

Trusting Ariadne's thread

Script development is predominantly an activity focused on writing and re-writing. It builds upon the unspoken agreement that writers, filmmakers, producers, and sometimes even financiers, are able to share certain ideas relating to content.

This may invite questions such as: what is this script about, which story, if any, is it trying to tell? How to engage with it as a reader, a viewer? And, more often than not, the mercurial audience question: who will like this and what can we do to reach this imaginary audience?

Film making is a collaborative endeavour. It is not surprising, therefore, that collaboration begins at the stage of development and script writing. However, the script stage is also the most vulnerable, it is the stage furthest away from the final outcome, the film. It is also the stage at which an idea is, in a sense, still in the process of 'becoming' what it will eventually be. It is also, for the most part, the least conducive to collaboration: think of the image of the lonely writer facing an empty page, writing "with the door closed" (to borrow a phrase from Stephen King's *On Writing*), but already thinking of the "masses out there".

As soon as the door is opened, writing is over, and re-writing starts.

At this stage, though, the writer is often surrounded, engulfed by the script. Writing "with the door open" necessitates stepping out of the woods that are the script, better yet, even levitating over them in order to best see the shape of the beast, to get an impression of its organising principles (its structure) and to assess whether it comes across as it was intended. After having been in the woods for so long, assessing the script in this way can no longer be achieved alone. A writer who is his own script consultant is like the proverbial defendant acting as his own lawyer and who is said to therefore have a fool for a client.

Re-writing starts with the feedback of others, at this point the writer needs to step back from his work, allowing others to read, comment, possibly suggest (sometimes even demand) changes. This can be a tortuous moment for writers. Not only do they have to show themselves through their work, they also have to let go of their babies, and, to a certain extent, the sole power of interpretation. They have to at least acknowledge the possibility of being misread – and yet, without this feedback, they'd have nobody but themselves to judge

whether their scripts are understood as they intended them to be. There is no communication without understanding, and so the audience, those first readers of a script, need also to mirror the script in their reading of it, to show in how far the writers have achieved this most basic goal.

At this first moment of revealing a new creation, the fragility of the creator and the work is at its peak. Even the most professional, jaded or cynical writers still crave some form of acknowledgement. If they wouldn't, they wouldn't write. At least not to be read, or have their writing turned into films. They would, like Jacopo Belbo, one of Umberto Eco's heroes in "The Foucault Pendulum", lock up all their writings in an old wardrobe in a rarely visited country house, and ask that after their death, everything should be burned unread. But do we really believe such modesty? We may be justified in our doubts, for if this is what Belbo wanted, why not burn it himself while he was still alive...?

This common literary motif presents us with the strange ambiguity writers live with: they write, because they want to be read; and yet there may be nothing they dread more than their reader's response.

Writing for film, one might say, is different, in that the writing isn't an end in itself, merely one stage in a series of transformations leading to the final outcome, the finished film. It's not literature, rather one necessary step along the way. And as previously mentioned, this job is a collaborative endeavour, not that of a single mind in a locked room. But somebody still needs to write it, as long as producers, co-production markets, financiers, etc. ask for scripts in order to assess a film's potential merits; as long as we can't agree on another form of representation that manifests the special qualities of the seventh art more closely.

In what we have come to know as "artistic film-making" or "art house cinema" (and we may agree these terms can be misleading, for some even unpleasant), we find the writer is often also the director. This can offer a certain protection for the creator: if the writer is criticised, the director can say "I'll fix it during the shoot". This can help to keep face and defer final judgement.

So is this what script development is all about? To get the writer to take in feedback, let him know that, if he ever wants to reach an audience, he'd better do as told and then send him back into his room and close the door once more?

Actually, the door can never be fully closed again after it has been opened. The writer is now aware of the outside and will always be. But rather than focus exclusively on the writer's process and levels of awareness, we need to look closely at the influence of the audience, or in this case, the readers of the script and how their feedback is given.

It is the intention of this text to explore that relation and suggest a series of approaches that may help answer a question that is equally important for both writers and readers:

How can critical feedback be handled in a productive way?

The intention to help is cardinal in the process of giving critical feedback. Equally important, on the part of the writer, is the willingness to assume such intent until proven otherwise. While this may seem rather self-evident, it can be unexpectedly hard to achieve. What does "wanting to help" mean? And help whom? Help the writer to write a next, better draft? But who is to say what constitutes "better"? The interests of the producer and the writer (writer-director) are not necessarily always identical. So instead of taking any assumption too far, it is usually more helpful to agree on a common goal and try to formulate that goal as clearly as possible. Do we share the vision of what this script shall be? At least to a sufficient enough degree to embark on this collaborative process together?

There are internal as well as external goals: trying to get closer to the central idea of the script, its emotional core and its intended audience engagement are predominantly internal goals. They can only be addressed once there is sufficient agreement about "what the script wants to do", with one idea, one intention enabling certain further steps while making others less likely.

External goals may be governed by the requirements of funds, festivals and eventually budgets, and don't always have to be regarded as the enemy of creativity – it is useful for any writer/director in the independent film world to have knowledge and understanding of those

aspects. The willingness to acquire and use such knowledge could even be considered part of their artistic credibility.

Regarding the intention to help, all this becomes problematic only when the person giving feedback has a hidden agenda. In such cases, the two partners do not share a common goal, but at least one of them may only be trying to give that impression in order to get the other to comply. In many cases, it will be the writer who eventually finds that the other's declared intentions were simply paying lip-service, rather than the expression of a genuine desire to come to a mutually beneficial conclusion.

One may presume that it is mostly producers who try to goad writers into making changes to the script they consider necessary and in the process disregarding creatively more appropriate options. Yet even a hired script consultant has to acknowledge that the intention to help can be jeopardized if they discover that a certain type of intervention is expected of them. Sometimes it can be the producer's hidden agenda, but it is equally possible that the consultant's priority is to make the best (professional) impression on the writer, distracting them from fully servicing the script. Trying to please the writer, for whatever reason, is equally unhelpful.

Actually, it is very simple: hidden intentions are almost always a corruption of the intent to help.

When developing scripts, many people look for support in the plethora of existing scriptwriting manuals. These usually assume or posit that there are certain ways to write a good script, as well as telling us what a good script is. Especially for inexperienced writers, this can be a promise, a haven of security. But most of these books create their rules and insights on the basis of a kind of statistical approach: watch films that "work" (meaning: that did well at the box office or are at least highly awarded/respected) and deduct the similarities in them. A core method, a skeleton, a mode d'emploi is distilled from this: how to write a good script that resembles the *good* films that already exist. Apart from the fact that these techniques for writing are mostly devised from analysing films instead of scripts, they also focus on two main aspects: structure and character.

They work from the assumption that scripts (and films) should be dramatic, in the same sense a classical stage play or a plot-driven novel is dramatic. If a script isn't, it can be fixed; and the majority of these books will strongly suggest that it should be fixed. Recently there have been attempts to broaden the approach, but again by offering a systematic, meaning one-size-fits-all, model for *the rest*, the *other* scripts. This model describes these other scripts as exceptions to the rule, rather than as works that may have an inherent and deliberate other intent from the outset.

This possible *other* intent brings us back to the question of the audience. Some scripts, some filmmakers, some films do not want to engage with the audience in a dramatic way, they might prefer observational distance in order to invite reflection in the audience, or be more interested in the moment, in creating an experience that exists more in and of itself, rather than as a link in the chain of narrative causality, leading to a final meaning.

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