



A six-session workshop on the art and craft of storytelling for screen

SESSION 1 – WHAT IS STORY?



From Sophocles to Spielberg, storytelling has adhered to elemental organic form over centuries. Existing within a set of tenets dictated by nature, stories continue to find echoes deep in the human psyche, particularly through film.

Through seeking a definition of storytelling, SCREEN TALES provides the learner with a fundamental understanding of what makes a film story work - or not.

Ideal for aspiring screenwriters, those who would critique film, or most importantly - those who LOVE film, SCREEN TALES examines through practise the meaning, structure, and telling of a primeval art increasingly relevant in a contemporary world.

RESOURCES

SCREEN TALES draws on the trainer's own personal experience - along with the work of a world-renowned theorists on the art of storytelling. These include:

- Robert McKee, *Story*
- Aristotle, *Poetics*
- Richard Walter, *Screenwriting*
- Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat*
- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*
- Lajos Egri: *The Art of Dramatic Writing*
- Christopher Vogler: *The Writer's Journey*

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES & OUTCOMES

SCREEN TALES aims to provide you with a greater understanding of what makes a film story work. Through examination of existing films such as BLADE RUNNER, AMERICAN BEAUTY, TAXI DRIVER, THE GODFATHER, FINDING NEMO, ROCKY, STAR WARS, JAWS, and others, you will recognise the structure and components necessary to a complete a film story, as well as identifying why some Screen Tales don't work.

SCREEN TALES will also provide you with an understanding of the practise of contemporary storytelling, placing the art in the context of a modern world and the habits of screenwriters.

SCREEN TALES will ask you to complete several practical written exercises – identifying structure, archetypes, forces of antagonism etc. in film samples you have provided.

SCREEN TALES will also provide you with the opportunity to develop your own original story idea into an industry ready synopsis - often referred to as a 'one-pager', with detailed development notes provided by facilitator/screenwriter, DARREN MARKEY.

DARREN MARKEY - FACILITATOR

SCREEN TALES was developed by DARREN MARKEY, founder and director of LORNE FILM.

After a successful career in theatre, Darren left Australia in 2002 for Hollywood, where he completed his first screenplay, LILLY - before getting lost in a giant martini somewhere on Sunset...

Darren was write/associate producer on the feature supernatural thriller THE UNLIT - and is writer/producer on MAGPIE - scheduled for production during 2022.

A trainer with over ten years experience, Darren's emphasis is on keeping participants engaged and entertained, with a style that resonates with those he trains.

LUCY BEST - FACILITATOR

LUCY BEST is an experienced performer/writer/producer and is associate producer on the upcoming feature film, MAGPIE

Lucy has also written and produced several shows featured as part of Australian's festival circuit and independent productions in Melbourne, and is a novelist and screenwriter.

Lucy and Darren, share a passion for quality storytelling. Their emphasis for SCREEN TALES is on entertainment that informs - along with excellent hospitality.

SESSIONS

1. WHAT IS STORY?

Where do stories come from and why are they important?

An examination into the history of storytelling and the role it plays in shaping the collective consciousness.

You will begin forming an original idea for your own screen story.

2. STORY ON SCREEN

What makes a screenplay?

An examination of the classic three-act structure and how stories come to the screen through the building of a screenplay.

You will apply these principles to your original idea formed in SESSION 1.

3. GOOD VS EVIL

How do the forces of antagonism drive a story forward?

An examination of protagonist vs antagonist - and the various forms they take.

You will recognise the hero and villain in your story, along with what it is they want.

4. ARCHETYPES ON SCREEN

What is a character?

An examination into the definition and purpose of characters. Includes analysis of Carl Jung's theories on the origin of archetypes.

You will recognise the archetypes in your story and the role they play.

5. JOURNEY ON SCREEN

The Hero's Journey - where does it begin and end?

Analysis of several theories on screenwriting - The Hero's Journey vs Save the Cat.

You will deepen your understanding of the journey your hero is undertaking.

