Ludo Smolski

Making Development Work

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WHAT IS THIS LECTURE?

Thank you, Marion, thank you Sources2, FFF Bayern and Creative Europe, hello again to the workshop team and participants, and hello and welcome to those joining us this evening – the strangers in our midst – I look forward to meeting you personally after this talk. I am Ludo Smolski, and it is an honour and a privilege to speak before you all this evening.

I must warn you that I am not a Guru, I have no book or grand theory or, god forbid, paradigm to sell you. I kind of wish I did. I am happy to talk at length on the cultural, social and anthropological aspects of storytelling, the art and business of filmmaking, or even screenwriting theory, but there are plenty of others who do this, and do it better, so I will leave it to them and stick to my experience… although I will of course reference these topics implicitly and sometimes explicitly throughout. What I can talk to you with some confidence, however, is this:

As my lecture description says, it all starts with the script, but how do you approach the task of developing it? Screenwriting is a skilful art that requires patience, organization and a lot of dedication, so how can the writer be best served to keep the project moving forward? What defines good script development practice (and bad), and what are the tools needed to help a project across the finish line? How do we use both logic AND emotion – and it's bedfellow instinct, as the things which often determine our actions – and what happens when they conflict?

I want to try and look at what happens over the course of the development process, from the point of view of both the writer and 'mentor'. I want to examine how one point of view informs the other – and sometimes doesn't. There are some central tenets of script development which recur regularly now in almost all discussion and presentations on the subject, but how they are applied is still hit and miss. I would like to look at some of the common pitfalls and problems I've noticed whilst training people to work as script editors and developers, as mentors, and indeed in my own practice, to show that, however much we may agree on the theory, making it work in practice is never guaranteed.

WHO AM I?

My current work is basically split between working as a script editor – a freelancer, an independent, hired on a project-by-project basis - and training writers and those that work with them.

I am currently working on a number of fiction features mainly with first- and second-time writers and directors, and also on a couple of feature documentaries – Hybrid Documentaries, as I believe we call Docs with a fictionalized element.

In terms of training and teaching, the majority of my work is for the National Film and Television School (NFTS) in UK. I have been co-tutor, with my colleague Angeli Macfarlane, for many years of the Post Graduate Diploma in Script Development.

In addition to the NFTS I will occasionally deliver bespoke training programmes for film companies in the UK, most recently for Northern Ireland Screen, Creative England and Focus Features, and occasional workshops and labs such as iFeatures, a national low budget filmmaking scheme.

But enough about me. Let's get down to business.

DO WE NEED MENTORS (AND DO NEED WRITERS?)

Logic tells me to work from first principles, so let's run with it. Why do we even need mentors? Why do they have to exist at all? Surely the writer should stand or fall by themselves? Do we, as mentors, actually even help the script improve? Can we, ultimately, make any difference to the quality and success of the film? These are important questions to ask, and keep asking, if we are to justify our actions (and existence) in any way truthfully and meaningfully.

Not all films have to come from a screenplay. It is not essential to the filmmaking process. Furthermore, 'traditional' script development, concentrating on the writing and rewriting of a script, is not the only way to develop a project, and certainly if used exclusively may even be the wrong way.

I feel this keenly when working with writer-directors. There are some who firmly embrace the "writer" part of "writer-director". They work as hard as any writer would on making their script as effective as possible, working on their screenwriting craft as much as directorial craft. There are some, however, who see the "writer" as a means to "director", aware that the industry demands a script to raise finance and so forth. These types can be more challenging to work with as you realise you are working with someone who sometimes sees the script as a bureaucratic hurdle rather than a creative platform. Then, there are some writer-directors who would like to be auteurs with no need for script. They look to the likes of Mike Leigh, Pawel Pawlikowski sometimes, sometimes Terrence Malick for validation. I love these filmmakers and their films, and I wish there were more, but the key point is that new filmmakers who want to make films without a script have to find a way to convince the money, to be able to define the process and communicate the story they are telling in advance. They can't just say there is no script if they expect public money, at any rate. They need to say what there is instead, and execs need to be open to it.

*As Malick said recently,
 "As a movie director, you always feel with a script that you're trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. And with no script, there's no round hole, there's just air."

