

Robert McKee

Key Questions and Ten Commandments

McKee (b. 1941) is perhaps the leading teacher of screenwriting on the commercial workshop circuit today. It seem fashionable to dismiss him and his ideas, but actually much of it is very good stuff (his book Story is worth close study). The fact is, what he writes and lectures about is what John Howard Lawson, Alexander Mackendrick and many others said decades before him.

Key Questions

1. What event starts my story so the crisis and climax must occur?
2. What is the relationship between the inciting incident and the crisis/climax of this story?
3. Does the inciting incident and the way in which it occurs make the crisis/climax eventually necessary?
4. The inciting incident occurs and creates branching probability. Given this, do you feel the ending you've designed absolutely must occur?
5. What event starts the story so that the protagonist must go into action? Even if the action is saying, "I'm not going into action," the protagonist must react to that inciting incident. Even if it is to deny action.
6. What does my protagonist want that comes out of this inciting incident? What drives the protagonist on? What goal must the protagonist accomplish? What has he/she failed to accomplish?
7. What position does the character meet? What are the sources of antagonism? From what levels of reality? Always try to create three dimensional stories in which conflict is coming from ALL THREE LEVELS OF REALITY.
8. Is the opposition equal to if not greater than the protagonist? The protagonist cannot be up against forces which he can easily handle and overwhelm. Do these forces really test him/her as a human being? Do these forces become so powerful and cumulative in their power that they are severely testing the deepest human qualities in this person?
9. As we move toward the ending, do we become more deeply involved? Not staying the same, not losing interest, but more deeply involved.
10. Have we grown to identify with and/or like the protagonist?
11. As we near the ending, do we feel an exhilaration/acceleration of action and reaction?

12. Does the action in the crisis/climax fully express my root idea WITHOUT the aid of dialogue?

13. Every movie is about one idea. How does each scene in the film bring out an aspect of that one idea, positively or negatively?

14. What is the worst possible thing that could happen to my character? How could that turn out to be the best possible thing? Or vice versa.

McKee's Ten Commandments

One: Thou shalt not take the crisis/climax out of the protagonist's hands. The anti-deus ex machina commandment.

Two: Thou shalt not make life easy for the protagonist. Nothing progresses in a story, except through conflict.

Three: Thou shalt not give exposition for strictly exposition's sake. Dramatize it. Convert exposition to ammunition. Use it to turn the ending of a scene, to further conflict.

Four: Thou shalt not use false mystery or cheap surprise. Don't conceal anything important that the protagonist KNOWS. Keep us in step with the hero. We know what he/she knows.

Five: Thou shalt respect your audience. The anti-hack commandment.

Six: Thou shalt know your world as God knows this one. The pro-research commandment.

Seven: 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.

Eight: Thou shalt seek the end of the hero, the negation of the negation, taking characters to the farthest reaches and depth of conflict imaginable within the story's own realm of probability.

Nine: Thou shalt not write on the nose. Put a subtext under every text.

Ten: Thou shalt rewrite.

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The Writer Must Master Classical Form

By instinct or study, fine writers recognize that minimalism and antistructure are not independent forms but reactions to the Classical. Miniplot and Antipplot were born out of the Archplot – one shrinks it, the other contradicts it. The avant-garde exists to oppose the popular and commercial, until it too becomes popular and commercial, then it turns to attack itself. If Nonplot “art films” went hot and were raking in money, the avant-garde would revolt, denounce Hollywood for selling out to portraiture, and seize the Classical for its own.

These cycles between formality/freedom, symmetry/asymmetry are as old as Attic theatre. The history of art is a history of revivals: Establishment icons are shattered by an avant-garde that in time becomes the new establishment to be attacked by a new avant-garde that uses its grandfather's forms of weapons. Rock 'n roll, which was named after black slang for sex, began as an avant-garde movement against the white-bread sounds of the postwar era. Now it's the definition of musical aristocracy and even used as church music.

The serious use of Antipplot devices not only has gone out of fashion but has become a joke. A vein of dark satire has always run through antistructure works, from UN CHIEN ANDALOU to WEEKEND, but now direct address to camera, inconsistent realities, and alternative endings are the staples of film farce. Antipplot gags that began with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby's THE ROAD TO MOROCCO have been worked into the likes of BLAZING SADDLES, the PYTHON films, and WAYNE'S WORLD. Story techniques that once struck us as dangerous and revolutionary now seem toothless but charming.

Respecting these cycles, great storytellers have always known that, regardless of background or education, everyone, consciously or instinctively, enters the story ritual with Classical anticipation. Therefore, to make Miniplot and Antipplot work the writer must play with or against this expectancy. Only by carefully and creatively shattering or bending the Classical form can the artist lead the audience to perceive the inner life hidden in a Miniplot or to accept the chilling absurdity of an Antipplot. But how can a writer creatively reduce or reverse that which he does not understand?

Writers who found success in the deep corners of the story triangle knew that the starting point of understanding was at the top and began their careers in the Classical. Bergman wrote and directed love stories and social and historical dramas for twenty years before he dared venture into the minimalism of THE SILENCE or the antistructure of PERSONA. Fellini made I VITIONI and LA STRADA before he risked the Miniplot of AMARCORD or the Antipplot of 8 1/2. Godard made BREATHLESS before WEEKEND. Robert Altman perfected his story talents in the TV series BONANZA and ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS. First, the masters mastered the Archplot.

I sympathize with the youthful desire to make a first screenplay read like PERSONA. But the dream of joining the avant-garde must wait while, like the artists before you, you too gain mastery of Classical form. Don't kid yourself into thinking that you understand Archplot because you've seen the movies. You'll know you understand it when you can do it. The writer works at his skills until knowledge shifts from the left side of the brain to the right, until intellectual awareness becomes living craft.

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