite simple, “the important part is that the audience is helped to bridge the gap...verbal or audio transition” that meaningful conveys the transfer of time (Howard, 31). In other words, a jump from scene to scene can be jarring if certain techniques, such as intercutting, fades, dissolves, and juxtaposing (an example of ellipsis is Jessie and Walt cleaning up the blood left by their boss Gus after he kills one of his thugs, cut to a man smearing ketchup on his plate, from Season Four, Episode 1 of *Breaking Bad*- life went on). Another technique is the use of montage, which “allows for the setting up of visual similes and metaphors, as in a poem,” or the growth of a character through intercut images of various actions, such as a flipbook of snapshots literally showing a character aging (Huss, 567). You don’t want the five year old from your prologue taking another fifteen years to get to the point, though the story reflects back to the younger days for context.

Mistakes will be made. There are no clear cut directions on how to write a spec. They’re not like baking a cake where you have set ingredients and amounts that result in a perfect product each time when followed to the letter. Mistakes stem from interpretation of the material provided by the guides and the writer’s limitations. For instance, utilization of terms such as anticlimax and irony “can become confused, for most of the terms have no precise definitions in the context of the subject matter,” (Howard, 16-17).

Screenwriters, as mentioned above are the invisible precursor to the cinematic event, and are often not given credit for their work, which is planning out the entire film. Some writers wish to maintain control over their work despite the nature of the cinematic

art form, and reality that film is collaborative. This attitude is best exemplified in referring back to Sielicki's playwright example. For Barrie Stavis:

[The director] has to be subordinate...though his plays can be - indeed have been - interpreted in many different ways by different directors, Stavis' basic intention is so authoritative that a director must respect it or else risk betraying the integrity of the play. (223)

Regardless of how rigidly Stavis holds onto his material, the care with which he wrote each scene, the plays are not so rigid as to kill all creativity, for the director still has to decide staging, approve costuming and the actors must act (Sielicki, 223-224). There simply are aspects of the art that the writer cannot control, and the struggle to maintain it can weaken the work or end up in the writer being deemed too difficult to work with. It is a must that any would-be-screen-writer accepts the collaborative reality of the art they propose to undertake.

Other things to be avoided are the improbable. Howard and Mabley tell their readers to avoid "the unexpected arrival of a powerful figure" such as the fairy godmother, or other "conveniently timed" events like an illness or windfall of cash (Howard, 79). Benedetti warns actors to "beware of falling into caricature. Nothing ought to be exaggerated or hackneyed, nor even the minor roles," (9). This is solid advice that the writer can also benefit from. The question of Naturalism vs. Realism, should the writer use mimicry (copy) of the real, or take only the specific points that matter in the moment, ridding of superfluous details, often confuse the writer and lead to overwriting or hammering a point to the detriment of the work (Benedetti, 11). Thus, overwriting is

another common mistake. It often manifests itself in covering “the same ground in both the dialogue and the scene description, (Howard, 86). Rewriting a script is often necessary through the long process of developing a story from spec to screen, “but it is also possible to rewrite a story to death,” (Howard, 97). A writer needs to know when to let go, which is difficult to put into clear directions. Is it the seventh or eighth draft that is too much? Or too little? As Benedetti writes, “Treasure the words of the text for two important reasons: First, not to wear the sheen off them, and second not to introduce a lot of mechanical patter,” (71).

Though he wasn't a writer, Stanislavski was a performer and so too is the screenwriter (all that exists in the written spec must first be performed in the mind of its architect), so advice from Benedetti on reflection of Stanislavski's experience is still pertinent:

Knowledge of grammar is no guarantee of being able to write imaginatively; an ability to manipulate the figures of rhetoric will not create poetry. Grammar provides a structure within which the creative mind can operate. The *System* is important because it draws attention to certain precise questions and suggests methods for solving them.

(74)

Thus, the guides are simply guides. They will not tell a would-be-screen-writer how to make a successful spec. The materials reviewed, were quite useful to my advanced stage in the processing of a spec. I did not find anything omitted and much of what was once unclear is now crystal. That said, the advice of my former professor to stay home and

read is in one sense correct, but without the guidance of others who have gone before me in this field, the leaps of logic and connections required to truly understand would be absent. I would still be struggling for meaning in the guidebooks. Mehring's work is interspersed with snippets of scripts to illustrate the meanings of the text's points, to show the student exactly what they mean, but without juxtaposing the material with interdisciplinary focus the samples are limited in scope. Interdisciplinary studies provide a good base for the would-be-screen-writer or any writer, and these materials can help to focus those studies onto the topic. However, it is up to the writer to create the design of their spec and only experience can teach what works.

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