Malick's script-free approach came from a desire to be open to as many narrative possibilities, and also of wanting to "torpedo" his actors, to capture surprise and create the unexpected. It reminds me of another great filmmaker, Maren Ade, who has an incredibly diligent writing process, who rewrites and is absolutely, as I understand it from her talks and interviews, a **writer**-director, but, at least for TONI ERDMANN she manipulated her script before giving them to the actors, only giving them small sections, removing the adjectives and much of the action description before handing it over to them, and then inviting them to play the scene in a variety of ways. This allows her to put the film back together in the edit suite (and I can only imagine it is a lengthy edit) and find the surprising and unexpected that way. It seems a clever way of negotiating between the square peg and the round hole, the script and the film.

Anyway, what I'm getting at is that because writing scripts is hard, for some writer-directors it may not the best expression of their intention for their film. They may not be blessed with literary talent, or motivated to work with words as much as they are images, yet at the same time do not want to delegate that responsibility, or involve, anyone else, to co-write. This is where it gets tricky and it is what almost always creates problems in the funding part of the development process: the script has to improve to get the next bit of money to improve the script, which then has to improve, and so on...

…we've all been in those meetings where discussion of a scene that isn't working provokes the writer-director to say "trust me, when you see it, it'll be amazing, it'll all make sense". And it's not that you, or the producer, or the financier, doesn't trust them, it's that you don't trust the scene, and a horrible gap opens up in your relationship based on a false dichotomy that needs calling out straightaway.

And it's here where I get frustrated with the industry and these filmmakers as there are many ways to get to a screenplay – they don't have to be written. From Shane Meadows to Joanna Hogg, a script can come out of improvisation, ensemble character work, diagrams and pictures and eventually take some kind of form that looks *enough* like a screenplay to perform the necessary function for financiers, casting directors and HoDs. I'm frustrated with filmmakers who should be grasping this sooner, and I'm frustrated with the industry for not being clear that this is just as feasible and financeable: that conventional screenplays are not the sole currency of development and production finance. Furthermore, this is one of the reasons why the term "script-ment" has become fashionable. I am all for unconventional scripts and they can be incredibly useful documents – and, yes, sometimes they can and do replace a script (see, almost every Mumblecore Film ever made) – but they are in danger of being used as a crutch for writer-directors who can't write, and as a "get-out" for producers and execs who are commissioning them –   and I'd argue that if you can't write a script, then you're still going to struggle to write a script-ment. I still believe that many directors would be better off involving a screenwriter for at least part of this process.

Why? For all this talk of the many ways a film can come to life, and the obvious primacy of the director in the film industry, there is a very clear indicator of the jaw-dropping ability of the writer to draw in, engage and grow an audience and that is in high end TV drama. I think it's clear the film industry has still yet to successfully reward the writer's art to consistently get the best from it. For all the similarities and differences between Film and TV, there's no TV director saying to Netflix/Amazon/ZDF execs "look, don't worry about a script, just trust me – when you see it, it'll all make sense...."

So screenwriters, rest easy, you are safe! But mentors…?

Novel writers have editors, and any writer will tell you the value of a good one. So is it something in the literary form? Maybe. But there is something deeper here: the script is not the end point and

there is also much more pressure on the form – telling a story at feature length. Sorry, telling *an engaging and moving* story at feature length. No, wrong again, *telling the most engaging and most moving* story at feature length.

There are a few writers who won't take notes from anyone unless they are the director or producer. The justification is usually twofold: Firstly, the success of the project stands or falls on these three names. That it is their reputation (and sometimes money) which stands on the success (or failure) of the film. Why should anyone else be involved in the discussion of the story and the script? I understand it, and I am completely realistic about the fact that there are any number of ways to make a movie. You don't always need a script editor. You also don't always need a writer either. You do, however, need a director. And before I go down that ontological rabbit hole again, what I'm trying to say is that the writer knows they need feedback, they need a mentor (they just want that mentor to be the director only), they are aware there is always another draft, and that they can't develop it in a vacuum. Incidentally, as you may have experienced yourself, what tends to happen in these situations is that the producer, and sometimes the director, commission notes from a script consultant and delivers it themselves. This is fine, I guess, at least it's a practical 'quick fix' in the circumstances, but as much as I wish more directors worked with screenwriters, so I wish more screenwriters developed their relationships with script editors, to find people they trust, to ask to work with them, instead of always having one assigned by someone else, or simply refusing. One of the reasons that this doesn't happen is the second justification: Bad Development. Once a writer has experienced bad development they are understandably wary of it. Being backed into a corner, undermined, replaced or losing a credit, railroaded in to changes they didn't believe in, whatever, they are scarred for life, and we as developers, as mentors, need to be better at what we do, and be sensitive and professionally courteous in circumstances where it happens. I went on a run of projects where in each case the writer had been recently brutalised. They were basically nursing jobs. The script was the least important thing, just getting the writer's confidence back, and them writing again, was a major feat.

