

WHEN TO GO TO A MOVIE GURU.

by James P. Mercurio

On the first day of my first film class at University of Michigan, the professor warned us that we were about to begin a journey from which we would never be able to return. He was talking about studying film: applying thought and analysis to works of art whose primary purpose is to inspire emotion. Never again would we be able to innocently *watch* a movie. The classes and seminars I review in this article demarcate a similar threshold for many writers. No longer will an emotional scene where a character reveals his dark secret only wrench your heart. You will identify the function of the scene as the “ghost.” You will wonder if the exposition could have been more effectively dramatized. You will realize that the character’s unconscious desire ironically contrasts with every other action he has made during the film. You’ll look at your watch, not because you’re bored, but because you’re timing act two. And you will even lose sleep over whether or not *Sea of Love* is a love story with a crime story subplot or a crime story with a love story subplot.

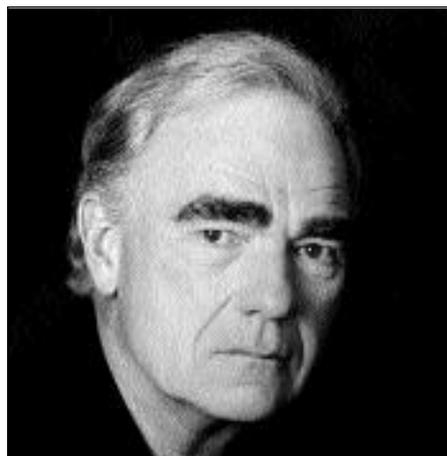
Curious to explore the cottage industry of teaching about screenwriting, I went to the story gurus, those teachers who spin the specifics of screenplay construction and deconstruction to audiences around the world every year. I wasn’t able to attend every seminar (an increasingly daunting task), but I got to sit in and participate in the seminars and classes offered by Robert McKee, David Freeman, Richard Walter, Michael Hauge, Jeff Kitchen, and John Truby. The seminars varied in scope, length, focus, and intended audience. If, when your mother calls and asks how’s it going, you respond that you’ve almost figured out how the climax of act two organically resolves itself from the individual characters, then you are either already on this journey or ready to embark. I hope this guides you and supplies enough evaluative judgment to help you arrive at the class or classes that make most sense for you.

The Presentation

With its 200 to 300 participants and its theater-style seating, Robert McKee’s “Story Structure” seminar (thirty hours, \$450.00) seems like it is going to be less a class and more like opening night of a show. And although it’s 9:00 in the morning, a one-man

show is what you get. In keeping with the show metaphor, the class is not a dialogue, it is a monologue. But McKee, who commands the stage like one of those highly-paid motivational gurus (what a stretch), delivers a honed performance that anticipates all of his audience’s potential questions.

In contrast, the most intimate class was Jeff Kitchen’s “Action-Thriller Writing Seminar” (two days, \$189). The informality and moments of interactivity among the couple-dozen students create an atmosphere similar to a graduate level class or



ROBERT MCKEE'S TEN COMMANDMENTS

- 1) Thou shalt not take the crisis/dimax out of the protagonist's hands. The anti-deus ex machina commandment.
- 2) Thou shalt not make life easy for the protagonist. Nothing progresses in a story except through conflict.
- 3) Thou shalt not give exposition for exposition's sake. Dramatize it. Convert exposition to ammunition.
- 4) Thou shalt not use false mystery or cheap surprise.
- 5) Thou shalt respect thy audience. The anti-hack commandment.
- 6) Thou shalt know thy world as God knows this one. The pro-research commandment.
- 7) Thou shalt not complicate when complexity is better. Don't multiply the complications on one level. Use all three: Intra-personal, Inter-personal, Extra-personal.
- 8) Thou shalt seek the end of the line, the negation of the negation, taking characters to the farthest reaches and depth of conflict imaginable within the story's own realm of probability.
- 9) Thou shalt not write on the nose. Put a subtext under every text.
- 10) Thou shalt rewrite.

workshop. Kitchen is a soft-spoken East Coast, or more specifically, New England intellectual. He brought writers Steve Pink (*Grosse Pointe Blank*) and W. Peter Iloff (*Patriot Games*) in to speak. I have to admit that there were a few times when I wish Kitchen would have borrowed from McKee and told some of his students to shut up.

