Scenario
Films Ltd.

RAISING CAIN!

or

THE ART OF SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

A manual for script consultants, script editors, directors, producers… and writers.

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CHAPTER ONE

Freeing up the spirit – Raising Cain!

Working with writers is an elusive, delicate balancing act.

On the one hand rational, analytical, structural.

On the other hand, intuitive, temperamental… and dangerous.

No writer can write without liberating inner energy, a power to live realities beyond one's everyday existence. Let us call it a dark side, the side of Cain, the first murderer.

A writer's first task is to raise the savage Cain trapped inside the civilized Abel. To let the imagination live in the fullest possible sense. Conjuring one's ghosts is a part of it. Causing an uproar in the psyche is another. Behaving badly… well, yes, maybe too…

Raising Cain (in colloquial if slightly archaic English) can also mean having a hell of a time - something people lose sight of, like the expression itself. If screenwriting isn't fun, it isn't anything. Without excess, it is merely a pale reflection of the everyday.

Dramatic art cannot be polite and it cannot be created from a place of safety. Comfort zones must be abandoned. The unthinkable must become speakable. All else is wasted effort.

In Raising Cain we have to let our hair down. Free up our sexuality. Liberate our sense of humour, of irony, paradox. Tap into our terror of death or violence. Our secret fears. Our deepest desires. Only then will an audience recognize us.

This is *not* to say that we have to live what we imagine. That way lies a great deal of unhappiness and an early end. Writers must tune themselves like an instrument. They write with their blood and

We only need *imagine* what we *might* live. What we might be, if rules and regulations and social conventions and accidents of birth or fortune didn't hem us in…

Storytelling

We all have different stories to tell, and different ways of telling them. About colleagues. About friends. About family. Things we overhear in the bar or read in the paper. Our dreams or imaginings. Each has its own flavour. None is quite the same.

However, we tend to tell these anecdotes in story form and stories are remarkably enduring in their mechanisms and structures. It's worth knowing how they work.

In this short handbook we shall explore ways in which producers and script consultants/editors can work more productively with writers, and writers with themselves and with each other.

It's based on our own experience as writers working with producers; as producers and script consultants working with writers; and as teachers of screenwriters both singly and in collaborative groups.

Screenplay

A Script - otherwise known as a Screenplay - is a means of organizing and focusing a story in a particular form, in order to put it on screen.

It is the tool by which the writer selects reality, in order to tell the most compelling story in the most dramatic way.

A Script is made up of Scenes, which together form snapshots of the Story. And the Writer must select and present the most telling snapshots.

The Writer tends to organize stories in Sequences, groups of scenes that form the building blocks of the Film overall. They might consist of parts of the Story that happen from a particular point of view, or that provide an ironic contrast to the preceding Sequence, or create the build-up to a Crisis in the Story.

A Script is not a finished artefact. It is not a literary product. It is not the finished film. It is only a route map. Open to many different interpretations.

No Script can contain every nuance that will inform the finished film. Words are simply different from pictures, even when they describe them.

Even if the Writer happens also to be the Director and the visual interpretation may already be clear in his or her head, it will not leap off the page for the production team without an explanation of the production strategy.

This happens in a series of planning meetings. During this process the Director adds a list of Shots against the Script and this creates the Shooting Script.

However, even a Shot List inserted into the Script is not the finished film.

A Script must above all tell a Story. A Story that will translate to the Screen.

The craft of dramatic storytelling is known as Dramaturgy.

Elements Of Dramaturgy

Film storytelling is fundamentally different from other forms of narrative.

Despite the term "movie" it is more than moving pictures, more than a sequence of canvases.

Despite the modern film's reliance on the novel for source material, it has little in common with prose narrative.

Despite the presence of an audience, it isn't filmed theatre.

Film storytelling is a form apart, an art of its own. Its aspirations and techniques are discussed – but cannot be defined – by the discipline of screen dramaturgy.

There is no question that certain terms of art are useful, even indispensable, for the understanding of dramatic form – arc, trajectory, crisis, character, identification, to name just some of the more obvious.

The producer, consultant or writer must be effortlessly conversant with these ideas, understanding not just their meaning but their weight, and how they will resonate in the onward creative process.

However, dramaturgy is not a science. It is fraught with paradox, like human behaviour. None of its varied elements are constant. They shift and mutate in contact with others to create the 'chemistry' we recognize between two actors.

Terminology should be used not just as an analytical tool let alone as empty jargon but as a spur to onward creative movement.

The terms themselves have no objective existence, they are merely road signs along the way, pointing in several possible directions. The sign is not the destination.

CHAPTER TWO

The Story

What is a screen story?

The story of a drama is its narrative. A sense of its whole at the deepest level, expressed through what happens in it.

In drama, something must happen. A character must do something that has consequences. One person must collide with another or at the very least with another reality. Even in dream films, there is an action. (Except in the most surreal, which can be merely a sequence of images. But this is not drama. It is *son et lumière*.) The simplest way to think of any film is in terms of its "story".

A Sequence of Events with a beginning, a middle and an end. Not necessarily in that order, as Jean-Luc Godard quipped.

It has an Action, and Characters through which the Action is enacted.

A STORY is:

A JOURNEY...

Which the audience takes with the characters.

It could be full of surprises and excitement, or quiet, intimate, reflective.

A PROCESS ...

Of conflict and resolution.
Of change and revelation.

We will not end up in the same place as we were at the beginning.

A MARRIAGE...

Between Plot and Character.

No screenplay can function without interaction between these two elements.

Additionally, to fertilize character and plot, there needs to be an overriding Idea behind the story. This is sometimes called the THEME.

Something that answers the question: "What's it *about*?"

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A Story may involve the real and the everyday. Or the bizarre and fantastic.

But a good Story is always governed by some basic human truth.

It might be very specific to a locality or situation. But it will also have qualities that are universal, that reflect people's common experience. They should be able to recognize themselves in the Story and say: "That could be me".

A Story might do many things:

Capture and reflect life
Satisfy our curiosity
Make the familiar new and fascinating
Make the strange familiar
Allow extreme emotions to be explored in a safe way

It combines UNIQUENESS and IMAGINATION linked to REALITY.

Most audiences will feel that the Story should 'add up' or 'make sense'.

The ideal storyline is one in which each point of the story is related to the others, in which everything feels inevitable yet surprising and keeps audience involvement and attention right to the end. How is this achieved?

Screen storytelling is a dramatic form.

Drama is not a steady state but a process in which at least two elements interact. It can be defined as CONFLICT developing over TIME.

CONFLICT can occur...

Between two or more characters
Between a character and a community
Between a character's present and past
Between a character's dreams and reality.
Between the audience's preconception and the character's actions

CHAPTER THREE

Character

So what exactly *is* a CHARACTER?

Your Main Characters are sometimes labeled PROTAGONIST and ANTAGONIST supported by the "glue" of SECONDARY CHARACTERS.

Your Protagonist does not necessarily have to be a hero or heroine, nor does your Antagonist have to be an out-and-out villain.

However their opposition and the conflict it creates must serve to create IDENTIFICATION with the Story and SYMPATHY for the Leading Character. This does not mean that the PROTAGONIST must be 'nice'. He may be morally repulsive but must have sufficient charisma to pull!

Not all the characters will be equally important, but Main Characters should be as thoroughly developed as the story requires.

This may include a thorough knowledge of their personal habits, fears, loves, appearance, deep psychology... it may encompass hidden events that have preceded the present action. These are often referred to as the character's BACK STORY.

THE BACK STORY may emerge either as EXPOSITION near the start or as a SECRET revealed at a crucial point in the action. This discovery can transform or puts the whole Story in another light. This moment is central to the Detective genre.

Any character self-evidently consists of:

a) A physical appearance. A gender, an age.
b) A social and/or family background.
c) A situation: employment, isolation.
d) Behavioural traits: habits, ticks, likes and dislikes.
e) An emotional life: friends, lovers, enemies...
f) A psychology. Desires, obsessions, secrets, passions.
g) A political allegiance. Opinions.
h) A kind of speech. Dialogue patterns.