WHAT HAPPENS IN DEVELOPMENT?

"Many things must happen, many things must go right, a whole constellation of events must be fulfilled, for one human being to successfully advise or help another"
Rainer Maria Rilke – Letters to a Young Poet

So my approach to script development has grown over twenty years working in the film industry and continues to evolve. Starting as a Runner for a production company I learnt what development is at the coal face (do you know this term? "the factory floor" maybe?) from the likes of Robyn Slovo, one of the leading creative producers in the UK. She opened my eyes to development, stressed the importance of reading as much as possible, and was the first to show me how it's done. Reading thousands of scripts, writing coverage and feedback reports and working with organisations such as The Script Factory have helped me to hone my own practice over the years. Working with other development practitioners, screenwriters and producers to deliver training for the film industry in screenwriting and development has given me a broader and deeper understanding of script analysis, the development process, the various tools of practice and different terms, attitudes and perspectives. Or that's what I say in my job applications, anyway.

My approach towards script development, indeed its guiding principle, is always **to find what is meaningful in the story to the writer and help them make it meaningful to the audience**. Or, as the screenwriter Jeremy Brock said in a session he did for us at the Film School, **"The writer needs to own their own truth, the developer needs to discover it with them"**.

This can be achieved in a number of different ways but always starts with an analysis of the script (or whatever form the project is currently in… Treatment, scriptment, outline) and a meeting with the creative team. Through interrogating the story via a sensitive and appropriate application of the principles of screen story the analysis can be put alongside the questioning and examination of the creative team to find the story's meaning, which lays a foundation for its development – even if finding meaning is the first part of that process.

By applying analytical pressure to the script and teasing out the writer's intentions (both conscious and subconscious) and encouraging their voice, the script will then develop as it is rewritten, whether as another draft script or in outline form, through a number of drafts, with continued analysis, feedback and discussion on each. Posing the right questions and helping the writer find the strongest story in their material *should* encourage them to rewrite and be confident that their creative decisions are to the story's advantage: **whatever serves the story best**. If this procedure sounds quite dry and rigid, it is my fault for trying to express what can be varied process, not least because every writer and their story is different.

For development to work it is vital that there is trust in the relationship between the script editor, the creative team and the project's financiers. It is a core value in my work as a script editor, and gaining the writer's trust can take time, is never a given, and can be lost in a heartbeat. You must, as we like to say "**know your shit**", and that comes across in your conversation with a writer. You aren't showing off, you are, through your questioning, guiding them to a deeper understanding of their story. Discussing why something works, why it grabs, why it provokes, what it means and why, can lead to greater realisation and is all part of what we need to do as mentors, but also essential in earning trust. Careful questioning, guided to areas you have highlighted as not working, or notable for some reason, work better than simply saying: "this scene doesn't work" and then trying to fix it. It takes a lot longer, but it has a better chance of being effective. It's not about hiding your criticism, it is about using analysis to enable the writer. Our instinct is almost always to offer suggestions, we are emotionally involved in the story and we feel that we know how to fix, how to improve, on their script – we can be convinced of it. But logic dictates that this course of action is doomed to failure – it is not our story, we are not writing it, so to give the fix and send them packing is both unprofessional, discourteous and wrong. Instinct is important in telling us things about the script, but not necessarily how to convey it to the writer. We are not garage mechanics and their script is not a car. This is something that is still fundamentally misunderstood by a surprising number of producers and execs right up to the highest levels – they need to go on more training courses and workshops!