In between McKee's one man show and Kitchen's cozy seminar are David Freeman's “Beyond Structure” seminar (eighteen hours, \$285), Richard Walter's “The Whole Picture” seminar (twelve hours, \$275), John Truby's “Writing the Blockbuster” seminar (three hours, \$39), and Michael Hauge's “Screenwriting for Hollywood.” (eighteen hours, the price is variable). Except for Hauge's (at about fifty), each of these classes had approximately 100 students. Walter is a storyteller whereas Freeman, more the comedian/jokester, infuses his workshop with jokes and some plain old silliness. Hauge, a James Cameron look-alike and a psychology dilettante (author's note: it takes one to know one), emphasizes meaning and a story's ability to guide us on the search for ourselves. They were all very accessible to questions during breaks and at the end of the day. Extremely polished, Truby's mild demeanor belies a lawyer-like analytical mind; he is always concise and convincing. Because Truby's class was only three hours long, there was not as much time for interaction, but he did field everybody's question before ending his seminar.

The Heart of the Classes

McKee begins at the beginning. He gives a lucid and explicit overview of all issues relevant to dramaturgy. He defines the smallest dramatic unit—a story beat—as a moment that turns or changes. He then continues to define a scene as a series of beats resulting in a change, a sequence as a series of scenes ending in a change, and acts as a series of sequences that turns in an even larger way. And finally, a story is a series of acts that culminates in a climax of a final turn, an irreversible change.

Although McKee's analysis is Aristotelian, he deviates slightly by claiming that character is inseparable from structure. Character, as opposed to characterization, is the hard choices characters make when there is a gap between what they expect and what they get. Stories only move forward when characters face and make the hard decisions which

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reveal his or her true nature. Only by having a character who is willing and able to keep fighting until the end of the line do you have an effective story.

Although McKee calls his class “Story Structure,” he has thirty hours, which allow him to spend some time on other issues such as scene construction, dialogue, and the habits of a professional writer. In fact, he balances the theory of story and structure with an emphasis on content and meaning. He is an advocate of research as the conqueror of cliché. He does a fantastic job of explaining how the controlling idea and theme manifest themselves dramatically in the crisis, climax, and resolution of the film.

In McKee’s scene-by-scene analysis and thematic analysis of *Casablanca*, he illuminates subtext and clearly shows how a popular entertainment form can rise to the level of art. This analysis was on par with the best I have seen in graduate-level film classes. Granted, as Richard Walter points out, the analysis may not have helped Julius & Philip Epstein and Howard Koch write the script to *Casablanca*, but if it can give young writers an appreciation of the artistic level to which our craft can rise (without sacrificing any commercial or storytelling aspects), then kudos to McKee.

Kitchen, like McKee, approaches story from the perspective of a classical dramaturg. He also begins with Aristotle but ends with a mostly unknown turn-of-the-century playwriting teacher, William Thompson Price, founder of The American School of Playwriting. Using Price’s work, Kitchen applies principles of rhetoric and dilemma to structure.

Whereas most other teachers’ approach to dilemma is limited to the paradigmatic axis (individual moments), Kitchen’s concept of dilemma on the syntagmatic axis (structural) is difficult but profound material. Instead of merely considering a scene where a character has a dilemma (two equally unacceptable choices) and a difficult choice to make, he shows how a dramatic script should boil down to one central dilemma for the protagonist. For instance, in *The Godfather*, Michael’s dilemma is that although it is unacceptable to sacrifice his happiness and peaceful life by getting involved with the family crime business, it is equally unacceptable to allow the family to be destroyed by his noninvolvement, as it is becoming increasingly apparent that he is the only one capable of running the business properly.

Kitchen believes (correctly) that although this is

a powerful tool, it is material that may take a long time to sink in. Therefore, he offers a specialized, yet optional, one-day “Hands-On Sunday” session (\$150) where students work with him to apply his tools to their own work.

Besides the structural use of Dilemma and Cen-

tral Proposition (see sidebar), Kitchen offers another structure tool: Sequence, Proposition, Plot. This tool uses reverse causality and backward plotting to effectively eliminate *all* unnecessary scenes. I won’t try to explain it here, but it’s a lifesaver if you have ever found yourself “here” in your script and need-



JEFF KITCHEN’S CENTRALPROPOSITION

Author’s note: Jeff Kitchen gave me permission to abridge his work and go into some detail regarding his dramatic tool, Central Proposition, which is a major part of his seminar. Although a few paragraphs are not going to do this justice, they should serve as introduction to Kitchen’s approach.