But the sum total of all these still does not add up to a living, breathing human being that one feels one knows. On the contrary, detail sometimes only serves to distance the writer from his or her own creation.

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How does a WRITER discover or invent a CHARACTER?

A character can have many geneses.

It can stem from a person one knows: a friend, a relation, a passing acquaintance.

It can stem from some facet of oneself: either from some hidden, perhaps suppressed urge or on the contrary from some aspect already fulfilled.

It can sometimes stem from a historical character, the subject of a news report or from another fictional figure.

But sooner or later, whatever the point of departure, a character must lose its origins and acquire a life of its own. It is a strange paradox that the characters that remain closest to their original model are frequently the least plausible.

"Real life" justifies nothing in fiction, least of all character. A fictional character is something different in its very essence from a real person. It must convey an imaginative existence that transcends reality.

Above all, a character is an intangible identity, a living presence that the writer senses within – and sometimes well beyond – her own existence. A bundle of instincts and possibilities that takes time to shape and focus, a shadow in one's unconscious, a voice that whispers to one in the night and gradually takes on a shape.

An embryo, perfectly conceived but as yet without precise shape. An embryo that needs nurturing while it grows to face the light and can't be forced to grow any faster than it wishes, that can't be photographed even by ultra-sound before it arrives and engages in life, in other words in its own story, for which it has been made, but which is bound to surprise both itself and its author.

Love your characters, as if they were your children. If *you* don't, sure as hell no one else will. Especially love the bad ones, because they need it most. Enjoy them, but respect them. They're separate, independent, with an existence of their own, not just projections of the writer's anxieties and neuroses, a tool for private therapy. Like children, they need their space.

This enjoyment, relish, sheer love for one's story-carrier is what lies behind the success of most character-based films. It communicates itself to the audience, conveying the impression that we are witnessing a real human being, not just a convenience thrown together for the telling of a story.

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Don't make the frequent mistake of thinking that a wonderful character makes a story.

Authors often let the character grow, and grow, and grow… until the character is incapable of fitting into any story clothes. The character is so big, so wonderful, that it's unfit for dramatic fiction and certainly for storytelling.

A character doesn't exist independently of its story. It exists to be discovered, by the audience, *through* its story. Dynamically. That is what drama means.

Of course it is good to know one's character intimately. But writing a magnificent back story – an entire biography – for the protagonist, can leave the poor creature with nothing left to do or to become. The back story has become a corset.

Worse, half the character has been wasted before the story starts, and the story can never discover all the richness you wished to convey. Character must be compressed *into* story. The story must discover uncover everything you wish to convey about the character.

Including what happened in the past and what will happen in the future. If it can't be told in story, it isn't relevant.

The writing of screen characters concerns a process of becoming. Just as story is dynamic, so is character. Characters must be dynamically conceived and capable of change for the story to move at all.

So a perfectly defined protagonist set in stone before the story starts will kill your film stone dead. Over-definition only stultifies a character and makes it impossible for the character to surprise. Which in turn makes both character and story boring.

We all know that in real life personality can change depending on situation and circumstance, and that we all can act "out of character" when placed in unfamiliar situations. This is the essence of the character/plot relationship.

A story must face its protagonist with unexpected dilemmas for which the character is not perfectly prepared. A character who fits his own story like a glove is merely an illustration, not a living being. For instance a fireman who goes to put out a fire is not inherently dramatic. A wheelchair victim forced to put of a fire *is* dramatic. This is the difference between cartoon and drama. Cartoon knows no gap between character and plot.

Of course one can recognize passages in many films where the writer/actor seems to get lost and acts "out of character" for no good reason, thus losing our identification.

On the other hand the key moment in many films comes when a character discovers hidden abilities, talents, emotions or extravagances that apparently contradict the character's "definition". Quite often a sudden eruption of rage or violence.

This moment is just one that often features in an ARC OF SELF-DISCOVERY.

The character grows before one's eyes, often through adversity, sometimes through liberation or emotional release, redeeming faults or deficiencies that seemed permanent.

Character is not static. It exists in permanent friction with plot. Changing and being changed. This friction between character and plot gives us the CHARACTER ARC.

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An audience expects its hero to start from one point and end up at another, preferably having changed or learned something *en route*. A static hero in a static world is not dramatic.

A character must struggle with his own story, her own destiny. The development of this active and reactive process gives us the idea of the character arc or trajectory.

The CHARACTER ARC or TRAJECTORY is one measure of the impact of a story, an important hook to audience identification. A character moves in some relation to its own story – initiating, propelling, avoiding, hindering, inhibiting, the options are many but a character always has an attitude to – at the very least a reaction to – what is happening to it. This developing reaction creates vital conflict between the character and its story, and this in turn creates SUSPENSE.

Any character who simply acquiesces in every next thing that happens to it, or simply achieves everything it sets out to achieve with no hindrance, will not arrest our attention or engage our sympathy. It's too simple!

Where did the character start? And where will she or he end up? The difference is the measure of the JOURNEY that we have made with this character.

This journey self-evidently has a physical dimension, let us call it the OUTER ARC: where does a character go, what does it do, whom does it meet? This is usually expressed through the ACTION, or put simply, what happens on screen.

The journey also, just as importantly, has an experiential dimension, which we shall call the INNER ARC: what does the character feel, suffer, absorb and learn?

The relative weight of inner and outer varies enormously from one genre to another.

Highly extrovert genres such as spy thrillers tend to have almost no inner arc – indeed in Bond films, for instance, it is vital to the continuation of the series that James learn nothing whatever. Otherwise he would quit his job. He remains himself, an icon, touched by nothing and altered by nothing, whatever lip service is paid to remorse, regret, reflection at the end. He must be fit to return to his iconic role the next time – maybe with a shift of image due to changing fashion reflected in casting changes but once again set in stone. Any greater psychological depths and he would be incapable of propelling, and reacting to, the plot in the way he does.

Conversely prison drama at its most heightened has almost no outer arc at all. It may never leave one tiny, claustrophobic cell but still can travel light-years in the emotional lives of its protagonists as they face an inner arc of self-examination and redemption or

refusal. The character may not have shifted from one small physical locality but still have experienced earth-shattering changes.

Conversely, the character may have traveled the whole world but experienced very little and learned nothing. This is the classic trap of the road movie.

The further a character travels physically, the more we might expect it to learn.

A character who is not changed by its own story has learned nothing. This might work in comedy but it is alien to the tragic tradition where the hero is possessed of terrible lucidity while going down a path of destruction. Even in the darkest, most predestined of tragedies, the hero conspires in his own predicament and is in some sense responsible for it. Oedipus may have been the victim of a curse, but he also killed a stubborn old man on the road to Thebes for no adequate reason. He was responsible for fulfilling the curse upon him.

A character who has no influence over its own story is simply a victim. Some very fine dramatized documentaries run this risk. It can be hard to portray those caught up in terrible events such as natural disasters or human trafficking as anything other than victims. Film here runs the risk of doubly victimizing the victim by making their condition seem inevitable or at worst deserved. Providing useful public information does not necessarily make a good film.

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Character often plays out in this dark grey zone between predestination and free will.

There is much debate about whether central characters need to be "sympathetic" and what that might mean. People's imaginative range varies widely. One audience might be riveted, another repulsed.

The defining factor is the writer's own identification with the character. If the writer loves the character as a creation, finds him/her fascinating, sexy, gripping, terrifying, then so will the audience. Macbeth, Bluebeard, Hannibal Lector, all can be made to grip the imagination and entice the audience, teasing out the viewer's dark side, enabling vicarious self-exploration without the need to become a serial murderer in person.

But remember: a character cannot be forgiven as much when he or she is shown, graphically, on the screen, as when s/he is read from the page.

Actions on screen are not virtual or metaphorical, as when narrated on the page.

They are real, even if 'pretend', demonstrated by actors who seem to live and breathe, and the audience reacts differently when shown rather than told.

CHAPTER FOUR

Plot

A PLOT consists of:

a) The BACK STORY.