This part of the process, meeting writers and writing development notes, is handled particularly carefully as there is a tension to be navigated between rigorous analysis of the work and support of the writer. Key to this is prioritising your analysis, so you can question towards, concentrate and agree on grappling with the most pertinent issues: "what does the next draft need to deal with most?" Prioritisation in this way is crucial in winning the writer's trust and leads to a more successful and efficient development process, keeps them moving forward and the creative relationships positive.

Similarly, trust must be established with all parties, for obvious reasons of positive collaboration but also particularly because differences of opinion about the project may already exist, or emerge during the process, between individuals within the creative team. It is part of my approach to help resolve these issues and keep communication clear in helping support the writer and keep the development of the script moving forward.

The language of cinema is predominantly a visual one, and part of my approach as a developer is to make sure the script honours this and that the writer explores and deepens their technical

understanding of screenwriting – of dramatising visually – while finding and exploring their own voice. Underlying this is an analytical approach that aims to help the writer find what I call the "dramatic immediacy" in the conflict which defines their story: making the drama immediate is crucial for a storyteller to engage their audience and is often lacking in early drafts. It is often because the dramatic conflict in the story is not yet manifest in the script, and that confused point of view and structure are causing the story to drift. Consideration of both the "visual" and the "immediate" feed in to the development process and help the writer see a number of different directions their story may take and, with careful support from and exploration with the script editor, this extra perspective can help kick-start the development process and generate the necessary momentum.

This approach needs to take place in the context of the current market and what constitutes success for the creative team and the project's funders. Whether the film is meant for a niche audience, key festival exposure, TV, multi-platform broadcast or mainstream theatrical release, it is important to keep checking that the ambition of the project matches its value in the marketplace in order to maximise its chances of finding production finance and an audience.

The development process is founded on rewriting, so a route map for the creative development must be established and put into practice through an agreed schedule with appropriate milestones – this bureaucratic element is essential project management and is the basis for payment schedules and contractual obligations.

In short: Read the script, write up your notes, prioritise them in the form of questions, meet the writer and discuss the work, agree on next steps and deadline, write up and send notes. Then, as we like to say, "Rinse, and repeat".

The reality of making this work is less straightforward. I worked on a film called LEAVE TO REMAIN (written by Charlotte Colbert and the director, Bruce Goodison), about teenage asylum seekers in London, and what the effect the system of asylum processing has on them in seeking official permission to stay in the UK, which is referred to as "Indefinite Leave to Remain" (spoiler alert – the effect it has is not a nice one). This was a project long in development. Bruce had I think initially wanted to make a documentary. He was involved in a summer school for kids, many of whom were recent immigrants and asylum seekers, and he helped them make films, so a lot of their stories fed into the process. Anyway, there was a lot of interest in the project, but it was loaded with concerns about the potential audience for such a piece. Who wants to watch kids, who have already sacrificed so much, having the life crushed out of them by the State? It's not a Friday night date movie, is it? (unless you're on a date with me…). It's value to the market was perceived as relatively low. The budget kept dropping, but you're working with a lot of kids, and it's hard to do that for low-no money. In the end, Bruce and his terrific producer Kate Cook, found *just* enough money to make it, but corners needed to be cut. For me, there was a fantastic scene in the script that really lifted it visually – it's a scene where the children go mountain climbing for the day. All is idyllic, the city kids out in nature, until the fog descends and they get lost in bad weather; it is dangerous and their lives are at risks. Some of the children, who were Pashtun herders in their previous lives, start calling to each other as they once did their sheep and goats and manage to 'herd' the group to safety. The incongruity of this action taking place on a wet, foggy Welsh mountainside captured much of what that film was about, kids using their smarts to navigate an alien world and look out for each other, even when their host country wasn't. Now this wasn't an easy or cheap scene to shoot, and there was occasional discussion of whether to cut or alter it for budgetary reasons, but I was vocal in my support for it and I'm glad that it stayed in.