A syllogism is a logic term that describes two premises leading to a necessary conclusion: A and B, therefore C. The most famous example of which is this:

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Therefore Socrates is a mortal.

Kitchen credits William Thompson Price (who was trained as a lawyer) for using the Logic of Argumentation to state the core action of a drama as two premises leading to a conclusion. If we consider that drama is literally a fight to the finish, then the Central Proposition for a script is in this form:

- A) A volatile situation is created, setting up a potential fight.
- B) An exacerbation of situation A, a touching off of the fight which will be a fight to the finish.
- C) Now that the fight has begun, what will be the result?

The key to applying this material to your script is to make sure that A and B are intrinsically linked and that they clearly raise a specific Central Dramatic question C. For instance, let’s look at a purposefully ineffective Central Proposition as it applies to a romantic story:

- A) Joe sells cars.
- B) Mary works at the library.
- C) Will they be married?

The problem is that there is nothing inherent in A or B which forces the question raised in C. Forgive the above contrived example, but let us see this tool as it is applied to *Romeo and Juliet*.

- A) Romeo, scion of a family at feud with Juliet’s family, falls in love with her at first sight. [A potential fight is set up.]
- B) Romeo defies the enmity of the families and marries Juliet. [The fight to the finish is now in progress.]
- C) Will Romeo find happiness in his marriage with Juliet? [Dramatic Question arising in the mind of the audience.]

Stripping down the core action of the drama to a unified proposition as above helps cut through the elusiveness of drama. Price said that a writer can take all of the energy that goes into rewrites and put it into engineering the script properly in the first place.

Kitchen says that the best demonstration of this tool’s power is the application of the Proposition to a work in progress, rather than showing it applied to an acknowledged masterpiece. (Kitchen spends ample time in his seminar applying this tool to *The Godfather*, *Tootsie*, and *Blade Runner*.) Kitchen claims that, “the tool has tremendous formative power as it pulls material into a coherent whole. I have seen this happen over and over again in my development seminars.”

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ed logically to get yourself “there.”

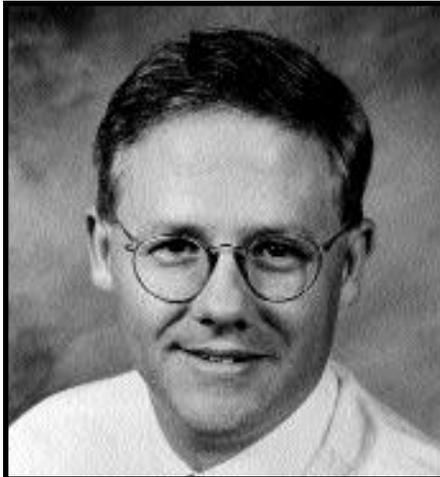
To Kitchen’s credit, he is also the first person who demonstrates a concrete usage for the Thirty-Nine Dramatic Situations. Whereas David Freeman mostly dismisses the situations by asserting that they don’t fit most stories, Kitchen takes the logical and creative jump to taking the word “situations” literally and using them to brainstorm, not necessarily plots, but themes, scenes, subplots, and characters.

Although much of Kitchen’s class serves advanced writers, there is an aspect that would appeal to young writers. At the end of the seminar, Kitchen literally opens up his notebook to show you his specific method (an application of his theoretical tools) of writing. This may help a beginner who is still trying to establish a concrete writing method, or an intermediate writer who has had a script fall apart in the middle pages.

Kitchen’s emphasis on structure makes his seminar almost the antithesis of and, therefore, complement to David Freeman’s seminar. Freeman’s Beyond Structure class, self-billed as the next logical step to McKee, has the unique distinction of dwelling the least on structure of any of these other classes. Freeman introduces his students to exhaustive lists of scene-sculpting techniques, plot twists, dialogue tips, rooting techniques (see sidebar), and character arcs (to name only some), and supplies clear examples illustrating each of them. He tries to raise his students writing up to, in his own words, “the next level.”