Very rarely can this be set out at the beginning of a film, because the audience has no way of assessing its significance before the story has got under way.

Without the story, the back story is simply a list of facts and events, the basic situation is a lifeless canvas without any dramatic significance.

The feeling "I must show my protagonist at work, at home, at play, so we understand him before the story starts" is a terrible mistake. Until the story starts, his work, home and play has no meaning, no interest, and the audience will simply wonder why they're being shown all this, and get restless for "the story to start".

So generally the basic situation is indicated with extreme economy at the beginning of the film, without explanation or elaboration. Almost as a tease – we'll learn more later, once the story is under way.

The Story is ignited through:

b) The TRIGGER or INCITING INCIDENT

This is a kick-start, usually in the first few minutes, the hook on which the action hangs and which usually contains (when seen with hindsight) the germ from which all the action springs.

Often an accidental encounter, an arrival, a departure. It is not impossible for the inciting incident to be discovered only later.

You can consider this trigger as:

a threshold between back story and story
a dividing line beyond which the characters' destiny changes
a catalyst of forces inherent in the basic situation
a summons to the protagonist to face up to his own story

Without this trigger or SUMMONS the story would never have happened, the back story would never have been crystallized into story.

The trigger cannot be some irrelevant, external event without meaning for the back story or consequence for the story to come.

It isn't just a date in the diary. It must be highly personal to the characters and change their lives – not instantly, perhaps, but over the course of the film.

It must somehow be inherent to the back story and continue to have repercussions and echoes throughout the film… giving rise to the dawning understanding "so that's why…"

This feeling may be echoed by the characters themselves, as they speculate upon and reinterpret what has happened to them.

There ought to be the feeling in the trigger that the characters "had it coming to them". This was a story waiting to happen.

But it took the trigger to fire the story on its way, to unleash the potential conflict hidden in the basic situation.

There are two models:

1) the trigger is inevitable – "this was bound to happen one way or another, sooner or later".

2) the trigger is contingent – "if X hadn't looked over his shoulder at Y moment, he would never have seen Z, and the story would never have happened".

c) In both models the idea of DESTINY is present:

In the first, destiny is expressed in gathering, unavoidable forces.

In the second, destiny is expressed through the accidental, the apparently contingent but actually essential. This plays with our sense – acutely explored in drama – that life is dominated by hidden connections, that even coincidence is an aspect of FATE at work in our lives.

This is quite different in its dramatic meaning from random event unconnected with cause or outcome.

It is hard to exaggerate the extent to which the sense of DESTINY or FATE is present in most drama. Drama is after all the attempt to find meaning in life and patterns create echoes, a sense of *déjà vu*, of anticipation and recognition. The concept of SUSPENSE implicitly conjures events about to happen.

Of course in our modern world we do not believe in pre-destination – for the most part – but effective dramatic writing requires us to put a great deal of scepticism on hold. A story needs to hand together and grab an audience. This requires a structured plot, which in turn implies certain life patterns…

d) COINCIDENCE It is a strange truth that coincidences we would accept as merely a bit surprising in real life are entirely implausible in storytelling. Or are they…?

While suspect later on, a coincidence that actually sets a story going is generally acceptable, because we all understand that this is the premise of the story or "where it all started".

If people are likely to meet, they should meet. Or else one uses the negative coincidence, showing people passing each other without meeting.

A story that continues to depend on a series of coincidence stretches our credulity and our patience, unless some profound sense of fate underpins it. .

e) EXPOSITION, in which relevant facts are revealed.

Exposition should be revealed "on the hoof", within the ongoing action rather than *en bloc*. Who cares what pertained before the story started?

This can learnt through the changes already triggered. The way things were before – and never can be again, because the trigger has irrevocably changed the basic situation.

This is true dramatic storytelling and it can best be expressed with the phrase:

"They had been so (un-)happy, till the day they met". Note the pluperfect tense. The story is racing ahead by now, and the original situation is receding at the speed of light. It isn't important any more in itself, only as an ironical reflection on where the story is now heading.

Sure, we have to understand (or have a sense of) where the characters are coming from (we have to feel we know them!) but their precise biographies and curricula vitae are completely inessential. If the author knows it all, the audience will sense it all. It doesn't have to be retailed in minute detail, as if this were a novel.

Exposition should only contain what is vital from the past for the onward momentum of the story, i.e. what we need to understand "to get it".

f) DEVELOPMENT – a plot requires change. The protagonist cannot move, let alone change, without some external interference. Development must grow from the central flaw or threat or danger in your protagonist's situation and must intensify or sharpen his problems. This can usually be recounted through:

g) RELATIONSHIP – one might think this as pertaining more to character, but in fact development of plot can be measured, and caused, by the changing relationship between the protagonist and other characters, very often the antagonist, because this generates (and is generated by) conflict.

g) CONFLICT: the novel can occasionally do without conflict; in dramaturgy it is absolutely central. A pivotal concept that carries the story forward and recruits IDENTIFICATION for the protagonist.

h) In his *Poetics* (the world's first manual of dramatic theory) Aristotle describes how drama functions by recruiting the audience's personal and collective involvement in the story. The audience must feel it has a stake in the outcome. He describes the key emotional elements of this involvement as TERROR and PITY. Terror that the protagonist will suffer. Pity that he should have to. Terror implies suspense. Pity delivers compassion. By naming these two gut responses, Aristotle offers us the dramatic levers of what we know as IDENTIFICATION.

i) SUSPENSE. As you will have gathered, suspense does not mean people hiding behind doors with axes or lots of violence. These are generally either short-term devices or downright alienating. Suspense in its deepest meaning is the ability to lure the audience from one step of the story to the next, teasing, provoking, challenging, denying, creating an unbroken thread through the film, answering one question only to raise another, conjuring a fascination with the story, the desire to know what will happen next and where the story will go, *not* how the story will end. If the audience wonders this, then they're already bored. Dramatic storytelling is a form of seduction. We all want to be valued. We hope to be recruited.

Suspense cannot indefinitely continue at the same level or playing with the same issues. Sooner or later a build-up of suspense must be resolved, the audience's attention must be rewarded and renewed by:

i) TURNING POINTS. Every plot needs moments where the story comes together and shoots off in a new direction. A turning point is a moment in the plot from which there is literally no turning back. A moment where destiny seizes hold of the protagonist and hurls him in a new direction. Or where the protagonist takes hold of his destiny and refuses to take the path on offer.

j) PACE or MOMENTUM. Just like music, every story needs a rhythm, and this rhythm needs to be varied during the course of a long fiction in order to keep the audience's attention. Do not mistake speed for pace. Or pace for good storytelling. Every story has its own inherent momentum driving it on in its own unique way. If you find yourself speeding up for no good reason, you may have lost sight of that internal momentum and with it your story. Fictional reality generally moves faster than in real life, it's true, but a slow pace in the telling of it can be just as gripping as breathless haste. In either case, the audience must be given some occasional respite!

k) LEIT-MOTIV: what Hitchcock called the *McGuffin*, a device, often a physical object, which recurs through the script and carries the story forward, disguising, revealing or advancing the fate of the protagonists, a point of reference for an audience to grab hold of like a life raft and very often drawing attention to the THEME: Ah, so that's what it's about!

l) CRISIS: the moment in which the conflicts of the drama can no longer be avoided but force their way to a head. Generally this has to come between two-thirds and three-quarters through the script

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m) CLIMAX. The emotional high point arising from the crisis. The protagonist's INNER and OUTER ARC must climax together or your PLOT is not functioning properly. If your emotional resolution is not triggered by your handling of events, then it'll seem to be unrelated to your story and not its inevitable and satisfying outcome.

n) CATHARSIS. 'Inevitable and satisfying' are two categories central to Aristotle's notion of catharsis or the purging of dark emotions. Aristotle was convinced that the communal sharing in performance of a powerful MYTH (or story…) enabled the community to sublimate its worst instincts and avoid repeating what it had witnessed in re-enactment. The audience should leave the theatre (or cinema) feeling lighter, relieved, thankful and aware of having shared something crucial, maybe mysterious, maybe tragic but enlightening. This effect is not possible, catharsis cannot take place, if the authors of the act have not themselves delved into those dark places and released them for an audience. In other words, ***Raising Cain***!

o) AFTERMATH Except in the bleakest tragedy (as above!) a story generally holds out some new perspective on the future, not necessarily 'and they all lived happily ever after'. Dark endings can be equally satisfying, but there must always be some perspective onto the future, however ambiguous, or else the audience leaves feeling abused and cheated. After all, they've identified, and that costs. They need something to take away with them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Theme

Theme is the yeast in the dough. Theme makes your tale rise from anecdote to parable. From B-Movie to an art film. A story that actually means something.

