

# Robert McKee's Unconvincing Story

*For years, Robert McKee's traveling screenwriting seminars have attracted scores of filmmakers and aspiring writers, many of whom have gone on to Oscar glory. But for all his swaggering authority, when it comes to horror movies, McKee has some lessons of his own to learn.*

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Just as financiers make pilgrimages to Omaha to hear Warren Buffett and aspiring Jedi knights travel to the ends of the galaxy to hang upside down in front of Yoda, screenwriters, with dreams of summer blockbusters dancing in their heads, periodically make the voyage to the seminars of Robert McKee. He has trained scores of Oscar and Emmy winners; his how-to best-seller, *Story*, is an essential part of most Hollywood bookshelves; and he's perhaps most famous for being portrayed by Brian Cox in Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*. So when he barks out, "You can't work in this business without reading my book," his audience has good reason to believe him.

This year I am among them. In the process of working on a book about the history of the modern horror film, adapted from a story I wrote for *Vanity Fair* last year, I've talked to most of the great horror directors of the 60s and 70s. That led to an interest in writing my own scary movie. So, a few weeks ago, I file into a room on the 18th floor of a hotel across the street from Madison Square Garden at around eight a.m. along with about 100 lumpy, underdressed fellow writers to participate in McKee's one-day seminar on how to write a thriller.

I entered the course genuinely hoping to learn about screenwriting, but also, as a critic – and a specialist of horror movies – with a professional interest in McKee's theories about genre and narrative.

By the end of the day, I had learned some valuable lessons about show business, the art of persuasion, and the tricky relationship between truth and fiction. I'd also learned that Robert McKee often has no idea what he's talking about. Some people believe that no course can teach you how to write a screenplay, that it just comes out of you, but in my opinion that's not true. A good teacher can really help writers, and McKee surely has had some success. He's been criticized for turning the creative process into a series of rules, but this misses the real problem with his course, namely that the rules themselves are often banal and arbitrary. The emperor here is not naked, but he is showing some skin through his loosely tied robe, and when the subject turns to horror, the silky-smooth garment collapses around his ankles.

McKee introduces himself like a tough guy out of a David Mamet play. *No questions designed to impress me, please, and do not engage me in conversation.* By contrast, his character in *Adaptation*, who shared his name and theatrical bluster, took Charlie Kaufman (as played by Nicolas Cage) for a drink. *But this is the real world, folks. Deal with it.* Then he lays down the law. The first cell phone to go off will cost its owner \$10. If it rings again, you are gone. "I learned how to run a seminar from Joseph Stalin," he says with a deadpan glare.

McKee teaches that a protagonist must be a willful character, and on that count, McKee certainly qualifies. But our hero quickly runs into trouble when he asks the crowd who has traveled the farthest to see him. "Japan!" shouts someone from the front row. McKee looks surprised, but not too surprised. As with seemingly everything in his opening act, this exchange leads to more stern words, in this case about the impossibility of doing business with the Japanese. He rants that his book, *Story*, has been translated into 20 languages, but not Japanese. He asks, "Did you know that there is no word in Japanese for 'yes'?"

McKee takes a sip of coffee, as his cowering, twitchy admirers mull over this provocation. He asks the question again, as if it were a hilarious punch line that improves with repetition. But then something unexpected happens, the kind of reversal you need in any effective thriller. A brave woman in the audience dares to challenge the master: "Actually, there is a word for 'yes,'" she pipes up. "It's *hai*."

McKee, a lover of jargon, has coined a name for this moment in a screenplay: the Inciting Incident. It's the act that upsets the balance of the life of the protagonist. McKee freezes for a moment, shoots her a look and, like John Wayne in a Western, refuses to back down, repeating his line a third time, as if that gave his assertion more credence. "No," the woman says with exasperation. "It's *hai*, and I know because *I'm Japanese!*" Here we reach the climax of the scene in which the hero faces an adversary who seems to have the upper hand. Every great thriller, McKee teaches, must have this showdown. In *Die Hard*, for instance, Bruce Willis stands shirtless, facing a row of armed men during a climactic face-off. But just when all seems lost, the camera circles him so that we see a gun taped to his back. McKee appears now to be just as outmatched – surely a Japanese woman knows her own language. Steely faced, he grips his cup of coffee like a revolver and mumbles something about translation before plowing ahead, adding, strangely, that there is also no word in German for "entertainment." McKee's confident body language, coupled with the flustered response of his challenger, enables him to win the exchange. The lesson: logic doesn't always matter as much as *confidence* – and this man has it, in spades.