Freeman provides numerous tools for making dialogue great and helping expand the dimension and depth of characters and scenes. His approach is anti-intellectual (not anti-intelligent) in that the process of naming these techniques is devoid of pretentious theory. For instance, he stated a very eloquent definition of a bittersweet movie (without using the words “irony,” “negative emotional value,” or “negative controlling idea”) as a story where the character doesn’t get the goal but still has his or her character arc.

Freeman’s approach to teaching dialogue differs from McKee’s. McKee approaches the topic via structure, arguing that knowing the beats/structure of your scene frees you to write great dialogue. Not until you know exactly what subtext your dialogue needs to convey, are you free to be creative and come up with great lines. Freeman’s approach, on the other hand, relies more on describing and examining recurring patterns and characteristics of good dialogue. A few of the over twenty techniques he names are “Dropping the first word of a speech,” “A character may start speaking on a tangent,” and “A character may have different ways of speaking around different people.” (Imagine the difference



JOHN TRUBY

In Truby’s newsletter, he briefly discusses the film *Anastasia*, and how its success is linked to its successfully melding two genres effectively. His usage of the word “opponent” and “ally” are in the specific sense in which he defines them in the Twenty-Two Steps.

The first and most important choice for the animation film is whether to base it on the myth, fairy tale or drama form. . . the writers (of *Anastasia*) get to use a Myth foundation for the desire line: *Anastasia* wants to find her home. But the writers wisely avoid the episodic problems that plague the myth form (and substantially hurt the success of *Hercules*) by layering a second genre, love, onto the story. *Anastasia*’s second desire, which occasionally conflicts with the first, is Dmitri. As the lover, he becomes the second opponent (and first ally), and he and *Anastasia* experience all the classic love story beats on their journey to Paris. Instead of encountering a number of successive opponents, the lovers’ ongoing conflict unifies the middle of the script.

To understand what Truby means in discussing “Love Story,” “Myth,” and other genres, here are his concise descriptions of the film genres:

ACTION: Fight a Battle
COMEDY: Hilarious Purpose
CRIME: Catch a Criminal
DETECTIVE: Find the Truth
HORROR: Defeat a Monster
FANTASY: Into Imaginary Worlds
LOVE: The Course of Romance
MASTERPIECE: Find a Deeper Reality
MYTH: The Journey Within
SCI-FI: Tools of the New World
THRILLER: Escape Attack

between recounting your hot date to your mom as opposed to your best same-sex friend.)

For every one of the techniques he names, Freeman presents a lucid example, and his snippets of television dialogue are exceptionally well chosen. I wish, however, that he would have touched on the subject of whether or not film dialogue has slightly different requirements from dialogue for television.

His discussion of character was thorough if not groundbreaking, and he made a nice distinction between the dimensionality and depth of character. Freeman’s Diamond technique for creating character dimensionality is, excuse the pun, a real gem. This simple tool insures that your characters not only stand out, but stand out from each other. Using simple-to-understand terms, he discusses several ways to layer depth into your characters. Without any sort of psycho-babble, he discusses how to give characters a mask: a way for them to protect themselves with delusion (self and otherwise), which will eventually get them into trouble.

Although Freeman does not focus on structure, he does address it in broad strokes. However, his tidy and brief overview would seem to apply mostly to high-concept fare which seems to be his strength and passion. The main structural tool he provides is a way to generate several brainstorms for high-concept films by using other films as a starting point. Unique to Freeman is that many of his lists refer to content and not just theory. Instead of just defining, say, plot twist, and prescribing how many there should be, Freeman lists dozens of specific types of plot twists. Reviewing his lists for plot twists, character goals, and character arcs may be an impetus to finding your structure or breaking out of writer’s block when you are writing your screenplay.

Other than one quick story concept exercise in Michael Hauge’s seminar, Freeman’s seminar is the only one I attended which incorporates workshop exercises. He would assign brief exercises focusing on one of his principles or rules, and then let eager volunteers read their work aloud. Some of the attendees claimed that these exercises improved their writing on-the-spot.

Richard Walter’s “The Whole Picture” is one of two seminars I attended which spend a substantial amount of time on the business side of screenwriting. He covers many of the unwritten rules of breaking into Hollywood, querying an agent, and professionalism among writers. Although this information could be gleaned from several other sources, Walter does remind all frustrated writers that finding an agent is the easy part compared to writing a damn good script. He also hands out

copies of his new book, *The Whole Picture*, which chronicles the seminar, so that participants may eschew note taking, relax, and enjoy the casual anecdotal lessons that follow.