An interesting character with a cunning plot can add up to a good yarn, but without the addition of this third element one leaves the cinema with the feeling "yes, well…" but it didn't really add up to much.

In other words, there was no essential reason why this character should have had that plot, he or she could equally have gone through a completely different routine, or conversely the same plot could have been told with a completely different character.

So the story – "the whole thing" - was kind of artificial or arbitrary. Entertaining, perhaps, up to a point. But ultimately not very convincing or satisfying.

To fertilize character and plot, there needs to be an overriding idea behind the story. A THEME.

Something that answers the question: "What's it about?"

This can be answered, and accurately in each case, either with (for instance):

a) It's about a man who loses his wife. (CHARACTER & PLOT)

Or with:

b) It's about the destructive/creative power of grief. (THEME)

The first answer may give one a character and the grains of a plot, but without the second answer (or something like it) the story here suggested acquires no overarching theme, no compelling interpretation of an all too frequent human experience.

Without this thematic interpretation the story will remain just one of many examples of this sad occurrence, a plot that could have had a different protagonist or a protagonist that could have a different plot.

Theme is the cement that brings character and plot together in a story that is essential, unavoidable, imperative, and gives the sense that the story has meaning, weight, importance.

To summarize:

Any Character is capable of an almost endless variety of behaviour, depending on circumstance. Any Plot is capable of almost endless, sometimes random development.

Theme brings Character to Plot. It defines how the Writer chooses which bits of Plot are relevant to the Character and how the Character should act and react within the Plot.

The sum total of this is your Story.

Theme generally is the objective expression of why the writer feels passionate about this subject and absolutely has to tell this Story.

Story is a triangle consisting of Character, Plot and Theme.

This triangle can be squashed in various directions depending on genre, but the three sides are always there.

Three Act Structure

Love it, loathe it; espouse it, avoid it: the Three Act Structure seems to crop up everywhere, even when it has apparently been excised or denied.

This is simply because stories, as we know, have a beginning, a middle and an end. If they don't, we don't recognize them as stories.

However our sense of chronology has been seriously challenged in recent times, as people realize that good stories needn't be told in strict story order.

The detective genre already demonstrates how the Back Story is discovered and laid bare by the investigator's enquiry. On the other hand, you can start the film with the planning and perpetrating of the crime and have the investigator outwitted by the gang. Both are entirely plausible models. Both have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not in the same order.

Different genres suggest different act ordering. The most challenging being a certain sub-genre of the paranormal or supernatural thriller in which the audience is duped into one assumption only to find it reversed by a shattering disclosure very near the end, as in *Sixth Sense* or *The Others*.

Assuming, however, that one is narrating in approximately chronological order…

A first act should generally kick off with reasonable dispatch, establishing the main lines of the story.

A first act is usually weakened by flashback, which betrays a lack of confidence in the on-screen dramaturgy; dialogued exposition, which suggests the story matter has been insufficiently digested in the on-screen action; too many secondary characters, who confuse the audience; too much subplot, which robs the film of its onward drive;

explanation by voice over, which betrays the lingering, undigested presence of a novel or other sources material lurking behind the dramatic structure.

A second act is generally no shorter than either of the other two. But no longer than both combined. If the film is going anywhere, it'll be through the distance it has to travel and the changes it'll see on its way. This implies development. Development belongs in your second act. If there are major strands developed in Act One or Act Three, this could indicate either that the material unfolded in the former is too thin and has little staying power; or that you haven't successfully led your plot strands to a crisis soon or effectively enough.

A third act should be the easiest. If it isn't, you're doing something seriously wrong, like, maybe you didn't ask the big questions at the right moment. Or maybe your characters don't really know where they're going. Or maybe your story simply hasn't got legs. A writer should know before starting to write scene one where the film ends. The real difficulty is sustaining it till you get there.

So when does the film end? The film ends just before there's nothing left to say.

Is the three-act model applicable worldwide? we are sometimes asked. The answer, very broadly, is yes certainly.

The three-act structure does work worldwide, since it's based on fundamental human perceptions ranging from a musical concerto to the mathematical equation to religious ideas of the Trinity, amongst others.

The logical progression – exposition/development/conclusion - is pretty irresistible.

However, this is not the only dramatic model available. And beware:

The classic three act structure with carefully planned plot points can end up as flat as a road map. What use structure if the spirit isn't there?

Adapting from Prose

Many good films have been adapted from published (or unpublished) prose, whether novels, novellas or short stories. Some prose is written with a parallel film version in mind, such as Graham Greene's novella *The Third Man.*

Studios and financiers tend to like adaptations. A chunky novel seems to imply plausibility and success. Many choose to hoover up rights to published novels, hand them over to the film screenwriter and then be surprised when it doesn't quite work, through no fault of screenwriter.

A novel is not a film. Prose is utterly different from drama. Not just in style and substance but in fundamental narrative patterns.

A good novel can often make a rotten film. The best novels make the worst films.

A cheap short story can sometimes make an excellent film, because the paucity of material allows the adaptor to find his or her own voice inside the existing material.
Adapting a classic novel can be a nightmare. Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, even that most accommodating author Jane Austen, rarely deliver a film that is truly a film rather than just a screen account of the book. If the film doesn't cut loose, it doesn't fully exist. It will always invite comparison, usually unflattering. Personally I would rather stay at home and read the book.

The differences between the two media of print and film are legion. The pitfalls in store for the adaptor of prose to screen are strewn across the literary jungle. Here are just some thoughts on how to sidestep the most dangerous of them:

IRONY Dramatic irony works very differently to novelistic irony. It is generally achieved through the withholding of information from characters or from the audience. It plays with the privileged or underprivileged gaze of the audience. Something that prose doesn't generally tangle with. Conversely authorial sarcasm simply doesn't translate onto the screen. An author's critical presentation of her characters is extremely hard to duplicate on screen. Film audiences tend to reach moral or aesthetic conclusions of their own.

AMBIGUITY The prose author can omit information and leave it to the imagination. The screenplay writer also, but not in the same way. In dramaturgy, some omissions simply seem like gaps. Ellipsis is used to advance a story through time jumps. Prose uses it to create ambiguity. A film that omits key facts is not ambiguous but infuriating.

RELATIONSHIPS In prose, a protagonist can exist in a vacuum, relate to no one and nothing. One thinks of Hermann Hesse and other novelists of loneliness. On screen the hermetic, introspective world is extremely hard to sustain. An antagonist or second lead is usually indispensable. Relationship development (or even lack of development) tends to provide the raw material from which screen stories are built.

ENVIRONMENT In prose, the characters can exist inside their head. In dramaturgy, there must be pictures, so they must exist in an identifiable world. A world with which the writer invites us to identify. Dramaturgy can speak of entire worlds in a picture and leave a cardinal understanding entirely unspoken. Dramaturgy, too, can speak between the lines. But not in the same way or with the same effect as prose.

SENSE OF PLACE In film, this visible world has to be defined and portrayed, not just described. It must feel real, dramatically convincing, even if it's imaginary, a fairy tale world for instance. In prose, words can conjure images. On screen there is nothing but the picture. The picture is unambiguous (mostly). It means what it is. Even if that meaning may contain multiple different levels we are invited to tease out. For instance, an elegant apartment once posh now neglected even dilapidated, which the occupant has tried to straighten up for an impending visitor, not very convincingly, and left some items apparently hidden but intended to be discovered. The information possibilities in screen set design can instill our sense of place with multiple ambiguities.