McKee begins in earnest with a certain view of success that runs counter to almost everything you might have heard about the movie business. It goes like this: if you write a great screenplay, studios will come. "With rare exceptions," he explains in his book, "unrecognized genius is a myth." During the seminar, McKee hits the point home by describing a conversation he once had with a writer who happens to be sitting in the row in front of me. "He wrote a movie and sent it to a friend at *Variety*, and next thing you know, he had five calls," McKee says. "That's how the world works." The writer, dressed in a T-shirt with the word "writer" printed on the back, nods. The irony that his good fortune originated with a professional connection seems lost on all.

I find it hard to believe that Hollywood always identifies and promotes the highest-quality work. The best scary movie I've seen this year, for instance, J. T. Petty's *S&Man* (2006), has never received a wide release and remains nearly impossible to find in video or on the big screen. (If you live in New York, check out one of its rare screenings at Union Docs, in Brooklyn, on November 29.) But, if we assume McKee has a point, just how do you write one of these high-quality screenplays? McKee gives a brief history of the crime genre, skipping from *Oedipus Rex* to Poe, to Sherlock Holmes, and then categorizes its subgenres based on point of view. *Film noir*, he explains,

is from the tough guy's perspective, and the gangster film tells a story from the criminal's vantage. This is a strangely limited way to analyze thrillers (and the subgenre of horror), since in these movies, point of view frequently changes. The technique of alternating viewpoints is most famously used in *Psycho*, which McKee rightfully points out, but *Psycho* is hardly unique—in almost every slasher movie, the filmmaker toggles back and forth between killer and victim and sometimes to an innocent bystander.

Many critics distinguish the horror film from the larger thriller genre by focusing on the peculiar dynamics of its plot or on the presence of a monster, supernatural or otherwise, but McKee locates the essence of horror in its protagonist, who, he argues, must not be a hero. In the original *Alien*, he says, Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, just wants to survive, which by McKee's logic, makes *Alien* a horror film. But in the sequel, she becomes a hero and the film moves into the realm of action. Like many of McKee's sweeping claims, this sounds plausible at first but does not hold up to scrutiny. Isn't the stoic protagonist who fights off the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* something of a hero? And what about the defiant scream queens who courageously stand up to and defeat the Jasons and Freddy's and Michaels of the world? Can we really say that horror has no heroes? That depends, to some extent, on what you mean by "hero." So, at a break in the session, I approach McKee and ask him to define the term. It's a question that has been pondered by scholars and writers throughout the ages, but McKee dismisses it with a swing of his hand. "A hero," he says in the voice of God, "is willing to sacrifice his life for another."

Surely Ripley is fighting for the lives of her crew in *Alien*, right? Shouldn't that make her a hero? *Alien's* screenwriter, Dan O'Bannon, for one, thinks Ripley qualifies as one. In an e-mail, O'Bannon adds that he considers the film to be a mix of the genres of science fiction and horror. "Producers and distributors have trouble with mixed genre: how do you sell it?" he writes. "But audiences don't mind."

McKee has very definite ideas about villains, too. They must be remorseless, smart, and unapologetic. "That's what was wrong with *Panic Room*," he says. "The criminals have a conscience. They feel bad. No! In a modern thriller, the psychos do not apologize." This insight fits in with another one of McKee's areas of expertise and the subject of a book he's working on: evil. He says that one of the defining features of evil in horror movies is the pleasure villains take in it. "Evil is the logical extension of good," he adds, giving as an example

the fact that patriotism, a good thing in principle, can become xenophobia when taken to the extreme. The picture McKee paints of the horror film, with cackling, devilish villains and weak survivors, is an accurate portrait, more or less, of the genre – until about 1968, the year that classic modern horror movies started getting made.

In the late 60s and early 70s, *cinéma vérité*, European art films, and even absurdist theater started to influence young, increasingly politicized horror directors, who saw fantastical ghosts and vampires as tame compared with the real terrors of the world. Wes Craven made movies in which the monsters appeared at first to be good people and sometimes seemed as guilt-ridden as the heroes. Movies like *Rosemary's Baby* and *It's Alive* touched on the fantastic but imbued it with a new sense of the ordinary. McKee's three kinds of horror – the uncanny (“astounding but subject to rational explanations”), the supernatural (“source of horror is an irrational phenomenon”), and the super-uncanny (the audience is constantly guessing between the two) – don't acknowledge that the key shift in the great horror boom of the era was the normalizing of the monster. He became the boy next door, your daughter, and, finally, you.