Walter demystifies the entire process of screenwriting with a very simple thesis. He tells students to write stories that are personal to them and that are integrated. By integrated, he means that every character, line of dialogue, line of action description, and story beat should be absolutely indispensable to your script. Rather than supplying various complex theories for each genre, Richard simply says there are two types of movies: good and bad. Period.

His demystification of the process may seem a little daunting (or trivial) at first. It's a bit like saying, "Brevity is the soul of wit.' Now go write good comedy!" But when he goes through a few pages of scripts with the audience, illustrating his concept of integration, everything becomes clear. Forcing the writer to make sure everything—story points, formatting, characters, dialogue, action description—is essential and integral, Walter shows that by stripping away *everything* that isn't good writing, one will necessarily be left with a very good script.

Let's see how Walter's approach compares to some of the other teachers' methods. Truby might specify, "Subplot characters face essentially the same situation which the protagonist faces." McKee theorizes that subplots must satisfy one of the following four functions: to echo or contradict the controlling idea, to complicate the main plot, or to interest the audience until a delayed inciting incident falls into place. Walter simply says to the writer who is ready to add a subplot, ask yourself if the subplot is absolutely essential (integrated) to the story? Does it fit? Is it absolutely indispensable? If the answer to each of these questions is yes, then the subplot's function will take care of itself.

Walter is also willing to read all of his students' work. He sometimes even recommends scripts to executives and agents. I slipped him a copy of my script (I think he was unaware that I was taking his class for this article), and less than two months later, he sent me a two-page letter praising the script and even referring me to an agent. Granted, a few paragraphs of the letter were form-letterish, but he took the time to point out some details unique to my script.

Michael Hauge's seminar makes a smooth transition from basic Syd Fieldian three-act structure to a satisfyingly complex discussion of character, psychology, and character arc. Emphasizing the mundane simplicity of most Hollywood stories, Hauge begins with the outer goal of the hero and clarifies that each story should have one specific goal with a

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clearly-defined end-point (see sidebar). After bringing the beginners up to speed, he then delves into character orchestration and even deeper into the inner world of the character: inner conflict, wound, and character arc.

His definition of character categories: hero, nemesis, romance character, and reflection are more specific and flexible than protagonist and antagonist, because each character in a script can be in a different category in relationship to each of the other characters. These character types have some similarities to Chris Vogler's (author of the Jung- and Joseph Campbell-influenced *The Writer's Journey*) archetypes, but the main difference is once you define a character as a certain type, that character remains in the same category for the entire story. More so than Vogler's archetypes, these character types are closely *allied* with and *reflected* in Truby's concept of Ally, Opponent, Ally-Opponent, and Opponent-Ally.

Where Hauge's class really gets interesting is in his use of psychology as a model of exploring character and character growth. Not only do I find this approach fascinating, I feel that it is sorely missing from some of the other approaches to teaching dramatic writing. Hauge uses Jungian concepts such as shadow and individuation to show how theme, meaning, and character orchestration arise from the inner workings of the character. His idiosyncratic approach makes him as likely to reference Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen and pop psychologist/Venutian John Gray as he is Aristotle.

He makes the most concise and illuminating statement of the relationship of the hero to the nemesis (usually the opponent or antagonist). Hauge declares that the nemesis will embody the inner conflict of the hero. If this sounds so simple and obvious, then either you're ready to stop taking classes or you're not comprehending it. Hauge gives an example from *Rain Man*. Charley doesn't want to be close to anybody—especially his family. So what happens? This story puts him in a car with Raymond, a family member to whom he has to give twenty-four-hour attention. To face Raymond is to face his inner conflict. Several students in the class seemed to have an epiphany with this concept.

Regarding the relationship between the protagonist and antagonist, Truby says that the hero and opponent are the most alike right before the crisis. In discussing the forces of antagonism in a story, McKee claims that if the issue at stake is love, then the story must go beyond the contrary (indifference), past the contradictory (hate), and push forward all the way to the negation of the negation: self-hate or hate masquerading as love. But understanding Hauge's seemingly simple yet deceptively complex notion will do the most to help turn your story into drama.