The other thing about the development of that script is that, at some point, the meaning of the story changed. It started as expressing something about the value of community and the bonds formed

among the kids as, ultimately, the only thing that helps them when faced with state authorised psychological and physical abuse. It became about the relative importance of truth in the face of rigged system. For me, we never got to grips with this change and how it affected the script. I'm hugely proud of the film, and Bruce's work, but remain a bit disappointed I couldn't guide him to a draft in which the meaning was clearer. Still, we kept the yodelling on the mountain scene…

WORKING WITH WRITERS

When I'm trying to work something out, or, in the position of mentor, helping someone else work something out, I tend to go back to first principles, try to break the problem down, talk it through from the broadest overview possible, and address the fundamental questions "What are we doing, why are we doing it, what are we trying to achieve?" and work from there. Diving into the depths of a complex or unfamiliar situation inevitably leads back to this starting point, so I may as well cut to the quick.

Using first principles (ie Logic) as a tool to surmount problems in the script and in the process is not new. I find it especially useful as working with narrative and with creative people can (and should) be emotional, and response to story is instinctual. Your feelings and empathy for others' is often what marks you out as a good developer. But you also need to know how to handle the negative, or destructive, emotions. There is a common emotional response in mentors around the frustration that the writer doesn't get you, doesn't really understand you and what you are saying. That even though they may seem to understand you in a meeting, in conversation, that when the next draft comes back, it appears that they never read your notes, that they weren't in the meeting with you. (I'm exaggerating here… in the most part).

The writer themselves may seem frustrated that they can't move the script forward, can't tackle the issues in their story and script, and they become blocked, or demotivated, suffer a crisis of confidence. Their instinctive reflex maybe to self-sabotage. Again, you can find yourself dealing with a lot of emotion, and part of what you're doing is helping them through this negative mind-set, but it can be emotional for the developer too, and in trying to help the writer be more positive, there is the temptation to over-do it, to react to their emotional state with your own. Empathy is a key attribute of an effective developer, but the skill is in how to use it. Becoming emotional in sympathy with the writer is rarely the best way forward. It can lead to false praise, and, even more dangerous, change your analysis and notes. To be clear, in this situation, you should of course be rephrasing your analysis and notes in a way to help the writer get back on board, but if you find yourself making fundamental changes you need to be very careful about whether they are warranted, if you're doing it to make life easy. The other instinctive reaction is to become didactic, to lead the horse to water <u>and</u> make it drink. This, as we know, will also backfire, and it can happen without you spotting it, it can happen unwittingly, and you need to catch yourself when it happens.

It is worth quoting some more Rilke here:

"Most people have (with the help of conventions) turned their solutions toward what is easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must trust in what is difficult…And if only we arrange our life in accordance with the principle which tells us that we must always trust in the difficult, then what now appears to us as the most alien will become our most intimate and trusted experience."

If it's not hard, it's not right. We learn to do things better, more effectively, but they are still difficult.

One of the little exercises I find most effective, for myself or to give a writer, usually when dealing with structure and visual metaphor in the story, is to use the structure of fairy tales to see how a story is working. As we know, a lot of film narrative can work as fairy stories, but there is also value in the exercise to identify the building blocks and structure outside of the script or a straightforward synopsis. In the book "Alexander Mackendrick: On Filmmaking", there is a wonderful chapter on how useful it is, as well as his breakdown of Cinderella, Bicycle Thieves and Hamlet. Michael Arndt's terrific recent video lecture on "Endings: the good, the bad and the insanely great" also refers to the "organic logic of storytelling" and its practical application in screenwriting structure. I find that, when a writer is unsure of their script's structure, or finds that, perhaps over a number of drafts, their story structure is collapsing, the fairy tale exercise is a good way to bring them out of the script and think purely about the story, how and why it works, and this often arms them with greater knowledge and confidence in the rewrite. There is also, for me, an opportunity to divorce them further from the script, to write the fairy story not in terms of the world of their script, but telling it as a fantastical version, to adapt their story into the land of folk and fairy tales, to help find a visual metaphor, and/or to see how it has the same structure as the plot.

I share these approaches with you to show how when we – mentors and writers – get carried away with the details of the script, and the emotional aspects of it, as we should, that there is often merit in making sure that the underlying story logic is going to support it.

Perhaps the most common issue, or certainly most commonly discussed issue, among mentors is around how to deal with the new draft – draft 2 and onwards. There is no feeling that comes close to the anticipation of a new draft. There is certainly no feeling like reading a new draft that has significantly improved on the previous one. And there is absolutely no feeling like reading a new draft that is exactly the same, or worse, than previous. There is, always, a heightened emotional response to the new draft and there is no way of getting round it. You have to let it happen. There are, however, ways of processing that emotion to better serve the writer and their script and that, you may have now guessed, involves applying logic, from first principles. I like to call this particular situation:

The tyranny of the blank page versus the idle fantasy of the new draft.

So let's take a hypothetical example – you're sent a script, you do your notes, rigorously analyse the script, carefully interrogate the story, prioritise and prepare your questions, do your research, KNOW YOUR SHIT, then….

… meet the writer, put them at ease, gain trust, question, listen, question, listen, question, listen… listen some more, guide them to issues, tread carefully, pull back when necessary, spot opportunities to open up on issues when they present themselves, see the writer have a 'eureka!' moment, or more than one – heck, this is hypothetical, let's say they have five – no, ten! They are spit-balling a whole new version of their story – this is amazing! They're knocking it out of the park! Maybe you join in! Great ideas sparking off each other and zinging around the room! Let's wrap it up – good bye and high fives! Go and write up the notes, exchange self-congratulatory emails with the writer! Set deadline…

…and wait. No not wait, get on with all the other scripts and, you know, life. For the developer – for us mentors, this is great. We have so many other things to do. We are busy and important people, living out culturally rich and creative lives. We have more scripts to read, notes to write, lessons to teach, writers and students to nurture, emails by the hundreds to answer…and um, lectures to write (cough). While we are doing this, we occasionally think back to our hypothetical example. How fabulous the new draft will be – how great that meeting was – how talented the writer is – in fact, in our heads, the script is just getting better and better. We are increasingly convinced of the brilliance

of the new version, the new approach that will surely unlock the potential in the script. We can't wait…

…meanwhile, over here [start to cross stage], is the writer. They have left the meeting on a high. They can't wait to get started. Perhaps they do, the next day – no, that same day! The cursor is blinking. The script and its problems stare back at them from the screen. "*Are you looking at me?*" The writer closes the document and opens up a fresh one. Nice and clean and unsullied by previous issues. Much less aggressive. Or is it? The cursor blinks. And blinks. Oh no! It's passive-aggressive! The writer gets emotional. The brilliant new version is slipping away from them, like sand through their fingers. Don't worry! Here come the notes! Yes! The notes will help me. Thank God! Thank Ludo! Yes, this is it, I know I can do this. Am not sure **how** yet, but let's sit back down and open up the document again…deep breath!

…the cursor blinks on…

Meanwhile, back in mentor-land, this script is now winning Oscars. There you are, laughing at the writer's hilarious acceptance speech. Blushing furiously when you are named and thanked – and before any of the stars too! You really must call them to see how they are getting on. Perhaps you do, all seems fine. And then, a few days late - "I just had to check for typos" - it arrives. And you read it.

Now, whatever has happened to this script, good or bad or indifferent, it will never, can never, bridge the gap that has opened up between you and the writer, between you and the story, between you and the script. You are here, the script and its writer are all the way over here.

So what do we do? We read it. We read it again. We read it with fresh eyes and ears. We do our level best to forget about previous drafts – but that's impossible, isn't it? There is, however, a kind of 'reset' that you can do, for me it often comes on the second read, that allows you back to that place where you can allow the script to come to you, to allow it to take control of your imagination. In that first read, our emotion is often so strong it is forcing us into the amazing story that's not there, that never will be there. We are expecting our version of the story, told with style and flair, and we just won't get it. The new draft reminds us of this in uncompromising fashion, and as soon as we move past this emotional response we move on to something much more useful. I know people who get stuck here a lot. They just can't compartmentalise between their version of the story and the writer's. But whose story is it? The writer's.

I must be careful here in making sure I am clear that the creative process is one of chaos, of unintended consequences and so forth. I'm not advocating that writer's write logically, if that's even possible. I'm saying that we need to be logical as mentors in the way we deal with our own emotion, and, indeed, make sure we are applying it to problems in the script, such as they are, even if that problem is situated within the emotional territory of the story. Our instincts are important, but they are only as useful as our ability to process them effectively. In terms of writers, I am not one, but I like to think George Saunders excellent attempt at describing the process of writing is a fair reflection. I'm sharing a small part of it here, but I suggest you read the whole thing.

