

Rewriting Aristotle: the Uses and Misuses of the Poetics in the Teaching and Practice of Screenwriting

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*“All human beings by nature desire knowledge.”
Aristotle (Metaphysics)*

*“Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and of life.”
Aristotle (Poetics)*

*“The film language is the most elaborate, the most secret and the most invisible. A good script is a script that you don't notice. It has vanished. Being a screenwriter is not the last step of a literary adventure but the first step of a film adventure...therefore a screenwriter must know everything about the techniques of how to make a film.”
Jean-Claude Carrière*

I read with interest that amongst the early aims of the Screenwriting Research Network is that of “interpreting documents intended to describe the screen idea” and a study of “the interaction of those agents concerned with constructing the screenwork.”

We are presumably referring here to the screenplay and the screenwriters and filmmakers working toward the creation of a film. The lively, anxious, imaginative humans who struggle to express themselves in conversation and debate, to shape a meaningful narrative for an audience. As an educator involved with curious and often confused humans trying to understand what it is they have to say about the world - I find that description of theoretical practice misses too much of what excites me about storytelling and cinema. This is partly language and partly to do with how as a writer and teacher one prefers to think about the process of filmmaking. There is also something admirably perverse in theorizing about the half-life of the screenplay, trying to define that which is constantly shape-shifting then vanishing like a wish. The screenplay always wishes to be something else – like a film - certainly not a text to be made available to all the literary and analytical tools of critical theory. Why do we always kill the thing we love? Theorizing however does not have to be like this - it can be alert to the human world of uncertainty and ambiguity and seek illumination in the quick bright world of practice with the aim of gaining a practical wisdom with a human face – aspects of which this conference is admirably engaged with. In this respect, Aristotle remains an excellent guide. But first what do we mean by theory?

The idea of *theory* has its roots in the Latin *theoria* – suggesting contemplation, spectacle from the Greek *theoros* meaning literally spectator. The Hegelian and later Marxist notion of *praxis* gives us our modern understanding of a practice informed by theory and a theory (to a lesser extent) informed by practice: *praxis* being the systematic exercise in an understood and organized *skill* – where theory and practice are interactive informing each other in a creative continuum.

If screenwriting is filmmaking - as Carrière suggests; what better place to study screenwriting skills but at a film school? The London Film School is just such a place where history, cultural critique and film theory are integrated in a daily *practice* where we make sixty films every twelve weeks in a constant and interactive flow of ongoing discussion and debate: where students are encouraged to give a detailed account of their learning and the decisions they took in scripting, directing and editing their films in a work and research journal: where they work on increasingly sophisticated film exercise over six terms developing their skills in writing, photography, directing and editing.

The school also runs a Screenwriting MA that I designed and now run in interaction and in parallel with the Filmmaking course. It is the practical development and study of this course that informs this paper, as much as the specific and continued relevance of Aristotle's *Poetics* to my teaching.

What place then is there for theory in such a lively and practice-based culture and in particular for a foundational text such as Aristotle's *Poetics* – indeed why read such a difficult, incomplete analysis of ancient Greek tragedy and to what purpose?

In many of the texts on screenwriting and in Hollywood centered industry itself, insights derived from the *Poetics* have been reduced to a set of rules for a culture desperate for an answer or a formula for success – the most important being the goal-oriented protagonist and the importance of three act structure - missing the irony that Aristotle is being used as a model of certainty when he himself was part of a culture of investigation and questioning. In teaching screenwriting I resist the oppressive effects of trying to define what makes a story work or trying to quantify human complexity with a few references to Aristotle, Freud or Jung. The Greek tragedy which Aristotle investigated was itself a dramatizing of different points of view and the difficulty of reconciling them – a ritualized form of *self-questioning* with which the whole community was engaged. An important aspect of the tragic dilemma was that no single position was right or wrong, that no one can know for sure the course of future events or therefore the “right action” at the time.

It is this questioning, investigative impulse that we can take from Aristotle as well as a concern with the good life, so central to his philosophy - how should we live together, how do we choose between competing demands of equal value, how do we live well in a contingent universe? These are all questions about which we as creative humans not only as student, teachers and filmmakers, should be concerned. They should inform our practice with each other in a society and learning community that acknowledges the suggestive power of uncertainty and ambiguity as well as the importance of openness, flexibility and the ability to improvise.