Hauge shows clips from and analyzes very modern and commercial films to illustrate his points. He did wonderful analyses of *Rain Man*, *Post Cards from the Edge*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*. Other films which he discussed were *Thelma and Louise*, *As Good as it Gets*, and *Twister*. Although he did not show clips from them, he also discussed very recent

movies like *The Truman Show* and *Bulworth*.

Like Walter, Hauge also gives a very thorough overview of the business etiquette relevant to screenwriters. He encourages writers to do research and be aggressive about networking and tracking potential future contacts. As an audience member, I appreciated the implicit vote of confidence, but I think slightly more emphasis on how hard and important it is to get your script ready to be sent out would be appropriate. Also like Walter, albeit more emphatically, Hauge unabashedly recommends taking all of the other screenwriting classes with the caveat: don't become a seminar junkie.

John Truby's Writers Studio offers several services for the screenwriter including screenwriting software, audio tapes, and various seminars. For screenwriters, Truby suggests one of two strategies. The first is to write a quirky, independent script that defines your point-of-view and "take" on things as a commodity in and of itself (Ed Burns, Tarantino, Kevin Smith), the second is to master a specific Hollywood genre or two. Then, of course, regardless of the track you select, learn your form inside and out via The Truby Studio's products.

The taped seminar of the "Twenty-Two Steps" (a part of his software and a part of his larger Story Structure seminar) and "Writing the Blockbuster" seminar are general classes on structure. Truby's "Twenty-Two Steps" is a mini-structure course. More prescriptive than McKee, Truby presents a paradigm to follow. Some of the steps seem rather obvious, such as "the introduction of the antagonist" (or the mystery cloaking the antagonist, or the romance in a love story). But Truby's scientific dissection of subtle points like the difference between a character's moral need and psychological need is not unimportant. At first glance, the twenty-two steps may seem like a mechanical list of prerequisites for a film. Eventually however, Truby's intelligent application of the steps to *The Verdict* and *Vertigo* show their flexibility.

The three-hour "Writing the Blockbuster" seminar is a sound but brief overview of screenwriting structure focusing on character arc, desire-line, and genre. Truby points out that most blockbusters follow the double track of character and action. There is a personal/psychological problem for the character and an external (action) problem. By solving the personal problem, the protagonist is more able to solve the action problem. The seminar effectively introduces students to similarities and recurring patterns in blockbuster movies. But the instructional emphasis on blending genres makes it clear that this seminar also acts as a veiled sales pitch for other Truby items that go into further detail about

MICHAEL HAUGE'S FIVE ESSENTIAL ASPECTS TO A HOLLYWOOD STORY CONCEPT:

1) Hero: a main character who is on-screen more than anybody else and whose desire (outer motivation) drives the story.

2) Identification: the audience must identify with the hero. Here are five ways to create empathy and identification:

Sympathy

Put the character in jeopardy

Make the character likable

Make the character funny

Power-make the character good at what they do.

3) Outer motivation: this is what the hero pursues. This is the essence of the story. It should be a visible goal with a clearly defined ending. Instead of "The hero wants to get better at baseball," find a recognizable end-point: "The hero wants to guide his team to victory in the world series."

4) Conflict: every story must be a David and Goliath story where the person has to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. Conflict is the only way to elicit emotion in the audience.

5) Courage: there must be the need for courage on behalf of the hero.





RICHARD WALTER'S PRINCIPLES

Throughout his book *The Whole Picture*, which follows the seminar by the same title, Walter lists over twenty no-nonsense gems of insight. Following are a few of these principles:

Principle 2: Screenwriters must embrace authentic self-disclosure, no matter how painful, as nothing less than the organizing principle of their creative lives.

Principle 6: The least important, most overappreciated element in screenwriting is the idea.

Principle 11: Do not have one character tell another character what has already been told to the audience.

Principle 16: Every writer will do anything, will seek any excuse, to avoid working upon the particular assignment in front of him at any given moment.

Principle 21: Lie through your teeth.

Truby's specialty: genre.

In Truby's genre audio tapes and software add-ons (sold separately), he breaks down each of the genres (Action, Comedy, Crime, Detective, Horror, Fantasy, Love, Masterpiece, Myth, Sci-Fi, Thriller) into their unique story beats and components. Then he matches up the twenty-two steps with their specific genre counterpart. Even his half-sentence statements of the goal for each genre (see sidebar) are illuminating. Although there are books written for fiction writers that contain some of this information (especially crime, mystery, and romance), Truby is the most thorough and no-nonsense source for genre study tailored for screenwriters.