DIALOGUE In prose, characters can be entirely mute and we can still be told what's going on inside them and what they're thinking. In dramaturgy, characters must communicate at some level to inform us of what they're doing or feeling. Of course a lone protagonist can pace her bedroom or rattle her prison bars. But the scope is limited. Films can of course be narrated through action, without a word spoken. But relationship development usually implies exchanged speech. Dialogue is needed to gain closer access. And dialogue is utterly different from page to screen. It is not enough to lift the speech from a novel and dump it down into a screenplay. Dialogue performs very different functions in the two forms. For instance, it is acceptable in the novel to use dialogue for exposition. In film, this is currently unacceptable, though frequently discernable in older movies.

LIFE PATTERNS While the random is perfectly admissible and persuasive in prose, dramaturgy craves a pattern, a cycle, repetitions, echoes, connections, replies, recurrences and inversions. This may go back to the ancient religious origins of drama, to atavistic cravings for an explanation to life, to ancient ideas of fate. The search for an explanation. A pattern is vital in all forms of dramaturgy. Novels don't often provide this.

EVENT Bluntly, there must be enough going on. Of course art films can tell nothing more than the sharpening of a knife. But mainstream dramaturgy needs an alarming weight of sheer event. Things must happen, and be seen to happen. This demands constant zest and surprising invention.

MUSIC Every screenplay has its inner music, a sense of composition that tides it along. The intertwining of plot and subplot renders dramaturgy in some ways closer to contrapuntal music than any other. A theme is stated, repeated, inverted, concluded. Rhythm is vital in dramaturgy.

SCALE It is essential to get the right size story for the genre and the theme. Different genres require different sizes of character and visual canvas.

INNER MONOLOGUE The "voice over" of film is not the same as inner monologue on the page. The latter cannot be simply lifted and dumped down in a screenplay. Usually it must be translated into pictures rather than delivered over a black screen. Overstretched, it can become wearisome. Gaining privileged access to the protagonist through his recounting the story can be highly effective though. One thinks of Humphrey Bogart.

PSYCHOLOGY Unconscious processes, sometimes known as SUBTEXT, must generally be conveyed through outward behaviour, self-evidently it cannot be explored in detail as on the page, except perhaps via the psychiatrist's couch or other interrogative device. On screen, the invisible must be made visible, or at least intuitable. This is often rendered by a tension between what a character says and does, implying inner conflict and inviting enquiry; or by dramatic irony in the story, implying that a character is not all s/he seems; or simply by good acting, which must be invited by the screenplay but not prescriptively described.

VOICE While less vital in prose, the idea of the VOICE is a central issue in dramaturgy for both character and theme. This refers not just to what the character says, his speech patterns or his vocal register, but in what the character stands for. The

vision of the world that he represents and the values he defends, whether verbally expressed or implied by his demeanour. You might call this attitude – not necessarily in a positive sense. Weltanschauung. Personal code. And it need not necessarily be identical with the author's position within the film…

Authorial Voice

Just as a character needs a personal voice, so does the author.

Every screenplay writer needs a personal voice, just as a novelist does. Even if the pressures of our industry constantly squeezes our originality.

Different stories require of course a different TONE OF VOICE. Very few screen writers sustain an identical voice or speak with the same identity through all their films, though some are fairly unmistakeable, for instance Alfred Hitchcock or the Cohen Brothers.

Some tones of voice which function well in prose – such as sarcasm – are very hard to transfer from page to screen. An ironical presentation of one's protagonist is hard to achieve. On screen, the protagonist can only act. Nevertheless it's clear in, say, *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* that we're not meant to take the leading character entirely seriously.

At its simplest:

The authorial voice is a whisper the writer hears in her head in the middle of the night that makes her get up and write.

It is also, equally, the writer's ability to speak to others, identify a public and forge a contract with that public through the concept of genre.

CHAPTER SIX

Writer & Audience

Why write for the screen? What differentiates the writer of screen fiction from the novelist, the playwright, the poet or the journalist?

Prose and poetry are generally shared (barring public readings) with one person at a time. The written word communicates directly between the brain of the writer and the brain of the reader.

Writing for the screen also takes place mostly in private, nowadays shared between the writer and the computer screen, though the Writers Room now challenges this introversion and opens the whole process to collaborative co-operation and in the worst case to industrial exploitation.

Perhaps this opening is long overdue, as writing for the screen is also aimed at performance, on screen, before a crowd of people gathered in a public place.

A screenplay has to be interpreted, staged, performed, filmed, edited and presented to an audience. Even in the home, the video market plays to an average audience of more than one.

A book, you can put down and think about, then pick up again. A film, you have to watch all at once (even with the replay button).

This means that your protagonist must retain our interest and identification till the end, or we will switch off.

Certain stories are better suited to this public forum than others. And certain writers are more apt to catch the public mood than others.

The film writer is no longer the protected wallflower, if ever he was; not a poet, to be permitted his garret and his lonely art; not a fascinatingly remote and inexplicable demonic force whose inner workings will be revealed only once his immaculate conception bursts with overwhelming, self-evident justification upon an unsuspecting audience. If this is your self-image, we recommend poetry.

The screenplay writer is a public person, intending to tell stories that will be narrated in public before an audience gathered for that purpose and prepared to put in the time to listen, to be seduced, to be convinced.

However hard his or her inspiration might be to summarize, it is not entirely illogical to expect a screenplay writer to be able to detain (and entertain) potentially interested parties with a well-turned thumbnail account of work in progress or “the story so far”. It’s the least that a paying producer desperate to hook the money-men can expect of an equally hungry but sometimes uselessly tongue-tied writer. Cain must be raised not

just on the page but in the soul, and this soul must sometimes be bared in public, however distasteful or embarrassing this might be.

After all, the writer is in search of an audience. No? Ah… then why should an audience be interested?

Back comes the time-honoured response: I'm taking no short cuts, making no compromises, I'm writing this the way I see it and the audience must make of it what it will.

Poor producer. Wasted cash. Lost project. Film is expensive. It costs immense amounts to make. And stands to make immense profits or losses.

Audience. And never forget it. Once the writer forgets the audience, the writer is talking to himself. And who will hear? The film is lost!

Cinema does not reward the native, untaught genius bursting primitive but fully formed from nowhere and redefining the art with one, fell, first film.

So how should a writer "consider the audience"? Does this "consideration" imply a dreaded sycophancy, as if the writer is inwardly saying "they'll like this bit" or "I'll have them rolling in the aisles here"?

Again, this suspicion is the naïve rebellion of a writer who cannot hear his own words being listened to. A writer does not just write. A writer listens to his words being heard.

A writer is capable of being his own first audience. A writer should know where the audience is expected to be in relation to the written as the story goes along.

With no sense of this self-discipline, a writer is simply an after dinner speaker who fails to observe the faces of his audience and doesn't know when to stop.

But… the film writer has no audience. There's no one there. And trying to imagine an audience involves the writer in endless second-guessing which will ruin his invention. How can you Raise Cain if you're constantly thinking about "how it'll play"?

Fair point. To be guarded against. But that delicate balancing act, that willful schizophrenia, is precisely the task of the screenplay writer. To be entirely inside himself and entirely inside the darkened cinema with his audience simultaneously.

This involves firstly the inner appropriation and digestion of craft and technique in ways that were self-evident to say painters of the renaissance or composers of the baroque. If you had to reflect on your means of creativity while exercising them, you failed to connect with your audience. Expertise liberates and facilitates spontaneity. Nothing can replace a fundamental, easy familiarity with your fundamental medium. In our case not musical notation or oil or watercolours but words on the page designed to prepare a production.

It involves secondly an awareness of where the likely audience is likely to stand in relation to the film, a sharing with the audience of previous cinema-going experience.

Cinema & Tradition

Cinema is a shared experience and shared experience creates a tradition.