Aristotle resisted expository schemes and yet his *Poetics* - a theoretical investigation into Greek tragic drama written in the 4th century BC - is still the defining text for students of Western drama. Its influence, amplified by Renaissance thinkers, has shaped ideas about dramatic structure ever since – including teachers and practitioners of screenwriting. It remains a dry, difficult text, cryptic and allusive by turns as well as incomplete with many obscure passages – probably because what we have are Aristotle's fragmentary lecture notes rather than a completed book. He would probably have elaborated upon these notes with jokes and dramatic examples in the classroom. Then too, the tragic drama that he analyzes had a very particular religious and political role in Athenian society. Any attempt to abstract principles from his analysis must bear this in mind - this probably also helps to explain the many conflicting interpretations of key concepts and their sometimes instrumental usage in screenwriting textbooks. So why read Aristotle?

A good reason would be the historical influence of the *Poetics*: as the first scientific study of storytelling and drama the text has been treated as a prescriptive guidebook by writers and playwrights ever since. Many professional writers and film directors around the world are aware of Aristotle's theories and apply them in their work – the idea of unified action, the chain of cause and effect and the key concepts of human *error* (*hamartia*), *reversal* (*peripeteia*), *calamity* (*pathos*) *recognition* (*anagnoresis*) and *catharsis* - remain central to the western idea of the drama. As exemplified in Homer's *Iliad* where Agamemnon's arrogance and Achilles's anger lead to disaster and a final recognition of his error and folly. Here the audience identifying with the protagonist, are caught up in the dramatic action, experiencing pity for the struggling hero and fearful that they too may be mistaken with disastrous if less heroic results. Dramatic storytelling engaging our emotions makes us reflect on our own arrogance and the unknown consequences of our action in the world.

For the Poetics is not just a do it yourself manual: Aristotle's interest is *philosophical* - driven by his desire to understand - which for him is a defining quality of being human. The world puzzles us and is full of wonder. It is natural to be curious about life; to want to know more about who we are and why we are: To grow and develop we need and *desire knowledge* and take pleasure in satisfying this desire; in knowing not only that this is the thing to do, but *why* we do it. And the drama by representing humans in action offers us knowledge and insight into our own lives and itself is a kind of rational enquiry deserving of philosophical reflection. Thus, while dramatists are makers - craftsmen, whose plot constructions require *Tekhne* – craft, skill, art - they are also explorers of our very human predicament. In this respect the Poetics is not just a dry summary of dramatic rules but a stimulus to thinking about who we are, about how we choose to live and act. It embodies the dialectic between reflection, theory and practice; as well as scrutinizing the relationship between artistic practice and life - what Aristotle also refers to as *praxis*. Doing knowledge, acquiring a practical wisdom – those are concerns at the heart of screenwriting teaching and practice. What it means or might mean to be a flourishing human in a contingent universe – these are thoughts that we can take back into our writing and teaching.

Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* involves an idea of art that is not merely imitative but, as Richard Kearney argues, is a creative *re-imagining* of the world which reveals hidden patterns and unexplored meanings, opens up possibilities and gives us a newly imagined way of being in the world. The aesthetic distance that it offers allows us to discern “ the hidden causes of things”, and to reflect upon what has happened and what *we* might have done or might do in the future.

So not only does Aristotle's analysis of tragedy give us insights into plot construction and storytelling; prompting us to think about how emotional effects are achieved (making us think about the audience we are writing for and the audience we *are* – simultaneously engaged and detached) but also about the fragility, vulnerability and neediness of the human being at the centre of the drama: a figure caught in a web of relationships very much like the place of the screenwriter in the filmmaking process.

For Aristotle emphasizes the *social* nature of human reality – our need for others and the complicated and conflicting feelings that arise from this need: the value of friendship and love: the desire to be acknowledged and listened to with kind attention. The ideal *polis* is a community of people attending to their own needs - which naturally include the needs of others.

He also emphasized the importance of *play*: exploration, the pleasure of discovery, the role of imagination– as much as an understanding of rules and principles. Learning requires the cultivation of perception and responsiveness; one learns by guidance as much as books or self-study. And understanding has an emotional and imaginative as well as intellectual side. So good teaching naturally requires teachers who cultivate emotional intelligence and imagination through openness and receptivity rather than the imposition of technical or intellectual theories; and who are able to work with ambiguity and paradox rather than certainties. An obvious misuse of the Poetics would be a dogmatic and inflexible application of Aristotle's insights, especially taken out of their philosophical context.