A development executive himself, Truby claims that Hollywood's obsession with genre, coupled with its penchant for pigeonholing writers, make it crucial for screenwriters to master a genre. Looking back at the last year or so there was a "traveling angel story" about a traveling angel, a conspiracy thriller with the word "conspiracy" in the title, and I saw a spec script sale for a thriller about "mind detectives" (a type of detective Truby distinguishes) called *Mindhunters*, so his opinion is worth considering.

Before I was aware of Truby's courses, I brainstormed a quick list of similar movies I admired and

wanted to watch again before embarking on a thriller screenplay. I listed films which seemed to define the genre I wanted to study. Here is the list:

- 1) *Three days of the Condor*
- 2) *Parallax View*
- 3) *Marathon Man*
- 4) *Pelican Brief*
- 5) *The Firm*
- 6) *Point Blank*
- 7) *All The President's Men*

Upon analysis, I realized how intertwined the authors, writers and directors are of these films. Number #1 and #2 not only share a screenwriter (Lorenzo Semple, Jr.) and the distinction of being the two films which Brian Helgeland (who is currently writing and directing a remake of #6) claims influenced him most when he wrote *Conspiracy Theory*, but their directors, Sydney Pollack and Alan J. Pakula, went on to direct and write/direct, respectively, the Grisham adaptations of #5 and #4. Pakula also directed #7, which was written by William Goldman, who also penned #3 and the Grisham adaptation of *The Chamber*. The recent movie *The Game* made a knowing wink at #2, and here in 1998, #7 is the film *X-Files* creator Chris Carter mentioned as the model for the *X-Files* movie.

It does seem that Hollywood has consistently gone to the same people to repeat their success in a genre. And it's telling to show how great genre films from twenty-five years ago can still be our models, inspirations, and benchmarks for current films.

A few of the other teachers said they believe that the analysis of breaking down films into divisions and subdivisions is redundant or useless. I agree that it is possible to write a good script, even a genre or a high-concept script without Truby. But Truby's argument is that to stay competitive in Hollywood, you have to do everything to master your craft. In light of my short analysis above, If I were competing with William Goldman (and I hope to) for a writing assignment on an Alan Pakula thriller, I would want to know as much as I could about the genre.

Denouement

There is something for everyone in each of these seminars. Until now I have been giving an objective accounting of the messengers and their message. Part of my responsibility to you, the writer, is to be critical and supply enough evaluation to help you choose what courses make most sense for you. Now I am going to shift gears and play devil's advocate and raise some possible concerns about each seminar.

I wrestled with the helpfulness of Freeman's exhaustive descriptive—not prescriptive—listings of

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techniques which I believe many people could figure out by intuition on their own. I talked to a few people in the class who were frustrated with a lack of theory. For instance, after listing dialogue techniques like, “Characters interrupt,” or “Characters answer a question with a question,” Freeman would not propose a theory or discussion of subtext, or say under what psychological conditions a character might be more or less likely to speak in this fashion. But there were also attendees who seemed to respond immediately to the clarity and simplicity of his message.

Walter gets a bad rap for sometimes being too anecdotal in his lecture, and I talked to a few participants who felt the seminar was a bit breezy. Sure, there is a bit of name-dropping, but Walter usually follows his own rule of storytelling and subtly integrates his points and teaching of the craft into his stories. He tells a story about how personal *Star Wars* was to George Lucas, as opposed to its being just a calculated commercial attempt. Not only was the story interesting, I hope its point was not lost on the audience.

Kitchen’s material ranges from the very theoretical to the elementary. One way Kitchen defuses this problem is by offering specialized classes such as his separate one-day sessions for development

execs, his Action-Thriller Seminar, and a one-day Hands-on session for writers to work on their stories by applying his tools.

Like Kitchen, Hauge covers a wide scope of material. He does a fantastic job of carefully leading the beginning writers to the more difficult material, but the more advanced writer will have to sit through some elementary material before reaching the heart of the class.