6. THE TOOLS OF SCREENWRITING

How do screenwriters write?

A close look at the screenwriter's habits and the tools used to create a screenplay.

You will use your story idea to create a SYNOPSIS - ready to build into your TREATMENT and/or SCREENPLAY.

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?



INTRODUCTION

Hi – and welcome to SCREEN TALES.

The purpose of this workbook is three-fold. Firstly, it is a commentary from me (Darren Markey) on my experiences and observations on the nature of storytelling, particularly for film – but also from my extensive time in theatre, as a playwright/director/producer.

I'm using this workbook to express and share my view on storytelling/filmmaking – based on my experiences. I'm in the privileged position of being a working writer/producer, and of gaining the knowledge that comes with that. I love sharing this knowledge, along the experiences I've been lucky to enjoy. I love telling stories!

Secondly, I've included in this workbook quotes from theorists/writers (see BIBLIOGRAPHY) who I respect and admire. These quotes are generally used to underline an aspect or tenet of storytelling that I share with these folk, and to introduce you to these writers.

Thirdly – and most importantly, this workbook includes activities, created by me, that I hope will stimulate the writer/film lover in you. It's very important to me that SCREEN TALES is about sharing ideas and stimulating discussion among us all – that we learn from each other. I'm certainly looking forward to learning from you!

So – welcome again to SCREEN TALES. Let's begin...

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING

So, what is storytelling – and why is it important? What purpose does it serve? Let's take a look below at some theories around the definition and purpose of 'story'.

To the film audience, entertainment is the ritual of sitting in the dark, concentrating on a screen in order to experience the story's meaning and, with that insight, the arousal of strong, at times even painful emotions, and as the meaning deepens, to be carried to the ultimate satisfaction of those emotions.'

Robert McKee
Story

Tragedy, then is a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotions.

...for our pity is awakened by undeserved fortune, and our fear by that of someone just like ourselves – pity for the undeserving sufferer and fear for the man like ourselves.'

Aristotle
Poetics

'Frighten the folks, make them cry, make them angry: they will stand in line to see your movie. Human beings need regularly to experience strong emotions; it's how we come to remember we are alive.

Once the end arrives, and once it has fled, and once the final credits crawl across the screen...the audience should feel not superior, not virtuous, but quite the contrary, humbled...each viewer should be left with some sense of his status as one more wretched sinner...reminded of his own sweet and sour humanity. There should arise within each member a sense that what has transpired on the screen is really about him.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING

We can see then, that among the definitions of 'story' – the chief purpose is to make us feel something – to experience emotion. To remind us what it means to be human.

Thinking back to when I first fell in love with film as a child, I'm reminded of how movies made me 'feel'. My most vivid memory was watching *BAMBI* at the cinema with my parents – and fighting back tears at the death of Bambi's mother.



As an adult I fell in love with *BLADE RUNNER*, and the questions this movie asks (ironically via the Nexus 6 'replicant', Roy Batty) – 'what does it mean to be human?'

I remain touched and moved every time I hear Roy (Rutger Hauer) uttering those famous last words:

'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe - attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.

Time to die.'

Although the chief antagonist in the story – I find Roy a tragic figure. He just wanted to feel what we feel. Love. Hope. Laughter. Pain. But all he knew was fear – fear of dying, of not being here. Replicants were only given four years from their inception date to obsolescence – and Roy knew this. He wanted to stay. He wanted to be human.

Like us.

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING

In this way, Roy's character – indeed the entire story – reminds us of what we all have in common. Our humanity. To 'feel'. The thing Roy so desperately wanted.

And I believe that is storytelling's greatest gift – highlighting what makes us all the same, and the emotions that each person on the planet shares.

Reminding us of what it means to be human.



Robert McKee elaborates on this..

'Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience.'

'A great work is a living metaphor that says, 'Life is like this.' The classics, down through the ages, give us not solutions but lucidity, not answers but a poetic candour; they make inescapably clear the problems all generations must solve to be human.'