While good plots are constructed rationally with the audience also engaged in a rational exercise of interpretation, this emphasis on plot structure so readily taken up by screenwriting manuals conceals the important cognitive role that Aristotle accords to *emotion*. Powerful emotions – anger, lust, jealousy, love – are a composite of belief and feeling and have an important role to play in the drama as in life. Emotions are rooted in what we *value*, what is important to us. For Nausbaum, tragic drama is a communal process of inquiry, reflection and *feeling*: tragic plots imply a certain view of human life that is out of our control, subject to chance events and surprise - and our responses of pity and fear for the participants point to what really matters to us, exposing the

value of our deepest commitments and leading us to a kind of self-knowing. The suffering on stage is the unconcealed nature of our own condition - our neediness and incompleteness, our lack of mastery and self-sufficiency – and it is the recognition of this that offers the possibility of change.

What the drama can teach us is to “see feelingly” – to cultivate emotional openness and responsiveness in approaching new situations and encounters– to allow a passionate response as much as detached thinking to guide our recognitions. What is to be avoided is the imposition of authority whether of the text, the rule or the teacher. *Choice* lies on this borderline between the emotive and the intellectual: what we choose to say or not say is grounded as much in what we feel as what we think. For Aristotle, the emotions are not a distraction to understanding but are modes of vision and recognition that help us in making the right choice..

Tragic plots, screenplays in development and completed films can all be viewed in this way - as *patterns of thought* showing the difficulty and complexity of human deliberation: they portray and examine characters searching for the right choice, reminding us of our own search as writers and teachers and citizens. A developed screenplay is a carefully crafted working through of a human story that demands an emotional as well as a thoughtful response – what we think about an event is partly determined by what we feel. An Aristotelian notion of rational enquiry therefore involves the emotions as well as the free-play of imagination and in the drama an understanding of plot structure that allows for both. This is how we understand character by bearing witness to their choices and actions - seeing them choosing and doing. Character and plot intimately connected “like the actions of a galloping horse”.

But making the right choice is difficult (we do not have all the information, we are faced with conflicting values) and cannot be mechanically plotted. Good choosing requires much expertise, practice, flexibility, improvisation and refinement of thought and feeling. As Aristotle notes, “there are many ways of missing the target, only one way of hitting: so one is easy and the other is hard.”

Does this not also remind us of the delicate interactions of discussion and feedback in the development of a screenplay? In the *Poetics* Aristotle deliberately chooses Odysseus as an example of someone who chooses a human life of uncertainty, risk and adventure over an unchanging eternity of bliss with Circe. The riskiness of his journey home and the dangers he faces, his joys and griefs, remind us of our own. The relations of dependence and love, his limited knowledge and vulnerability and the choices allow for investigating the limits and possibilities of human beings – their incompleteness and in this way Aristotle identifies resourcefulness.

We need stories to illuminate what is of value to us. So that as well as giving us pleasure and entertainment a well-structured drama has an *ethical* dimension that forces us to think about our own choices and who we have chosen to be. This, in turn reflects the writer’s journey – the vulnerability, the dependency, the mix of excitement and anxiety the discovery of what is important and how to express this in the context of a degree structure involving class work, assessment, teachers and the opinions of many others. How should Aristotle’s observations on human nature and his more specific analysis of tragic drama inform our teaching and the design of a screenwriting course?

In the first place Aristotle’s own wide-ranging curiosity and pursuit of knowledge across the sciences and humanities should encourage us to read and study across the humanities as sources of insight into the human drama. Not only to bring to bear dry, technical analysis of films and screenplays but to draw upon a range of disciplines - art history, photography, sociology, philosophy, psychology, music – as well as the collaborative arts of filmmaking – directing, sound, editing to inform our teaching and practice. So that teaching screenwriting is also training writers

to think, to be inspired and to draw on a range of approaches in solving their screenwriting and filmmaking problems.

As students of drama we should also be good students of life and find insight and inspirations from many sources to use in our study and discussion and to help interrogate our assumptions and habitual ways of thinking. Knowledge comes from observation as well as study and writers on our screenwriting course keep notebooks where they sketch, jot down ideas, and write up their observations. Of course reading the *Poetics* can help students analyze screenplays and design plots – there are craft skills and techniques that can be studied and learned but they will only be properly understood through practice, a practice informed by a wider reading and reflection. Our students have to complete a *Work and Research Journal* where they give an account of how they have applied their learning and what they discovered through writing and rewriting; making explicit what began as tacit and spontaneous. The assumption here is as with Aristotle’s notion of praxis - through a dialogue of thinking and doing, I become more *skillful*. These developing levels of reflection play an important role in the acquisition of artistry and bring together theory and practice in an active way.