Cinema is a highly sculpted, unspontaneous, cunningly crafted, brilliantly decorated artifice in which a composite team of highly varied talents collaborate to a single end, with the shared purpose of reaching an audience.

For goodness sake, every film writer was once a filmgoer and usually continues to be so. But how often have we worked with would-be screenplay writers who seem to deny every film they've ever seen the minute they sit down to write their own, as if it's dishonest to acknowledge any precedent let alone debt. This willful amnesia is dangerous and mendacious. The films you've seen have shaped and formed your creative awareness, as they have your audience's, and they may have contributed greatly to your desire to write.

Debts persist and they must be acknowledged. If you've forgotten them, the audience sure as hell will not. Your debts will stare you in the face the minute your film starts playing.

Like it or not, cinema is an art form already shaped and defined by tradition. In its many different forms and expressions, tradition can be continued, defied, mocked or subverted, but it cannot be ignored. To behave as though tradition did not exist renders a writer laughable.

But it's hard - we know this as writers - to absorb one's viewing however passionate, however critical, into one's personal creative output. There is something laming, hurtful, inhibiting about it, like a stone in one's trainers. But that jab in the Achilles heel is an excellent reminder of one's weaknesses and a warning of worse to come, if one denies it.

Once this exercise in humility is accomplished, it's possible to think of offensive words like "genre" in slightly more charitable ways. Perhaps "genre" isn't just the straitjacket we think it is. Perhaps "genre" as a concept is actually the writer's friend.

Genre

What the hell is *genre* anyway?

Well… The term has a respectable pedigree, since Aristotle discerned three dramatic genres in 4th century Greece: Tragedy, Comedy and Epic; his observations on the

relationship between plot and character are the first known attempt to define dramaturgy as appropriate to genre and they were respected by Shakespeare's editors, who published his plays under the entirely cognate terms Tragedy, Comedy and History.

"Genre Film" is a term used loosely in the industry, especially by distributors, sales agents and marketers as well as by academics to denote a film based on a well-established and by definition well-loved model that enjoys a popular following and delivers a relatively guaranteed audience, the readiest examples being Horror, Western, Comedy, War, Action, Adventure, Crime.

"Genre film" is often used – indiscriminately and wrongly – as a synonym for B-Movie.

But the analysis of "film genre" - of how genre functions as a presence in screen dramaturgy - goes well beyond any narrow concern with "genre film".

Even an auteur, even the most surreal and anarchic like Buñuel, has some concept of genre while fashioning his or her output, because genre at its simplest defines the space in which communication between filmmaker and audience takes place.

At its simplest "genre" implies an awareness of the audience through shared tradition, a tradition in which the author and the audience both partake.

"Genre" – I would argue, despite all its debunking *The Player* and other films about films - is a creative concept that instills, changes and shapes the creative process and throws it into a dynamic relationship with the audience from the writing to the screening, guiding the audience's response through text, music and performance, a living, organic, transfigurative presence that shifts and metamorphoses as the story progresses, allowing the audience to enter into the narrative and to exercise an illusory influence on its outcome via classic mechanisms of identification.

The workings of "genre" involve and implicate the viewer in interpretation of the narrative through the optic of received tradition.

Genre is a means for the author to unlock, release, recruit, subvert and collude with the audience, like a shout from the stage at a rock concert: *Know what I mean?* And the shout echoes back from the amphitheatre: *Yes we do!!*

Genre denotes a convention that links the speaker with the hearer and establishes (or is meant to establish) that communication is taking place as intended, a systematic exchange sometimes called "the generic contract".

As a representation of myth, genre functions as an anxiety-reducing device, to explain conflict and inevitability along predictable and acceptable lines via the reinforcement of tradition. So you could indeed say that genre is a conservative force in the creative process. But before the independent writer runs screaming into full denial mode and insists on Raising Cain all on his own without any reference to all this, let's try and work out how to *recruit* rather than *refuse* the unavoidable.

Genre stares one in the face from every cinema poster. "What is it like?" is the first question (possibly after "who's in it?") of the conventional cinemagoer including – let's be honest – almost all film practitioners bar the most esoteric, and the word genre usually holds the clue to "what it's like". You can't get away from it.

Posters and ad campaigns are carefully crafted to lure the audience with graphic hints of what they might be in store for. They offer a sales contract, based on references the cinemagoer will understand from prior experience, in other words on genre. A generic contract. Woe betide you if you disappoint. If you substitute another genre for the one on offer. If you fail to deliver on contract.

Dramaturgical discourse on genre generally assumes that the concept functions as a straitjacket on the author, constraining creativity, confining the imagination with purely commercial or attention-seeking considerations.

Let us put in a plea for genre as a creative impulse. Genre implies constraint and restraint, but also focus, self-discipline, economy of means. Genre stops writers wandering off the point. Genre is arguably a liberating principle, in that it gives the author some sense of contact with his or her audience through the act of writing.

This contact is all the more vital in that a film script, unlike a stage play, is rarely subjected to the cleansing fire of rehearsal by actors who must eventually face an audience, actors who will tell you long before the First Night "sorry guv, this doesn't work it won't play".

No one knows how a film will play, not the writer, not the director, least of all the actors who frequently have no idea of the overall creative schema. The only way of anticipating an audience reaction (i.e. of trying to ensure that what one wishes to say is what the audience will hear) involves the matching of one's output however original against the likely response of an audience conditioned by received tradition. This is why studio bosses are uncomfortable with anything they fear might be "original". Remember the investor who notoriously declared: "If it's art, I'm out!"

However if you deliver only the genre and nothing more, your fate is sealed. Boredom, refusal, yawn. We are not convinced, we've seen it all before. A modern audience expects its generic expectations to be challenged as well as confirmed. It wishes to be surprised, confounded, amused. Genre thus functions not just as a convention or a contract, it is also a dare, a jest, even a threat. How far can the author go before the contract is broken? How much can the audience take?

The use of genre as game sees the author playing cat and mouse with the willing audience in a conspiracy to know, but not to know. Ironies are created through the juxtaposition of existing reference with author's manipulation of it, anywhere from gentle restatement through mockery to total inversion. You were expecting "this" but I'm giving you "this". The audience must trust that the deception won't go too far.

Certainly, genre can be abused as a "button-pusher", a means of recruiting the audience's allegiance on the cheap by offering them a surrogate experience they know, and you know, will work, emotion rung from you by easy means in favour of

characters you wouldn't give the time of day on the street, not because they are too evil but because they're too superficial.

But genre can also open new perspectives on old themes, liberating an audience and refreshing imaginative roots that the one-off, permanently singular art house movie with its presumed immaculate originality cannot reach.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Writer

Why write scripts?

The desire to tell a story. But what kind of story? And why?

The position of the script writer in the industrial hierarchy is not exactly inviting, except possibly for name authors adapting their own novel and in possession of a very tough agent.

Many script writers would love to direct their own work but in the English-speaking world at least they generally do not get the chance.

So what should one cultivate as a writer? How, as a producer, do you choose your writer?

We/they have (or should have):

- Vision/ideas
- Ability to say things in a way that makes others want to listen
- Ability to share their imaginative world with others.
- Ability to take risks (to probe inside oneself for raw material)
- An observant eye on the world
- A flair for research and a willingness to learn
- A good ear (reflecting reality through well-written dialogue)
- Fascination with character (what makes people tick.)
- Ability to work within a team, to accommodate other needs (from Director to Marketing!)
- Familiarity with the terms of art needed to conduct objective script meetings.
- A certain flexibility combined with extreme tenacity in defence of the basic principles of the project.
- An ability to stand back and exercise self-criticism.
- Freedom from, or at least ability to deal with, paranoia.
- Conversance with the tools of the trade (software etc).
- An adequate familiarity with the process of film-making.
- An acquaintance with film history and especially with the genre or story model under discussion.
- An effortless mastery of the varied arts of dramaturgy (as above!).
- A willingness to let rip, let one's hair down, imagine the unimaginable. In other words:
- *Raising Cain!*

The Script Consultant

The script consultant's first task is to recognize the writer's relationship to his or her own work - exhilaration, over-optimism, depression, vanity, confusion, block etc - and to challenge entrenched attitudes that have led to inhibition or word blindness. In short, to liberate the creative potential hovering between the writer and the film.