Robert McKee
Story

The great classics over the years have endured because they have made us feel something. *Jaws* scared us, *Bambi* makes us cry, *The Producers* made us laugh - and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* excited us.

You could argue that in an age of blockbuster franchises that the opposite takes affect. While entertaining to look at - the blockbuster doesn't necessarily move us, or elicit any deep emotion - and therefore becomes forgettable.

I find it like comparing a piece of confectionary with a home cooked meal. One gives us an instant sugar high that quickly disappears - the other gives us lasting satisfaction.

A great film is like a great bottle of wine - it leaves a lovely aftertaste. ❤️



SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?



THE CAVES OF ALTAMIRA

'In Ascent of Man, Jacob Bronowski posits an insightful theory on film's nature. The caves at Altamira, Spain, whose walls are emblazoned with primitive paintings, were not domiciles. The tribes retreated to the caves from time to time for the exclusive purpose of viewing the paintings.

The paintings' subject is the local fauna, in particular the bison-like creatures that were the hunters' prey. The hunters' very survival depended upon the success in the hunt. The animals' flesh provided protein; the skins supplied shelter and clothing. But the beasts bore lethal racks of antlers with which to gore predators. They strode on hooves easily capable of trampling men. What would a man, even holding a spear, be likely to do when faced by a herd of charging buffalo? The natural reaction would be panic and flight.

The hunters needed, therefore, to learn how to control and overcome that panic. They needed to train their emotions so that instead of fleeing they would stand their ground. The caves provided a place for the hunters to rehearse their feelings.

The chambers were a safe arena to experience intensely frightening emotions without authentic risk. Light was provided by tallow-fuelled torches. With the torches flickering very much in the manner of a movie projector, the images must have appeared to be in motion. Indeed, the bison's walls were drawn with multiple sets of legs, as if to suggest motion.

In the caves' security the hunters could allow their emotions to simulate those experienced in the actual hunt. In complete safety they could wallow in fear. Later, in the hunt, recalling the cave experience they could successfully steal themselves against surrendering to their panic, which, thanks to the caves, was now familiar to them.

The movie theatre is the modern-day version of the primitives' cave. A film is a life simulator enabling modern men and women to rehearse their emotions, to experience desperate, painful sensations in an environment of total safety.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING

As we see with the example above – storytelling can bring us together, to feel these emotions as one. We form a silent bond with friends and strangers as we sit in the dark and stare at a glowing screen, purging our emotions – sharing our humanity.

I visited Hollywood in 2002, shopping my first screenplay (LILLY) around to several agents and assorted industry folk. While there, I visited the theatre on several occasions. I remember being surprised at how expressive the Americans (at least the Los Angelenos) were while sitting in a cinema – a lot more so than here in Australia. It underlined for me how important the collective audience is to our experience. It's why I personally believe that cinema will never die – there's something special about doing it together in the dark.

Stories help us to understand our purpose – what it means to be human. Like all artists, writers are saying, 'This is how I see things.' – we see meaning through the prism of the writer's experience and perspective, in much same way we see the image of a field as expressed by a painter, or the flight of a bird expressed by a dancer.

After having created stories over the years, I believe I express my view of the world as being the quest for freedom – my stories, and the world in which they exist – are continually asking, 'Where is freedom – and how do we find it?' This view – and the questions it asks, are informed by my experience.

I believe all artists, including writers – do this.

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE ROLE OF PREMISE

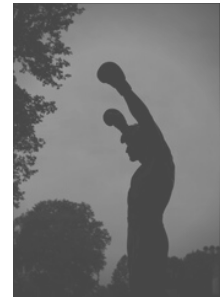
A story's 'premise' can also be referred to as the 'controlling idea', 'theme'- or 'super objective' i.e. what the story is *really* saying - what the story is *really* about.

