

**SCREENWRITING RESEARCH NETWORK
LEEDS CONFERENCE SEPT, 2016**

**Rules, Regulations, Principles and Paradigms in the Teaching,
Practice and Assessment of Screenwriting.**

“ There are no rules.”

(Sir Ronald Harwood)

“First learn to be a craftsman: it won't keep you from being a genius.”

(Delacroix)

“ Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space were it not that I had bad dreams.”

Hamlet Act 2 Scene 2

Rules and regulations are often regarded with suspicion in a culture that valorizes individual freedom and creativity. As ways of thinking about reality or ordering knowledge they can feel didactic, restrictive, prescriptive, too close to closed systems of authority whether bureaucratic, religious or militaristic. Theories and principles, models and paradigms also seem to prioritize the rational, analytical, logical, approach to reality - a reductive, explanatory mode that leaves no room for more subjective or imaginative forms of experience. Like the researcher's desire to categorize and classify, rules and principles can be experienced as a form of power and control that paralyzes creative thought and denies individual autonomy.

So what place do rules and principles, codes and conventions have in a practical screenwriting programme? And what part do they play in the development of the individual screenwriter or screenplay in the context of a film school education? What indeed are the major theories that might guide the screenwriter through the labyrinth of their imagination and help them connect with an audience - and how useful are they?

Individuals typically apply to screenwriting courses precisely to learn the craft skills and techniques that professional screenwriters apply in their daily practice. They have often reached the limit of their personal creativity and the insights to be gained from reading screenwriting manuals or talking to their friends. On such courses they expect and will encounter a range of techniques and theories

that can help them reconsider the shape and texture of the stories they want to tell.

Because filmmaking is a specific art form - as the playwright David Edgar points out in *How Plays Work*, there is a repertoire of conventions that can be studied just as actors, musicians, painters and other artists do. For Edgar, while you do not need to slavishly follow rules you do need to take into account the *audience* – and their expectations of narrative clarity, coherence and plausibility. He refers to Peter Brook and his account of the *essential* elements in any work of art that a student should be aware of - *concentration* and *pattern*: the need to focus the attention and organize the dramatic elements around this focus, in a shape and rhythm that gradually reveal their meaning – a meaning and set of relationships that we would otherwise have missed. As Aristotle points out in the *Poetics*, the essence of the drama is to make visible the hidden relationships between these elements, - the strongest plots are often those where an insignificant moment near the beginning becomes the most important thing at the end: logical but surprising and somehow deeply satisfying - if crafted with skill.

Edgar also picks up on another key idea from the *Poetics*, the central through-line or *action* line of the play, the narrative progression of cause and effect structured to create meaning –and the importance of *contradiction* or reversal in that progression. At the heart of the human drama is the contradiction between our infinite hopes and our finite reality and abilities – our essential ignorance or limited knowledge of the world and ourselves. It is only after the event - that we realize the significance of what we have done. Dramatic narratives are constructed around a build to this final reversal or recognition. The lyric moment may lie beyond the end of the story but this is where we realize that something important has happened – to someone – including ourselves.

For Alexander Mackendrick in his book *On Filmmaking*, the essential component of drama is *tension* –this may come from conflict between people on screen or between a character and his environment or within a character - but the aim of the screenwriter should be to create tension *in the mind of the audience*. This leads to curiosity, suspense and apprehension – “drama is the effect of anticipation mingled with uncertainty, ” of not quite knowing what is going to happen next. And this tension may be less a concern with what happens but *how* it happens for example in the *Bicycle Thief* where

the tension comes from the plot problem of the stolen bicycle on which the father's job depends but more importantly, at the deeper level of story, the focus is on the father's relationship with his son and how this is irrevocably but movingly changed when he himself, under unbearable pressure, and he himself steals a bicycle. The resolution of the moral conflict and tension when the son forgives him but can longer see his father as the unimpeachable figure of authority is cathartic. Rising tension finally leads to the release of that tension and in this relaxation - a return to silence, an image, a space of reflection, new knowledge.

David Bordwell in his recent book on *How Hollywood Tells It*, gives the most comprehensive overview of classical narrative theory that confronts the neophyte screenwriter. For him there is a clear set of codes drawn from cinema's roots in other art forms: principles of plotting, causality and rising action from drama and literature; point of view, framing and composition from painting and photography; and film's own language of gesture, close-up and the editing together of fragments and moments. He argues that these elements were codified into a specific language of classical narrative cinema as early as the 1920's. But he is also keen to make clear that these are *principles* not laws and that while narrative may be a construct it draws on our everyday perception— how we interpret what we see or what happens to us; the relationship between intentions and outcomes, the presence of the past, our emotional engagement with people and events. These everyday interpretive skills are the ones used by an audience when watching a film.

So from the earliest days of cinema screenwriting texts referred to the need for characters with important goals and forbidding obstacles, for actions bound tightly together through cause and effect, for major events foreshadowed and for rising action leading to the climax and the resolution of all issues.