At the same time, another seemingly competing trend arose within the genre: the embrace of a simple and mysterious conception of evil that inspires a mystical or, to borrow from the great H. P. Lovecraft, cosmic awe. In *Halloween*, Michael Myers is not conflicted or even human. He is just the bogeyman. And you can't say that the monsters in *Alien* and *Jaws* are the logical extension of good. They are forces of nature, or worse. These strains of horror – the realistic terror next door and the unimaginable mythic darkness – combine in the terrifying 1986 indie classic *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. The relentlessly ordinary killer does not kill for pleasure or profit, but merely because that's all he knows how to do.

If you take horror films seriously, you acknowledge these shifts in the genre that have deepened it and helped it evolve from the campy days of Boris Karloff and Vincent Price. Critics no longer dismiss horror as they once did, but McKee doesn't seem to have gotten the memo. He spends very little time in the seminar exploring the nature of suspense, an essential element of horror. Instead, McKee draws a distinction between what he calls the Cheap Surprise – a sudden shock out of nowhere – and the True Surprise, which includes a revelation. “It's hard to imagine a satisfying horror film without a Cheap Surprise,” he says. This is snobbery masquerading as hipness.

But the big-picture mistakes by McKee pale in comparison with the multitude of his small errors. It's not true that, as he says, there is no mention of childhood in Shakespeare. (Take a look at that obscure speech that begins, "All the world's a stage," or, hell, read Freud on the Bard.) Nor is it true that, before *Chinatown*, all crime stories had happy endings (who was smiling when Warren Beatty got gunned down in *Bonnie and Clyde*?), or that most serial killers work in pairs (someone teach this man how to use Google). If you think McKee would be more careful in print, forget about it. In *Story*, he propounds that the only reason critics ever cite an audience's approval of a movie is that they secretly share it. As someone who has worked as a critic for the past dozen years, I can tell you that is preposterous.

So how does McKee get away with being repeatedly wrong while still charging \$250 for his daylong course and \$645 for four-day seminars? That might be the most interesting question of all, and the first big hint at the answer comes two-thirds of the way into the lecture, when a loud cell phone goes off. Uh oh! Surprisingly, McKee breaks his own rules and ignores the phone, which rings and rings and rings, distracting everyone. It keeps ringing, and McKee keeps talking. No \$10 fine, no eviction, nothing. Joseph Stalin, it turns out, is all talk. By now, we know that his bluster is an act, a carefully constructed device to win your trust. And if you follow a few rules, you can pull it off, too.

**Rule One:** Drop names shamelessly. McKee tells us that he once received a doctor recommendation from his friend John Cleese, bummed a cigarette from Toni Morrison, and corrected his pal Paul Haggis when he confused two genres over lunch. But my favorite is his anecdote about telling Stephen Hawking (whom he calls "Hawkings") that he has never read a book by the scientist but is fascinated by the Big Bang. I imagine Hawking rolling quickly away.

**Rule Two:** Never express a scintilla of doubt. McKee is insightful about some things, especially with regard to structure, but his relative knowledge or ignorance of a subject in no way affects the manner in which he discusses it. He holds forth on politics ("Terrorism is a police problem and that's all it is") and the theater ("there is very little crime drama onstage") as confidently as he does on the Incitement Incident.

**Rule Three:** Start in a rage and end with poetry. In *Adaptation*, a wildly imaginative movie that first sends up, then celebrates, and ultimately condescends to McKee, the teacher advises the screenwriter that any flawed movie can be saved with a “big finish.”

In the last few hours of the lecture, which features a screening and examination of the movie *Se7en*, McKee gives it to us. His analysis is often trenchant, zeroing in on the homosexual subtext and the way the visual themes—or “image system,” as he calls it – are built on religious art. Referring to the final showdown between the two heroes and the psychotic killer, McKee suggests that the movie is a warning to never “underestimate evil. It is human and capable of great creativity.” His idea is that the movie presents the killer, played by Kevin Spacey, as an artist whose work is death and destruction. It’s a provocative point, but it misses part of the reason for the brutal force of the character. “It doesn’t matter who I am,” Spacey says during the final showdown. “Who I am means absolutely nothing.”

The screenwriter is telling us something here. The serial killer is not a real person with a plausible psychological life, or at least one that matters. His evil is too bizarre and terrifying to understand. It’s not human. It is what mankind has always feared most: the unknown. But McKee cannot conceive of the unknown. To him, the most incomprehensible acts (mass murder, terrorism, the decisions of movie executives) can always be broken down, explained, and made sense of. What’s missing from his lecture is truly the essence of horror, and arguably of life itself: that moment of reckoning when you look up at the vast madness of it all and admit that you have no idea what it’s all about. That’s scary stuff, in part because it means you question everything, even your own mind. Over the course of the day with McKee, it became clear this idea has not occurred to him.