Often when we ask someone what the movie they just viewed was about, they will respond with something like, *'It was about this struggling boxer who gets a shot at the title fight against the champ and nearly wins, and also gets the girl.'*

But is that what *Rocky* is *really* about? Or more a summary of the plot? Isn't *Rocky really* about persistence overcoming adversity?

Isn't *Rocky* saying that if you never give up and do your best, you will eventually achieve your goals?

This is what we refer to as the 'premise' - the 'controlling idea'.



Mr McKee refers to premise as the 'controlling idea - suggesting that it should control/drive the action/plot:

'Controlling idea, the story's ultimate meaning expressed through action.'

Robert McKee
Story

Mr Walter refers to a movie's theme as the 'so what' test:

'Somewhere deep inside every worthy screen story, binding the characters, shaping the dialogue, integrating all the scenes lies a unifying thread succinctly answering the question: So what? This is the movie's theme.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE ROLE OF PREMISE

In *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Lajos Egri suggests the premise is a thumbnail synopsis of your story i.e. a good premise includes *character, conflict and resolution*.

Mr Egri demonstrates this idea with the premise of King Lear - 'blind trust leads to destruction' i.e. 'blind trust' (*character*) 'leads to' (*conflict*) 'destruction' (*resolution*).

He refers to this as 'dialectics' i.e. *this plus this equals that*.

Here are some further examples Mr Egri offers:

Romeo and Juliet: 'Great love defies even death.'

Macbeth: 'Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction.'

Ghosts: 'The sins of the fathers are visited on the children.'



Record what you think might be a premise for these popular titles:

Thelma and Louise: _____

Taxi Driver: _____

Toy Story: _____

The Godfather: _____

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE 'LOG LINE'

A logline is the distillation of the plot into one sentence.

The logline differs from the 'premise' - it represents the action - whereas premise is about theme, what the story is really 'about'.

A logline is expanded into one paragraph, and then the synopsis - or 'one pager'.

I've learnt from experience never to progress until I've nailed my logline.

It can take me days. Sometimes weeks. I write my logline in large text on A4 paper - leaving it somewhere I can see. I walk past - stop and stare it, change a word - and move on. Then come back and do it again - examining every word in the logline.

Until I've nailed it.

'A logline is like the cover of a book; a good one makes you want to open it...you must be able to see a whole movie in it. The logline is your story's 'code', it's DNA, the one constant that has to be true.'

Blake Snyder
Save the Cat

For the plot should be so ordered that even without seeing it performed anyone merely hearing what is afoot will shudder with fear and pity as a result of what is happening.

Aristotle
Poetics

Can you name the film titles to match these loglines?

'Two imprisoned men bond over a number of years, finding solace and eventual redemption through acts of common decency.'

'The ageing patriarch of an organized crime dynasty transfers control of his clandestine empire to his reluctant son.'

'A lying lawyer who always stretches the truth is stricken with a curse that forces him to tell the truth.'

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

THE ROLE OF GENRE

'If you know what genre you're in, learn its rules and find out what's essential; you'll write a better and more satisfying movie.'

Blake Snyder
Save the Cat

The 'feeling' or 'emotion' we can expect to experience from a film can be expressed by its given 'genre' - and the conventions of that genre.

Genre is simply a tool for classifying or grouping films according to theme, topic, setting, character etc.

Recognisable genres include horror, comedy, romance, drama etc. These can be broken down into 'sub-genres' e.g. supernatural horror etc.

Film genres have certain conventions, or 'tropes' - which provide us with an expectation of what we might feel when viewing the film.

A horror film will provide scares, a comedy will provide laughs and a romance may bring tears etc.

'Genre conventions are specific settings, roles, events, and values that define individual genres and their sub-genres.'

Robert McKee
Story

What titles can you think of that match these genres?

CRIME/ROMANCE: _____

SCIENCE FICTION/HORROR: _____

BIO PIC: _____

HISTORICAL DRAMA: _____

MUSICAL/COMEDY: _____

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

ACTIVITY 1: FEELING AND MEANING

Using the three examples you have brought with you – detail below the title of the three films – and the chief, single emotion each film caused you to feel, along with the genre. Detail also in simple terms – the ‘premise’ of the story – what is really trying to say about being human.