According to Bordwell, screenwriting gurus have now extended these principles in *three major ways* familiar to all screenwriting programmes – (1) the three act structure (2) character arc and (3) Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey as rewritten by Christopher Vogler. The emphasis on structural principles, character flaw and transformation and the mythic resonance of those ideas through rites of passage remain central to conventional screenwriting teaching and practice. Along with the use of deadlines and appointments to create

tension, the spread of story knowledge amongst characters and audience in ways that are used to shape suspense and surprise – the casually dense and connected style of storytelling driven by character desire and psychological change defines the classical film – and its alternatives. So flashback and multi-protagonist and episodic structures are simple variations on the classical model while a range of options characteristic of art house films - lack of plot or interest in psychology, ambiguous endings or the workings of an impersonal or unknown causality – only make sense to us because of our classical expectations.

PAUSE

These organizing principles whose distillation into the *How To* books can clearly be useful but of course create their own kind of tension for the neophyte writer and teacher alike. What use do you make of them? How do you teach them? Is this not the proper domain of film studies and screenwriting researchers rather than creative writing – a dry analytical approach that has little to do with how scripts are actually written? Of course narrative structures and dramatic schema, character and characterization, scenes and sub-text as well as the philosophical, psychological and political context of a screenplay or film can be discussed and analyzed in seminars where the focus is on a close reading or viewing of the text while also focused on practice and at practical problems and possible solutions. A seminar discussion triggered by a series of *questions* that require the student to dig deeper, to think harder about how certain emotional effects have been achieved can give the screenwriter a useful, developing *vocabulary* for discussing their own and others work as they come to an understanding of how good work has been created and how it has been crafted to connect with an audience. Discussions around theme or motivation, the relationship between plot and story, the external action and the emotional journey, the use of dramatic irony and the importance of setting – as Edgar suggests – being able to give a name to concepts and techniques also builds not only the repertoire of options available to the writer but their confidence in knowing what they are talking about. Yet this kind of analytical knowledge and understanding while providing insight into the ways of enchantment can be stifling to the writer. Especially if delivered by a didactic teacher in bullet point presentation keen on appearing to be the One Who Knows. Screenwriting is not an academic pursuit – and in that sense it cannot be taught. As Lacan

points out – the more you understand the less you hear, the less you are able to hear something new and challenging.

PAUSE

Learning as opposed to teaching - of rules or principles or concepts - begins on the borders of the known and the unknown. To understand is to return to the already known while not knowing is central to the openness required of the creative process.

Hence the need for a countervailing force of *anti-structure* to counter the possibility of rigidity, enervation and blindness of rule-bound culture: a space where imagination is nurtured, where ideas and images freely circulate and where *play* is central to personal and script development. And where there are no rules, only *prompts* to ways of thinking and the passion to communicate and work with others: where it is possible to fail, to try again and fail again. In a market society dominated by instrumental reason and bureaucratic rules this is the space of literature, art, music and the *communitas* of carnival and festival. Film schools in their origin in Eastern Europe were conceived as just such spaces – a humanist space opposed to totalitarian thinking (including the domination of industrial cinema), where students are opened up to each other by a range of questions rather than given definite answers. A place dedicated not only to a *critical* but also to an *ethical* approach to filmmaking. To the study and illumination of master works. Where the most important thing is not a three-act structure but what you have to say or the realization that a “film thinks”- and that in great work the thoughts are *morally complex*. We should be asking not just how this was constructed or how the director worked with the writer, the photographer and designer to achieve certain effects – but what the film is thinking and what are the grounds of that thought. Philosophy and philosophical questions are central to film school teaching that seeks to *interrogate* tradition as well as to steal and learn from the past. The codes by which we live and write need to be constantly challenged and renewed. This requires intelligent critical thought. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor contends – “Codes limit us and shut us out from something important.... prevent us from seeing and feeling things of great moment.”

In a screenwriting programme within such a film school these “things of great moment” are not only studied through screenings and analysis but also explored and discovered within the key space of

personal transformation – the *script workshop*. This comprises three or four new writers working with a practicing professional mentor or tutor with a focus on the individual development of both writer and project, along with the mutual support of the group.

How then do the mentor and group work to mediate the pressure to structure and organize their stories in conventional ways?

Firstly by not seeing themselves as teachers with a body of knowledge or set of codes to communicate but rather seeing their role as guiding, provoking, stimulating – helping the writer to discover where they might go with their story. Finding out what the writer needs and exploring possible alternative routes that the characters might take – discovering together the problems and possibilities of someone's project. A good tutor is also helping the writers to develop skills of *collaboration*, how to give and receive feedback, experimenting with different approaches to script development, setting exercises. One tutor may focus on where the story begins or indeed how to begin, emphasizing the importance of preparation and research so that the writer can better play with possibilities of development. Another tutor may focus on developing character and networks before discussing the plot. Some prefer to start with the premise or the plot. But always the discussion, the probing, the playing with different ideas is predicated on the belief that there is a particular script to be written and a particular film to be made and that the individual writer must come to an understanding for themselves of their relationship to the theme and action of their story. The connection to filmmaking is a *personal* one and cannot be determined by *general* rules. The student herself is learning to make connections between films and screenplays that she has studied, principles distilled and discussed -with her own unique observations and personal experience. The task of the tutor is not to impose his or her own ideas, but to listen, accept and work with that personal approach. This means trying to understand the real basis of the idea and the underlying elements that have inspired the writing. The tutor can of course refer to other films, or other possible worlds that might open windows for the writer, stimulate new thoughts and images. Or they may ask the writer to forget the rules – just imagine the film you would like to see; have the courage to stare into that empty space and go beyond the fear of not knowing, using questions to provoke creative development of an idea rather than answers or explanations that might close it down. Most writing is discovering