This means getting involved, provoking, challenging, taking risks, deliberately creating confusion… but never manipulating by devious stratagems or psychological abuse, still less deliberately destroying confidence, never usurping the writer's role by functioning as a co-author or ghost writer.

An audience, that's what most writers need. The ability to project from one's inner world to the audience beyond the screen eludes even the best screenplay writers, unlike most of their theatre counterparts who must face their audience in person on that first night. The consultant *is* a first audience, responding with questions like: "what am I meant to feel here?", "have I really understood?", "aren't you just speaking to yourself?!"

The consultant (and/or the creative producer) is often also a guide between the writer and her professional milieu. Making a film is a collaborative act. Many writers write to a brief, to a commission. How does inspiration co-exist with authority? The writer is in on the ground floor but the elevator stops to take on passengers at every department, each passenger with something to say about the script. Budgets, investors, censors, employers, how can one listen to them all without losing the thread? Endless practical constraints must be acknowledged while nurturing the voice that's attempting to speak. What is Maecenas paying for? And what should he get?

In playing this delicate anima role, the script consultant must use many voices from a whisper to a cry. Never forget that unlike most creative artists the writer has no medium - no clay, no bronze, no oils or water colours. The writer writes in her own blood. Perspective comes hard. This makes the writer vulnerable and easily destroyed, especially by a false or reckless authority figure. Writers need respect. One key is to recognize the limits of one's own taste, experience and relevance. Outright conflict is not useful. A line has been crossed. The consultant has over-identified.

But fierce questioning may be utterly appropriate. Writers can go down blind alleys from which they need rescuing. For instance, in cases such as:

The message muddle. Let us say, political correctness. "I want to tell the world my message and my hero must prove it!" But dramaturgy is not a rational art, it works by association, identification. The more you reinforce the message, the more you defeat it. Repetition leads to stereotype leads to boredom. It may seem paradoxical (like dramaturgy itself) but a message can only be conveyed by its opposite, namely good fiction. And even then, you may be surprised. Read Bertolt Brecht on the first night of *Mother Courage*: he was furious that the audience was so moved they wept, despite his insistence on detachment through deliberate moments of alienation.

The documentary dilution. The writer has fallen into the trap of illustrating his copious research rather than telling a story and the film simply fails to lift off. A notorious English novelist, (for a while in gaol) said: "Do your research afterwards." Even crooks can utter memorable truths. While feature documentaries have made a huge entry into the cinema in the past decade, fiction is not illustrated documentary. It is something completely other. It needs its own logic. It needs distance from historical fact. Especially when very true to it.

The genre gap. Great story, wrong genre. For instance, taking one's material too seriously, overlooking unconscious comedy and the danger of ridicule. Subversive humour from the consultant may be a cruel but necessary response - parody can sometimes expose a hidden flaw. Of course you can make a comedy from tragic material but you have to know that that's what you're doing!

The myth deficiency. Writers can also be blind to the sources or forerunners of their story, whether in cinematic or literary tradition. An audience gets uneasy: "Haven't I seen this before somewhere?" Be aware of your precursors, know what myth your story relates to or springs from. On the one hand, refuse the straitjacket. On the other, remain consistent in style. You can't start with a myth and end with a statistic.

The (auto-)biographical complaint. "But it really happened!" Who cares? There is no reality outside *the* reality. No one is interested whether granny "really" died or not. If the biographical sources have not been obliterated by the fiction, your film has failed. Be very wary of the "Based on a true story" boast. It can come back to haunt you.

The sympathy syndrome. "Oh, but your protagonist is so unsympathetic!" Any character can be made sympathetic. Macbeth. Hannibal. Bluebeard. The Beast. It has nothing to do with his or her moral or emotional constitution, still less with carefully crafted character notes and back story. It has to do with the writer's *point of contact* with the character, the passion and skill with which the protagonist is held out for the audience to share.

The structure stricture. Don't set your structure in stone before you know your material better than you know yourself. Don't ultra-define your characters before you have a story, or you'll never get one. The story may (must!) change your characters. And vice-versa. So leave room for both of them to surprise you, or you'll end up merely dialoguing your treatment. Few producers, accustomed to safe deliveries, understand the essence of spontaneity in the writing of a first draft.

The Producer

How does the producer approach a writer´s work? By asking questions, not necessarily out loud:

Who is the writer, what are they trying to say and why might they be interesting?

These are the first questions for any producer to address, before even wondering what to tell the writer to say or do.

Unless you can identify what makes this writer special, where the writer's voice truly lies, you'll just be tinkering with surfaces or even worse, providing recipes that don't apply.

How direct can you be with a writer?

The most important thing is openness and honesty. This can often be difficult with writers who are insecure. But it should always be possible to build a relationship of trust with any writer, which allows you sooner or later to express their personal challenge in a fairly direct way, such as: *Sorry but you don't have your "big idea" yet, so the story simply doesn't lift off.* If you're not prepared or able to do this, you're arguably not doing the writer much good.

Remember, the writer has to Raise Cain and you have to help, because the constraints of modern civilized living, the comforts that surround us and the absence of deep stories to be found in our materialistic society make it very hard for the contemporary writer to dig deep. The role of the analyst – whether producer or consultant - is to provoke, tease, challenge, cajole, bully, until Cain makes his appearance in the writer. This is absolutely dependent on the relationship of trust we just mentioned.

Where does the producer fit into the creative process?

A team is a team and the sooner that team is formed, the better it will be for the end product. This is not to say the producer or director should usurp the writer's job, simply that the writer is exposed to less abuse and last minute random rewrites if the rest of the team take their responsibility in the process. A good producer should be able to ensure that the team functions smoothly, especially defending the writer.

The producer's job is to protect and guard the creative space needed by the rest of the team. No producer can start to understand this job without some personal creative flair. This does not mean attempting to prescribe or dominate. It does involve intuition, sensitivity and sudden flashes of inspiration, especially when a writer/director pair for instance hits logjam. The producer should develop a personal style that transmits a certain generosity and unshakeable confidence in the project, a sense that all involved are working on something important and worthwhile.

This is in addition to all the obvious commercial *nous* any producer must possess!

Tips for finding a good script editor?

Someone who knows all the previous answers!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Working with Writers

Of course one needs to know how film works and how writers go about writing them.

Any number of exercises come in handy, such as:

Script and book reading;
Film viewing;
People-watching;
Curiosity and clear-sightedness;
Self-analysis and psychoanalysis;
An eye for fashion…

But input to a writer is no use if it's over-referential. Don't remind him or her of that brilliant scene you'll never forget in – what movie was it? Writers must be given credit for trying to find something original inside themselves, to share something new with the world. Human understanding is as important to the producer a knowledge of film.

Should producers be writers themselves in order to really understand what a writer is trying to say?

Probably everyone in this business should try to write at least one screenplay. That way we'd all be on the same page: writing is one of the most difficult and exhausting jobs in the world. And also one of the most exhilarating and fulfilling. It's hard to see how one might presume to offer creative input without having submitted to the same pain! But many successful and excellent producers have never wished to write, nor have they needed to in order to give excellent and incisive input.

On the other hand, producers who secretly want to be writers are the most dangerous kind. They interfere in truly destructive ways, and fail to take responsibility for the end result.

Of course it helps to understand the vocabulary of dramaturgy with which to communicate, which this thin volume has done its best to define.

Yes, of course, but we must tell you now…

The dangerous thing about this shared vocabulary, which has led to much misunderstanding within the industry, is that producers are tempted to apply terminology to their writer's script from somewhere outside the creative process simply as a means of establishing ownership and exerting control.

Beware!

As we have said, dramaturgical terms of art are signposts, not straitjackets. Once you start looking for the plot point under the table you have lost the film.

Many producers are secretly scared of writers. Writers are strange. Directors and technicians and business people are so much more practical!

