SCREEN TALES

A four-week workshop on the art and craft of storytelling for screen

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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 the reverse.

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.

Course Objectives and Outcomes

Screen Tales aims to provide the learner with a greater understanding of what makes a film story work. Through examination of existing films, including titles such as JAWS, CAST AWAY, FINDING NEMO, ROCKY, STAR WARS, BLUE VELVET, THELMA AND LOUISE and others, the learner will recognise the structure and components necessary to a complete film story, as well as identifying why some Screen Tales don't work.

Screen Tales will also provide the learner 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 participants to complete several practical written exercises – identifying structure, archetypes, forces of antagonism etc. in film samples the learner has provided. Participants will also be proved with extensive written notes summarising the learning materials.

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*

Topics

Screen Tales is broken down into the following components:

1.   STORY ON SCREEN?

Where do stories comes from and why are they important? An examination into the history of storytelling and the role it plays in shaping the collective consciousness.

2.   STRUCTURE ON SCREEN

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

3A.   GOOD VS EVIL

An examination of protagonist vs antagonist. How the forces of antagonism drive a story forward. Who is our Hero – and what do they want?

3B.   ARCHETYPES ON SCREEN

What is a character? The role of characters in conveying a screen story. Examines orchestration of characters and role of archetypes, and Carl Jung's theories on the origin of archetypes.

4.   JOURNEY ON SCREEN

An examination and comparison of popular theories on story structure. The Hero's Journey – where does it begin and end? Analysis of several theories on screenwriting – The Hero's Journey vs Save the Cat.

SESSION 1 – STORY ON SCREEN

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

We can see then, that amongst 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.

Let's take a look at another purpose of 'story'.

'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

'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 move's theme. After a film's final frame there ought to be some clear sense of purpose, a reason for all the fuss and bother, a semblance of overall meaning.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

'Every good play must have a well-formulated premise. There may be more than one way to phrase the premise, but, however it is phrased, the thought must be the same.

You should not write anything you do not believe. The premise should be a conviction of your own, so that you may prove it wholeheartedly. Perhaps it is a preposterous premise to me—it must not be so to you. A good premise represents the author.

A premise has to contain; character, conflict and resolution. It is impossible to know all this without a clear-cut premise.'

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

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 rehears their emotions, to experience desperate, painful sensations in an environment of total safety.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

Stories therefore 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

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. Detail also in simple terms – the 'premise' of the story – what is really trying to say about being human.

1.   Film title:

      Emotion:

      Premise:

2.   Film title:

      Emotion:

      Premise:

3.   Film title:

      Emotion:

      Premise:

Here is an interesting theory on what creates a story –
Robert McKees 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 partner, Helen, to surprise her and say hello.

Jim pulls up outside Helen's place, walks up to the front door, and knocks. Jim's subjective view is that Helen will answer the door, look pleased and surprised, kiss Jim – and invite him in.

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

STORY MEANS CONFLICT AND 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

'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.

The more powerful and complex the forces of antagonism opposing the character, the more completely realised character and story must become. By 'forces of antagonism' we mean the sum total of all forces that oppose the character's will and desire.

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

'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 is a life-threatening situation.'

Christopher Vogler
The Writer's Journey

ACTIVITY 3 – WHO'S THE BAD GUY

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.

1.   Film title:

       Antagonist:

2.   Film title:

       Antagonist:

3.   Film title:

       Antagonist: