20. Making a Bad Script Worse

The Curse of the Scriptwriting Manual

Abstract

Since the 1980s, film culture on an international scale has seen the massive and ongoing rise in the number and influence of scriptwriting manuals – "how to" guides that offer convention-bound models and "rules" for the composition of narrative cinema, such as the "three-act structure". This polemical essay argues that the effect of these manuals has been largely deleterious upon filmmaking at all levels of the cinema industry – from journalistic reviewing and vocational training to government subsidies and studio production. Against this normative model, the essay poses a vast area of diverse film practices (whether in art cinema or B-grade genres) that disrespect the orthodoxy of rules, and consciously or intuitively strive to invent new, possible paths in cinema.

Keywords: Scriptwriting, Raúl Ruiz, Jean-Claude Carrière, narrative, B-cinema

In his book *Poetics of Cinema*, Raúl Ruiz recalls a moment in his youth in Chile when he "began thinking about so-called dramatic construction".[1] He consulted an American textbook by John Howard Lawson (which he refers to as *How to Write a Script*, but is most likely *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting*) and discovered there something that was (and still is) called *central conflict theory*: the "law" (as Lawson calls it) that all stories must be based on a conflict, usually between two characters, with a hero wanting something and a villain trying to stop him from getting it.[2] "Then, I was eighteen", writes Ruiz. "Now I'm 52. My astonishment is as young now as I was then. I have never understood why every plot should need a central conflict as its backbone".[3]

Ruiz's bewilderment is understandable. The central conflict theory – if you look at it askance – is indeed a weird, almost perverse theory, although this

perversity masquerades as perfect, commonsense normality (as most danger-ous ideas usually do). It is a violent theory. And it is a very American theory. But it is a theory whose day has definitely come on the international stage.

Ruiz remarks that, 30 or 40 years ago, central conflict theory "was used by the American mainstream industry as a guideline. Now it is the law in the most important centres of film industry in the world".[4] He comments on one of the worst crimes committed in the name of this law – the expulsion of so many strange, eccentric or unfamiliar films (like the B movies Ruiz loved as a child, "as unlikely and extravagant as life itself")[5] as *badly made*.

The long arm of this law can be judged by a perusal of some of the Internet sites devoted, supposedly, to the appreciation and enjoyment of film. Although the Net is regularly touted as holding the key to the future of criticism, the more likely prospect, judging from these sites, is rather sadder. Many well-patronised discussion groups basically provide proud punters with an outlet to express their most pinched, closed-minded, nerdish ideas about movies. Again and again, one reads that a certain, over-praised film is just no good, does not make sense, contains continuity errors, is stupid, pretentious, or a waste of a viewer's time and a producer's money.

Such a merciless trend is particularly apparent in discussion groups for screenwriters. This ramshackle, open-ended manifestation of Internet criti-cism is basically enslaved to the publishing industry that has grown up in the last two decades around scriptwriting manuals – all those popular, self-help books for aspiring writers about how to make a good script great, how to write a screenplay in ten easy steps, how to pitch a successful story in Hollywood, etc.

These scriptwriting books sell models, formulae, ironclad structures, conventions, rules. They are scarcely ever interested in the depth and scope of cinema history, or the range of its artistic and popular achievements. The only films these authors really care about are those that have reaped the biggest rewards at the box office in recent memory, and the sure-fire lessons they supposedly offer – as if the only cinema that exists, or has ever existed, is the feel-good, blockbuster entertainments of George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and their many hopeful imitators.

In the discussion groups, all these scriptwriting manuals come predigested and amalgamated into one gooey lump. The three-act structure (sometimes four or eight, depending on which manual you consult); central conflict theory; graphs plotting the upwardly-rising shape of a story; the actions and motivations of the hero; the ubiquitous arcs and journeys that the characters must travel; the correct placement of key plot points, pay-offs, revelations and resolutions; the importance of a backstory … If you have ever dabbled in screenwriting at any level, you will know this often hokey lingo well from

books (all of which have spawned multiple, updated editions and various spin-offs) such as Syd Field's *Screenplay*, Linda Segar's *Making a Good Script Great*, Michael Hauge's *Writing Screenplays That Sell* and Robert McKee's *Story*.[6]

More recently, another layer has been poured on top of this craft advice. It comes from Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*, who preaches, bowing deeply to Joseph Campbell, that Hollywood's currently favoured narrative models are in fact timeless, mythic structures common to all cultures – an apparently comforting piece of sheer nonsense.[7]

But so what if the manuals limit themselves to a very restricted notion of populist cinema? And so what if a lot of people spend their money and their energy on such dodgy cultural goods? Is it not fine to start with a schooling in the most basic conventions – on the received wisdom that you have to know the rules in order to break them? Are the manuals not perfectly valid guides to composing down-the-line, generic scripts for the mainstream industry? I will agree to, at least, this proposition: that even the worst script manual can be plundered as a tool box, no doubt providing some canny reader, somewhere, with a stray good idea, helpful device, or way to unjam writer's block. Anything that gets writers to actually write and keeps them writing – aiding a creative process – cannot be an entirely bad thing.

My sore point of contention, ultimately, is neither with the authors of best-selling scriptwriting manuals, nor with the opinionated film-nerds on the Internet, nor even with the self-appointed "script doctor" gurus who travel the free world flogging their intensive, expensive, weekend seminars. What I dislike is the culture – the culture of decisions – that is propped up by the script advice industry.

All around the globe, right now, studio executives are rejecting, mangling, or rubber-stamping projects; paid assessors are ticking little boxes on report cards and offering marks out of ten to a mountain of scripts clogging their in-trays; and government sponsored, film-funding organisation officers are giving the green light or offering their blessed two cents' worth on a new proposal for a movie. And what are these people saying or writing? Things on the order of: *this script lacks a strong second act ... the hero is unlikeable ... there's not enough driving conflict ... this character has no journey*. All such comments and decisions reflect the ersatz wisdom dished up by scriptwriting manuals; even worse, they serve actively to police this terribly limited view of what cinema can do or be. The composite model of the well-made film is used as a forcible grid – and proposed films are either made to fit that grid, or excluded from potential existence altogether.

The script manual industry is poisonous because it has helped cheapen and limit what is possible in cinema – whether you view the medium as

primarily art or entertainment. So much cinema disappears from view, from discussion, from thought – at risk of never inspiring another new filmmaker to explore, play and experiment on the basis of what has gone before.

I speak not only of historic avant-garde cinema, or the once revered art movies of the 1960s (by Alain Resnais, Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, etc.). I am also talking about the highest aesthetic achievements in cinema today (the films of Abbas Kiarostami, Alexander Sokurov, or Hou Hsiao-hsien), as much as the many fertile and eccentric paths of the popular genres in their pre-cult, former glory. I am talking about the lost era of the B movie (GUN CRAZY [Joseph H. Lewis, 1950], UNHOLY ROLLERS [Vernon Zimmerman, 1972]), when characters were just elegant stereotypes racing through the least likely of plots and worlds. I am talking about the floating, multi-character narratives of a Robert Altman and the complex, jazz-inspired plot structures of a Martin Scorsese or Spike Lee. I am talking about characters who make only the tiniest, almost imperceptible journeys (like the old man played by Michel Serrault in Claude Sautet's NELLY & MONSIEUR ARNAUD [1995]) – or, indeed, no journey whatsoever, eternally twisting instead in the grip of neurotic, death-driven, compulsive-repetitive states (Ulu Grosbard's GEORGIA [1995], Abel Ferrara's psychodramas). I am talking about films (like RAGING BULL [1980] or HANA-BI [1997]) with heroes who are not immediately likeable or even necessarily comprehensible.

I am remembering screen characters who are like phantoms or pal-impsests of contradictory behaviours, characters whose will is "dark and oceanic" in Ruiz's terms,[8] rather than boringly explicable, three-dimensional personalities – inside stories that are more like surreal dreams, with their own strange logic and subterranean swirls (VERTIGO [1958], CRASH [David Cronenberg, 1996]), than plots fixed to the unities of verisimilitude. I am talking about films that knowingly burrow into a minimal amount of story, evicting central conflict for the sake of finer filigrees of suspense, bemusement or everyday observation (as in much contemporary Iranian cinema).

I am recalling movies that are more spectacle or digression than story (from Jerry Lewis comedies to Leos Carax's LES AMANTS DU PONT-NEUF [1991]), or more about describing, tracing and enlarging complex, imaginary worlds (GOTO, L'ÎLE D'AMOUR [Walerian Borowczyk, 1968], LA CITÉ DES ENFANTS PERDUS [Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1995], DARK CITY [Alex Proyas, 1998]), than drearily exhausting the destinies of a few privileged heroes, villains and sidekicks.

These are only some of the many, tantalising alternatives you will not read about in most screenwriting guides.

The amnesiac, myopic mindset of the script manuals finds its echo in the neighbouring culture of film reviewing and criticism, in all its

current forms (from on-line fanzines to scholarly journals). Now, more than ever, the prevailing line on movies is a witheringly normative one. As general interest in any form of cinema other than the current mainstream releases drains away, critical judgments become harsher, cockier, deadlier and more certain. Reviewers – like manual writers – think they know exactly what constitutes a well-structured script, a properly crafted, generic exercise, an appropriate mode of screen acting, and so on. Words like overlong, risible, silly, incoherent and implausible – not to mention even nastier ones like confused, pretentious and self-indulgent – are the stock-in-trade of evaluative reviewers hoisted high on their own, magnificent hubris.

The assumptions and standards inherent in such judgments are usually quite spurious. Most critics do not argue out their underlying values; they have merely, only semi-consciously, internalised them, after reading too many samples of the same mean, pugilistic approach in *Variety* and other, market-driven rags. The general, largely unspoken consensus among reviewers and critics as to what constitutes a good film – noble theme, psychologically deep characters, believable story, seamless continuity, a delicate balance of comedy and drama, a strict adherence to genre, a transparent style purely at the service of story, and so forth – is ridiculously rigid and over-prescriptive. Above all, such a model can do justice to less than probably ten per cent of the wonders of world cinema.

In Australia, the curse of the scriptwriting manual has had clearly deleterious effects on the state of filmmaking itself. The general feeling of dissatisfaction that many local cinephiles suffer in relation to the national cinema can be traced to this prevailing madness. Directors and producers, like critics, quickly end up internalising – while scarcely being able to defend – the dubious, normative standards of the well-made film.

Following these aforementioned normative standards leads to movies empty of dramatic ambiguity, in which every deep, psychological motivation is spelt out verbally, and the final resolution of the central conflict is foreseeable five minutes in. It leads to films with pat, conformist, uninventive narrative structures, wherein the requisite plot points, reversals and "moments of recognition" can almost be clocked with a stopwatch. It leads to films whose grasp of theme (the delicate process whereby the real, underlying subject of a story is proposed, developed, complicated, transformed and concluded) is either hopelessly simplistic and schematic or piecemeal and scattershot. And it leads to films (from DEAR CLAUDIA [1999] to HEAD ON [1998]) in which an inner journey is laboriously imposed on the principal characters, whether or not the material really calls for it.

Worse still, the script curse goes hand in glove with a willful neglect of everything that makes the cinema truly cinematic. Quite simply, the script industry – the incessant redrafting and development of projects on the page, the funding judgments made solely on the basis of the written text – is overvalued. The truth is plain: a script is not a film. At best it is a plan, a blueprint for a film – the place where the plot, the essential logic of the character relationships, the structure of the themes first get worked out. But in itself, a script – however crucial, however artfully elaborated – is really only a sketch or a proposition for a film. Pier Paolo Pasolini calls the screenplay "a structure that wants to be another structure"[9] – and in that second, larger, more complete structure of the finished film, words are only one element amidst performances, colours, rhythms, images and sounds, everything that constitutes the art and craft of direction and is summarised in the noble term *mise en scène*.

The script industry has worked hard to elevate its most favoured texts to the realm of literature – just glance at the enormous Faber and Faber catalogue of published screenplays. Scripts, however, rarely hold up as literary objects, because they are mere skeletons without flesh, tales without poetry or metaphor, figures without life.

One reason for the enormous and consistent quality of Hollywood cinema in its golden age was that the best directors (from Ernst Lubitsch to Nicholas Ray) were often silent, uncredited collaborators on their scripts, shaping the material with an eye and ear to its cinematic realisation (the process of "turning words on paper into strips of film", as director Edmund Goulding explained to his scenarist Casey Robinson in the 1930s)[10] – and the writers themselves quickly learned to adopt this orientation.

For many reasons, there has been a historical drift toward scriptwriting as an autonomous activity, breaking apart the ideal unity of script conception and screen realisation – an alienation that the current manuals help to reinforce. There is even an Australian manual that seriously advises prospective writers only to read other film scripts, and not to study the actual movies made from them!

There has, however, been a welcome counter-development to this trend. All over the world, since the revolution started by the Nouvelle Vague in France and the many neighbouring New Waves in other countries, we have seen the rise of the writer-director, either alone or with other writing collaborators. The writer-director envisages the cinematic substance of a project from the first moment of conception, through writing and into production. In Australia, unfortunately, this development has led to an odd outcome. The writer-director in this country is prized more for literary skill – their way with a plot or urbane dialogue – than for any grasp of *mise*

en scène. This much is clear from the film careers of Bob Ellis (who once declared the director to be only the tenth most important person in the credits) and Peter Duncan (CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION [1996]) – not to mention the cases of novelists unwisely allowed to direct the adaptations of their own books (Robert Carter's THE SUGAR FACTORY [1998] and Richard Flanagan's THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING [1998]).

More generally, the over-valuation of the script as the quintessence of a film leads directors (when they have not had a hand in the writing) to take an overly dutiful and respectful approach to its on-screen translation. This results in a bland, overall, TV-style mode of filming, enlivened by only occasional ketchup-dollops of high style: fast edits, a splash of colour, a burst of music, a spray of intense close-ups.

Does every film need a script? This heretical question, unsurprisingly, is never asked within the accursed manuals. Raúl Ruiz once personally advised me: "You do not need to write to make a film. You shouldn't!" – because the act of writing too often imposes instant limits on cinematic invention. Let us quickly remind ourselves of some of the great films that went into production with only the slenderest outline of a script – just the sketch of an intrigue, a few random pieces of text, a list of locations, a cast, and a game crew ready for anything: most of Wong Kar-wai's films (including CHUNG HING SAM LAM [CHUNGKING EXPRESS, 1995], DO LOK TIN SI [FALLEN ANGELS, 1996] and CHUN GWONG CHA SIT [HAPPY TOGETHER, 1997]), Wim Wenders's DER STAND DER DINGE (1982) and DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN (1987), and every single Godard movie. Some Hollywood classics, too, got under way without an ending in sight – most famously, CASABLANCA (Michael Curtiz, 1942).

In fact, across the breadth of cinematic practice, there are a hundred different ways that the most imaginative film artists have incorporated the work of writing into their creative processes. Jacques Rivette (LA BELLE NOISEUSE, 1991) starts with a 20 page scenario, and then has his writers on set for the entire shoot to write dialogue on the spot, as things develop with the actors. Terrence Malick went into making THE THIN RED LINE (1998 – a movie way beyond the normative grasp of most reviewers) with a vast, open, variable structure of plots, narrations and backstories – knowing that he would find the definitive shape and form of this material only in the editing. Directors from Orson Welles to Chantal Akerman have written reams of scenes and dialogue exchanges in and around their basic plots, essentially as a means of preparation for the work to be done on set, a way to explore in advance some of the many possibilities. None of these filmmakers reject the contribution that can be made by scripts or scriptwriters – but they all firmly steer this contribution towards the larger, more crucial art of *mise en scène*.

So the art and craft of scriptwriting – which has a more eclectic and inspiring history than the popular manuals let on – is essential. My plea to all who toil within film culture – writers, directors, critics, assessors, funding agents – is this: to loosen up the currently reigning models of film narrative; to recognise the rich plurality of available forms and styles in this medium; to concentrate, with the determination and flair of a true aesthete, on what will actually end up on screen, its mood, rhythm and meaning.

There is one book about screenwriting that I enthusiastically, unswervingly recommend. It is Jean-Claude Carrière's *The Secret Language of Film* (1994).[11] Carrière, in his long and brilliant career, has worked as a scriptwriter for Luis Buñuel, Louis Malle and Jacques Tati, among others. In fact, it was Tati's editor Suzanne Baron who gave young Jean-Claude the exact same lesson that Edmund Goulding gave Casey Robinson in the 1930s, about the necessity of transforming what is set down on the page into what will work on the screen.

In *The Secret Language of Film*, Carrière downplays the autonomous role of the writer and always privileges the guiding role of the director. He is not into formulae, models, or set structures. His argument essentially rests upon a precious piece of wisdom: there are no scriptwriting or (more broadly) storytelling rules. Anything that you can show or tell that holds, intrigues, or captivates anyone is a story. On screen, this is perhaps even truer than it is in a novel or at the circus: a single look, the smallest gesture, the most subtle alteration of light, colour, or shape, is enough to trigger the excitement, both sensuous and intellectual, of fiction.

Carrière encourages his readers to find and create this peculiarly cinematic excitement in any conventional or wayward fashion that they possibly can. Look for inspiration in any art form, he urges; do the exact opposite of what prevailing rules decree; work from your most obscure dreams or fantasies.

For Carrière, this is all an integral part of the living spirit of cinematic creation. At the movies, we live for surprise, for visions and apparitions, for even just the familiar tweaked in a fresh, unusual, or disconcerting way. The shock and pleasure of the new in film can come from naïveté as much as sophistication, from error as much as mastery.

In one of his other books, Carrière offers eight, priceless pages to the aspiring or practicing screenwriter of "Some Tips That Might Help You". The next section of his text is entitled: "Even The Preceding Observations Are Dangerous".[12]

(1999)

Notes

All unattributed translations are mine.

1. Raúl Ruiz (trans. Brian Holmes), *Poetics of Cinema, Volume 1* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1995), p. 10.
2. John Howard Lawson, *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (New York: Putnam, 1949), p. 163.
3. Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 9.
5. Ibid., p. 10.
6. Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delta, 1979); Linda Segar, *Making a Good Script Great* (West Hollywood: Silman-James Press, 1987); Michael Hauge, *Writing Screenplays That Sell: The Complete Guide to Turning Story Concepts into Movie and Television Deals* (London: Collins Reference, 1991); and Robert McKee, *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1999).
7. Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 1992).
8. Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, p. 11.
9. See Pier Paolo Pasolini (trans. Ben Lawton & Louise K. Barnett), *Heretical Empiricism* (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2005).
10. Casey Robinson, "On *Dark Victory*", *The Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, no. 4 (1978), p. 7.
11. Jean-Claude Carrière (trans. Jeremy Leggatt), *The Secret Language of Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
12. Jean-Claude Carrière and Pascal Bonitzer, *Exercice du scénario* (Paris: La Fémis, 2000).

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