Well… yes. But remember:

What every writer brings to the table is themselves. Every human being is unique and original, and has his own unique and original perspective on the world. To that extent, each writer brings an original perspective to his story. An original voice, an original interpretation of the human condition.

If we dare to suggest:

First read your script. What is actually there, not what you wish to be there. This may seem so trite it's insulting but you would not believe how many producers – and far more so directors – do not take the trouble to read a script thoroughly when it is first handed to them. Give the screenplay enough unbroken time to give it the attention you hope the audience will give your film. If you don't read it properly and are constantly thinking: "What can I make of this? How can I advance my career by making this film?' you will almost certainly miss the point and sacrifice that unique first moment when a script becomes a film in waiting.

Second, try to understand what the writer is trying to say even if it isn't on the page.

Thirdly, listen to your writer and ask her to tell you where the story is coming from. Does she really know her characters? Does she really know their story? Make her tell you.

Only then can you start deciding what works in the script and what doesn't.

Be truthful to the story and the characters and use structural change to liberate them, not imprison them.

The other seductive danger of screen terminology is that it is apparently quick to acquire. Read the book and hey presto, you have the secret of all knowledge!

But in addition a creative producer needs a broad body of life skills that take longer to acquire.

Of course you need to be screen literate, you need to watch films, read film scripts, if only to share a common vocabulary with your writers.

The producer needs to develop the same curiosity about the world as a writer, while retaining an ability to discern and select the stories that will make the best films.

That doesn't mean falling back on old successes, it means moving forward with excitement and an open mind.

Above all, don't forget that the producer is the writer's first audience. She needs tact, intuition, decisiveness, and in the end authority based on understanding.

What is really required of any creative producer is a willingness to put yourself in the other person's skin, to try and make the journey in their footsteps (and at top speed), before judging the choice they have made at any one point in the script. And most importantly, because you are *not* the writer, you have the privilege of standing outside the story and sensing whether or not that succession of creative decisions called a script could be improved upon and strengthened in places. That takes time, thought, and understanding. And sometimes a willingness to admit that a knee-jerk reaction to a particular event or scene may not serve the film in the end. Producers can change their minds. They can even, sometimes, admit that the writer was right!

Time, unfortunately, is a commodity in short supply in our pressured industry.

Power is a commodity that should rest equally between writer, producer and director but rarely does because of the perceived industrial hierarchy.

But our firm belief is that commercial demands would be better served if the film-making process trusted the writer to a greater extent than is the case internationally.

Why are great scripts rejected?

Commercial pressure. Moral cowardice. Fear of the unknown. Tyranny of tradition. Pervasive lack of trust in the writer. And lastly, the writer's lack of standing and influence in the industry.

This industrial suspicion of the writer has led directly to Hollywood's "writer for hire" contractual position, which the rest of the world is rapidly following. It is born of a certain fear of, a need to reign in and control the writer. A fear of what kind of animal the writer is. And a fear that writers are somehow… not like the rest of us. What they do is strange. They are conjurors, magicians, keepers of the key to all knowledge. They must be controlled or they will take over.

Whether or not producers are aware of this fear, it underlies much of the day-to-day behaviour in the television and film industry.

We do not subscribe to the idea that writers and producers should be in conflict with each other. Conflict should be the basis of your drama, not of your professional life!

Commercial demands would be better served if the filmmaking process trusted the writer to a greater extent than is the case internationally.

The truth is, film success is won by risk-taking, not by duplicating past glories. Remakes rarely do as well as their originals. Audiences know when they are being cynically handled. They want originality, honesty, integrity, compelling characters, great stories. When they enter the cinema, they want to be taken on an adventure into the unknown,

The writer of an original screenplay sits down at a desk and thinks nothing of spending nine months or a year doing so. At the end of that process she or he have undergone a journey from which something subtle and profound, something wild and dangerous, something thrilling and truly unexpected may have emerged.

They have sat and Raised Cain, struggled with the dark and difficult things inside themselves for an extended length of time.

They have tested their imaginative premise, pushed their characters through those dark places and followed them out the other side.

A good piece of fiction has the authority and integrity that comes from concentrated time and intellectual input.

The author will have done all alone, without any interference from well-meaning producers, script editors or script consultants.

And lo and behold:

The film producer picks it up, is amazed and says, what a wonderful piece of writing. This script would make a wonderful film!

So producers *do* trust writers then? Yes, the ones who have been left alone to get on with the job.

Producers have respect for the stage play, the novel… and now they need to develop and hone their respect for the writer of the original screenplay.

CHAPTER NINE

Tropes and Tricks of the Trade

There's no such thing as originality

Well here's a tough one. The French essayist La Bruyère said as early as the 17th Century in his *Characters*: 'We come too late, and everything has already been said'.

It is true to say that film stories, like any stories, fall into groups, genres, recognizable patterns, references and images that build upon an ever-growing tradition. There's no such thing as existing outside a tradition. Only building on it. Even the wildest and least orthodox film is part of a tradition and will create a new offshoot.

For example: Spike Jonz's *Being John Malkovitch* takes a familiar theme, lack of self-confidence/jealousy, and passes it through a fantasy kaleidoscope whose logic he meticulously follows to its extreme conclusion. The weirdness of its fictional universe draws on literary tradition as far back as Jonathan Swift and Lilliput. It draws on genre inspiration - science fantasy such as invasion of the bodysnatchers - then cleverly reverses the perspective to tell a story of wish fulfilment.

Dangers, Disasters & Examples Of Bad Practice

- The producer has already cancelled the production but commissions another draft to prove it's a disaster and shift the blame.

- Unconscious plagiarism, giving your writer some great ideas that you just happen to have heard or seen somewhere else in another script a week ago.

- Rewriting your writer's script overnight and showing it to them in the morning.

- Deliberately withholding contractual payments in order to create insecurity.

- Lying about production prospects.

- Springing another writer on the initial team without warning.

- Springing the director as co-author on the writer without coming clean, then attempting to withhold or reduce the writer's payments.

- Constantly demanding more work before paying for the previous draft, surfing endlessly on good will, one new idea after another, promising payment then conveniently forgetting. The writer is the weaker party in the contractual constellation and has to be protected. No one can live on words.

- Ignorance of basic dramaturgy. It is amazing how many producer/writer pairs flounder in the dark without a common vocabulary, without the basic tools to analyse and to communicate, without any personal or general idea of how fiction

works. So script discussions boil down to emotional responses to the material – *I don't like this bit* – without really knowing why. Many producers claim they'll *know it when they see it*, which for the writer is the equivalent of searching for a needle in a haystack blindfold. This kind of producer uncertainty is usually linked to power and confidence issues.

Exercises & Improvisations
(in the event of boredom, frustration, aggression…)

1 The shared story. Start with a random – or possibly deliberately chosen – victim, ask them to start a story and pass it on the person sitting next to them.

2 Dreams and nightmares. Each member of the group to recount their favourite, or least favourite, dream and/or nightmare. Beyond the apparent meaning, what might the dream mean for the creative life of the writer?

3 Greatest fear. One's most terrifying, deepest fear. How to face up to it in fictional form, and how to get it into story form.

4 Fondest or most persistent memory. People remember and value different periods in their life at different stages in their development. Childhood is a constant store of experience and emotion. Sometimes childhood is present in one's life, sometimes distant. It's worth unearthing.

5 Extreme situations. Put yourself in an emergency, a moral dilemma, an impossible emotional bind, and wonder how well or how badly you would behave. It's vital, if one's going to write, to face up to one's own dark side. Self-knowledge is essential for any writer, and the knowledge of how one deceives oneself.

Character is not static in real life - we often surprise ourselves, for better or worse. To develop one's character skills, one has to face up to the dark side in oneself, from cowardice and aggression through the lesser vices such as gluttony, sloth and lust all the way to sexual preferences.

6 One's worst action. Bad things one has done, and could do again. Bad things one could imagine doing, even if one hasn't.

Tips for overcoming Writer´s Block

Don't believe in it. Just write.

If you can't, you don't need to.

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