FILM TITLE

emotion:

genre::

premise::

FILM TITLE

emotion:

genre::

premise::

FILM TITLE

emotion:

genre:

premise::

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

Here is an interesting theory on what creates a story – Robert McKee's theory of the SUBJECTIVE GAP.

'Story is born in that place where the subjective and objective realms touch. The substance of story is the gap that splits open between what a human being expects to happen when he takes an action and what really does happen.'

Robert McKee
Story

ACTIVITY 2: CREATE THE GAP

Our protagonist, Jim, finishes work earlier than usual one Friday. As he drives home he decides to make a quick detour and call in on his mate, Hank, to surprise him on his birthday and say hello.

Jim pulls up outside Hanks's place, walks up to the front door, and knocks. Jim's subjective view is that Hank will answer the door, look pleased and surprised, give Jim a hug – and invite him in for a beer.

Now – create the SUBJECTIVE GAP. What really takes place? What causes our story to happen?

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

STORY MEANS CONFLICT + ANTAGONISM

Stories need conflict like a car needs petrol, a tree needs the sun and a child needs love. Without conflict a story is not able to grow or move forward.

'Movies must forever be violent. Call it conflict, if you prefer. But screenwriters are urgently advised to consider the general disquietude essential to all films as plain, mean, straight-out violence. They are urged also to remember that enlightened, reasonable, rational behaviour, combined with courteous agreement – is boring.

And what thickens a plot are wrinkles and reversals, obstacles and complications. Each interferes with the protagonist's forward motion, each requires him to take a step sideways, up, over, or even momentarily backward in order to arrive at that place where it was determined at the beginning of the tale he should go.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

'The function of the Shadow is to challenge the hero and give her a worthy opponent in the struggle. Shadows create conflict and bring out the best in a hero by putting her in a life-threatening situation.'

Christopher Vogler
The Writer's Journey

'Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict. As long as conflict engages our thoughts and emotions we travel through the hours unaware of the voyage. But when conflict disappears, so do we.'

A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them.

When a story is weak, the inevitable cause is that forces of antagonism are weak. Rather than spending your creativity trying to invent likeable, attractive aspects of protagonist and world, build the negative side to create a chain reaction that pays off naturally and honestly on the positive dimensions.'

Robert McKee
Story

'All drama is conflict. Without conflict, you have no action; without action, you have no character; without character, you have no story; and without story, you have no screenplay.'

Syd Field
Screenplay

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

ACTIVITY 3: WHO'S BAD?

Using the three examples you have brought with you – detail below the title of the three films, and the chief, single antagonist, or force of antagonism – that caused the story to progress. If your film feature a single antagonist - detail what it is that they desire.

FILM TITLE

antagonist:

desire:

FILM TITLE

antagonist:

desire:

FILM TITLE

antagonist:

desire:

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

ACTIVITY 4: YOUR STORY

So - to summarise, thus far we examined the following:

- the DEFINITION and PURPOSE of STORY
- the role of FEELING and MEANING in STORY
- the need for CONFLICT and ANTAGONISM to drive a STORY forward
- the role of PREMISE
- the role of GENRE

Now it's your turn. Use the field on the following page to begin building your story idea. And remember - 'great plays aren't written - they are re-written...' - so use this opportunity to simply get some thoughts down on the page. Nothing is written in stone (though Moses may differ) - give your ideas permission to evolve/change/develop - including the title (if you have one).

This is simply your first step in developing your story. Don't worry about structure just yet - we'll examine STRUCTURE in our next session.

And don't concern yourself with creating a premise - the premise will become evident as you create your story.

Have fun - and good luck!

SESSION 1 - WHAT IS STORY?

ACTIVITY 4: YOUR STORY

TITLE:

GENRE:

FORCES OF ANTAGONISM:

LOGLINE:

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