what it is you really want to say and what you are saying is really about. And each story has its own rhythm and shape that must be respected – and not twisted into a pre-decided model. This may be what Ronald Harwood means when he says there are no rules.

How then does a tutor judge or assess the work without reference to principles or rules? Of course they will know the names of familiar concepts, structures and techniques from their own study and experience and could use them as criteria of judgment. But the response to emerging work is always more a *subjective* than objective one. And here we are reminded that screenwriting is an *art* as much as a craft – and as such is rooted in personal experience grounded in the emotional, mythical and irrational as well as the practical aspects of life. These cannot be reduced to hard data or scientific formula. R.D. Laing reminds us of what a rational, scientific approach to reality might miss:

“Banished from the scientific method, exiled from the scientific discourse, meaningful experience lives on in stories, narrations, myths, parables, in dynamic patterns and dramatic forms.....all natural science can say about *values* is that they do *not* come within it’s domain of investigative competence. A few of the other modes of existence outside the investigative competence are love and hate, joy and sorrow, misery and happiness, pleasure and pain, right and wrong, purpose, meaning, hope, courage, despair, God, heaven, hell, grace, redemption, enlightenment, compassion, wisdom, camaraderie – and everything in fact that makes life worth living. The natural scientist finds none of these things. Of course not! You cannot buy a camel in a donkey market!” (*The Politics of Experience*)

The script workshop is a place where these subjective experiences, emotions and values can be explored without rush to judgment, where the attitude of the script tutor should be close to what Keats meant by “negative capability” – the capacity for a free-floating, contemplative attention – waiting for something new to emerge, receptive to the particular moment and person in front of you. This is what teaching art or creativity is about. There is always more to life than can be explained or defined or contained in a set of rules. There is another reality on the other side of the everyday. The urge to create itself is driven by a need to engage with the irrational, opaque, otherness of the world and our experience: to give it shape and meaning. Screenwriting and filmmaking are compelling and seductive rituals that are transformative for all those involved.

Where the shift to more focused attention is guided by questions rather than answers – What is this? What does it want to be? Is this any good? Will anyone care? Do I? Where the practical insight of the script tutor draws less on a rule-bound, scientific approach than on their *experience* – of working with writers and scripts, through the long process of living and choosing that develops their *resourcefulness* and *responsiveness*. For while rules and principles can be useful as rules of thumb (whose story is it? What do they want or need?), can point to salient features that need more work, can suggest ways of organizing and planning, offer analytical tools for rational discussion and summarize audience expectations – they are less useful in dealing with the *particular* and the new.

The *new* requires responsiveness and imagination rather than immutable laws, the cultivation of flexibility and perceptiveness that will allow for openness and improvisation. And these skills of *practical insight* that a good tutor has developed are precisely the skills of *perceptiveness* that a good screenwriting course will develop in their students, bringing rules and concrete particulars into loving conversation with each other - in a community of critical practice and historical awareness.

For while screenwriting is often more about dreaming, imagining, observing, experiencing, *feeling* than formula, and the screenplay more like an organism than a mechanism, its development non-linear, more a weaving back and forth - the rational demands of revision, concentration and audience need to be acknowledged. As well as the skills and techniques that the novice expects to acquire from a practice based course. And an understanding of how the conventions of this particular art form have developed. These skills cannot be taught in any direct way but rather acquired through study, discussion, and practice – through trial and error and reflecting on the practice: thinking how to do better the next time. The student has to work out for themselves what they need to know and how to apply this knowledge, in discussion with their peers, tutors, teachers and significant others in their life: each person must achieve this for themselves, an understanding that involves getting to know oneself. Self-understanding or self-knowledge is also the realization of the importance of our relationship to others. And on this journey the student will learn from the more experienced navigators when to follow the rule- book and when to lay it aside. There is no safe guarantee – no formula for success. The teacher

herself should understand the conventions and *her* creative task is to offer an interpretation that allows the student to enter into dialogue with them and encourage the discovery of why such organizing principles and procedures might at times be a cul de sac - rather than a key to all mythologies. For as Dostoevsky notes, “ We have all the answers – it is the questions we do not know.” This was perhaps what James Baldwin had in mind when he declared, “ The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden behind the answers.”

Brian Dunnigan
September 2016