One definite misuse of Truby’s material would be to use it as a shortcut. The old adage, “A little bit of information can be a dangerous thing,” holds true here (see *Cliffhanger*). Remember, what makes a genre film work is the tension between what has come before and what has yet to be seen (the original stuff you bring). If you are going to embark on mastering a genre, you most likely love those kinds of films. Therefore, before going to the Truby tapes or software add-ons, I would recommend a self-directed study of favorite, classic, or canonical films, as I did with the above seven films.

The above adage could also apply to McKee’s class. The worst thing this class can do to a young writer is to overwhelm and stifle him or her. The worst thing it can do to a novice development exec is turn him into spawn of Satan. This class can give development execs the tools to pass on almost every script. Few scripts submitted to me—even by professionals—succeed in the case where the Spine (through line) is not the external goal of the protagonist, but the unconscious desire. I worry that words like “spine” and “unconscious desire” get thrown around a lot by people who couldn’t even identify the spine of a movie like *Good Will Hunting*, which declares itself in the title.

And occasionally McKee goes off on some self-righteous tirade about “Monkey Paws” and vivisection. More than a few times my derriere was begging me to yell, “Shut up,” so that we could trim the twelve-hour day. This should not steer anyone away from the class; it should just be a reminder to bring a seat cushion.

Beginners

Beginners would benefit from any of these classes. Freeman’s and Walter’s absence of theoretical pretense or Aristotelian rhetoric makes their classes a great choice for beginning writers or for the diletante considering a change in career. Hauge also carefully guides beginners into the more challenging material. The only reason I hesitate to recommend writers who are at the beginning of their craft to McKee is that all of his principles can seem

daunting at first. Writers should let instinct and experimentation (failed or otherwise) be their teacher for a while. Having a script that you’ve already written or are working on also helps to learn the fundamentals, because you’re mulling over the new ideas as you try to apply it to your own script.

Similarly I recommend that beginning writers do not use Truby’s genre studies as a shortcut. His approach to Hollywood films via genre is an intelligently schematic and interesting approach which should complement—not replace—intuition and the vast store of residual knowledge all writers who are film lovers have. Truby’s “Writing the Blockbuster” seminar is an introduction to Truby and his products. And because of its shorter length (3 hours) and its price, it’s a good choice for beginning writers not sure if they want to jump into the more expensive and longer seminars.

Intermediate

Kitchen’s various seminars contain a range of useful material from a hands-on introduction to a specific method of writing, to individualized attention for each participant’s material.



DAVID FREEMAN ROOTING TECHNIQUES

Freeman list over thirty rooting techniques which are ways to make a character more sympathetic, i.e., to get audiences to root for them. The movie *Philadelphia*, Freeman points out, uses no less than fifteen of these techniques. Of those fifteen, here are five:

A character suffers undeserved misfortune.

A character is an underdog.

A character is ethical.

A character stands up against the masses.

A character is thoughtful and intelligent.

Remember in the seminar, Freeman would give examples from other movies for each of these techniques.

AD

McKee's class is textured and would probably benefit every writer from amateur to highly paid professional. I even know of writers who have taken the class a second time, an expensive option that can be avoided by purchasing McKee's tome *Story*.

Many of Walter's students found that the few minutes spent analyzing screenplay pages were the invaluable highlight. If analysis is what you are seeking, I would recommend Walter's course, "Beyond the Basics" (ten hours, \$275). In this seminar he offers intensive individual attention—applying his principles of integration to your script—which would be fruitful for the intermediate to advanced writer working on a draft of a script.

Freeman's focus on material other than structure creates an apparent audience: writers who have a satisfactory grasp on structure yet want to emphasize other areas of screenwriting.

Advanced

As mentioned, McKee's "Story Structure" and Walter's "Beyond the Basics" are good classes for intermediate-advanced writers. Although Hauge's class starts with elementary (but sound) topics, it eventually picks

up speed and covers some really rich ground.

If you're writing in classic Hollywood genres, Truby's individual genre analyses might be a good investment. If you're interested in an alternative approach to structure, emphasizing dramatic unity, and a fresh application of rhetoric and dilemma to structure, then consider Kitchen's courses to augment your paradigm of structure.

Conclusion

But where do you start? Which of the above list is most important? The word Drama is from the Greek word meaning "to do." Accordingly my suggestion to a writer is do. Do what feels right. Do what you want. Do what you need. Do what you mean. But do plaster your butt into your seat (lounge chair, hammock, or prison cell bench) and write.



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