But the writer needs more than plot mechanic, intellectual analysis and reflection – she requires nurture and space to explore her ideas. On the screenwriting course we have a range of classes called *Writer’s Gym* where students improvise through writing exercises, role-playing, drawing and performance as a way of freeing their imagination and exploring their ideas and new approaches to old ideas. Often ideas generated in this class find their way into their screenplays in development.

The unifying idea is that of a *community of writers* where students work together informally. Learning to listen, to give and take feedback in a creative way, are skills that can also be learned through practice and drawn out by talented teachers. This social context – the shaping of individuals within a social context, the web of relationships that shape our fears and desires, the conflicts that arise as a consequence, the way a sense of morality is used to resolve conflict - is also an important element in how we approach the analysis and development of a screenplay. The idea that humans can only be finally understood in the context of a social world and group life and in our need for cooperation – offers an alternative to the individualistic goal-oriented model of the screenwriting texts. The emphasis here is more on networks and the *internal conflict* of a character around competing values, motivations and morality. A concern, as with Aristotle, over what *selves* actually are, and how the development of a *moral sense* is related to both thinking and feeling in a particular context. How in our individualistic culture we are able to think about other people at all. These thoughts are fundamental to our exploration of story and story structure.

Teachers and tutors are practitioners who are also able to draw on a broad intellectual background and, while knowing the models and theories of modern screenwriting and filmmaking, guide by discussion rather than the imposition of rules – and this, in small groups of three or four. “Happiness” according to Aristotle is the realizing of one’s potential, and this of course is central to the Enlightenment idea of education. Having a safe space in which to discover one’s voice and then to learn how to shape one’s thoughts and feelings for an audience is central to what I do.

In this respect there are also no rules other than to engage or entertain an audience. An understanding of basic principles can suggest how to subvert audience expectation and play against the rules. Understanding the principles laid out in the *Poetics* can make you a more flexible and intelligent writer. But this must be linked to a culture of openness, discussion, uncertainty and ambiguity, where the importance of the *writer’s voice* is a central concern. Rather than a utilitarian teaching practice of problem solving where teachers are gurus who will unlock the secret of Story.

Aristotle cannot tell you what to write about or why write this or why write at all or how to sell your screenplay. He can, however, offer useful insights and clues on how to shape your story for an audience and how emotional effects are achieved; as well as placing your struggle to write, to teach, to communicate, to understand, in a wider context of mutual concern.

Like any screenwriting text, advisor or teacher the *Poetics* should be used as a *stimulus to thinking* and understanding rather than a final authority. Rules and principles can offer useful guidance but everyone has to find their own solution. This is the thought that concludes Kiarostami's early film *Bread and Alley* where a young boy has to find his way home with the family's bread, past a fierce dog that defends the alley with whom he has to share part of the bread in order to proceed and after he succeeds the film's coda has another boy appear at the entrance to the same alley. We all have to find our own way to deal with *particular* problems that art and life put in our way. That is one good reason for studying the *Poetics* – to get ideas and theories about of how to deal with particular practical problems. By developing your understanding of what is at stake in the human drama it will give you the confidence to *improvise* your own particular solution. In this sense student screenwriters and filmmakers do not passively receive but *create within themselves* the knowledge that will take them forward - in interaction with their peers, teachers and those who achieve significance in their lives.

Where rules and theories are static, artistry requires not only good judgment and recognition but also the kind of knowledge that is dynamic, flexible and responsive to the particular – as is found in jazz improvisation or a good conversation. And so too can the screenplay be seen, rather than as a text to be analyzed or theorized, as something that is part of a *conversation* between significant others, between the writer and herself, the characters' and the plot, each transforming the other through surprise and discovery into new configurations as the screenplay goes through the drafting process toward its disappearance into a film. In this sense screenwriting is filmmaking. And the screenplay can be seen in its most practical sense as *a dialogue of thinking and doing*, as shaping future action through which students and practitioners become *more skillful*.

As with Aristotle we believe you will be a better screenwriter and filmmaker if you are an intelligent one and engage in analysis, study and debate with an open mind and heart and try not to kill the thing you love. Critical thinking and analysis is important to our understanding of life and art but we should be careful of spending too long in our ivory tower. As Faust reflects just before heading off to Hell:

“All theory now is grey, but green is life's glad golden tree”
(Goethe – Faust)

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