"An artist works outside the realm of strict logic. Simply knowing one's intention and then executing it does not make good art. Artists know this. According to Donald Barthelme (Bartle-me): "The writer is that person who, embarking upon her task, does not know what to do." Gerald Stern put it this way: "If you start out to write a poem about two dogs fucking, and you write a poem about two dogs fucking – then you wrote a poem about two dogs fucking." Einstein, always the smarty-pants, outdid them both: "No worthy problem is ever solved in the plane of its original conception."

The other common problem I find in the development process, and also in teaching students as this is a problem that arises with newer talent, is that the ambition to do something different is misapplied. We of course understand the desire for talent to declare its originality and genius, and we mock this at our peril, but it's also incumbent on us as mentors to help writers understand that you need to know the rules to break them. This is another self-evident truth repeated ad nauseum in screenwriting and development circles. But how do you apply it? Often, I find it comes down to an understanding of how stories work, matters of genre and audience expectation. We are all familiar, I'm sure, of the script that is trying to reinvent a genre, or blend two in a new and unusual way, or at least that's what the writer's intention is, even if it's not yet clear on the page. We're also aware of the writers who reference some masterwork in respect to what they are trying to achieve with their own script (recent popular references include Kenneth Lonergan's MANCHESTER BY THE SEA, and Guillermo del Torro's PAN'S LABYRINTH is also making a comeback). Having this ambition is of course no bad thing. We want our films to measure up to these works in some way – so why not take inspiration? – but when it happens without understanding how those films really work and what, specifically, the inspiration relevant to this new project is, the script can founder and will inevitably be crushed by the shadow of the masterwork. Working with the writer to discover what makes these scripts so effective can help them understand their own script better. I've mentioned Michael Arndt's video on endings already, but it's striking how much his analysis of two films helped him with his own. Now, not all writers can work in this way, so it is up to us as mentors to help them find ways of achieving that same level of insight.

Next up I want to look at some cultural factors that crop up in storytelling. They are observations, really, about the underlying problems in screenwriting and development around the world. But they absolutely inform the way I work.

Stories are instinctive (and fun), screenwriting is hard.

In Skopje, Macedonia, leading a workshop for new writers with the dear-departed Lucy Scher (and this story crops up in her book READING SCREENPLAYS) we asked the group to trawl the newspapers for material to turn into films. They all chose the same story, its headline was something like "200 Macedonian students are to be given the opportunity to work in Disneyworld, Florida for the summer to improve their English and their relations". I know, what a gift, right? It's THE FLORIDA PROJECT we really want to see – Sean Baker missed a trick! Anyway, split into teams, they responded to the task of writing up a film version of stories suggested by this headline into a choice of genres, and I present them to you here:

1. A Comedy drama about a 30-something guy. Too old to be a student, he loved all things Disney, and the film was about his efforts to enrol in a college so he could get on the trip to meet Mickey Mouse and friends. By the time he succeeds and arrives in Florida, a person has filled this gap in his life and he no longer needs Mickey Mouse and friends.

2. A Slasher film set in Disneyworld where a group of six Macedonian students is employed on night watch and a Disney character seemingly comes to life. In investigating this apparition, one by one they are slaughtered until the one lone girl remains, fighting for her life. In the morning she is found alive atop Big Thunder Mountain, mute and unable to explain what happened. As she returns to Macedonia she collects her friends' wages, and we realise it was her who had killed her friends!

3. A road movie. A Macedonian Grandma learns she is dying. She decides to visit her grandson who is working in Disneyworld for the summer. She has never left Macedonia before and deeply distrusts all Americans but she gets her visa and plane ticket and arrives… in Los Angeles. She's gone to the wrong Disney! And so begins her trip from LA

to Florida, with time running out. The trip enables her to discover the commonality and humanity of all people, even Americans, at a time, and in a strange place, when she needs it most. She arrives in time to say goodbye to her grandson.

I would happily watch all of those films (though I dare say the Mouse House may not be so happy). I didn't really do the slasher justice – it was a much better and scary pitch. My favourite is still the grandmother story. It never fails to make me cry, to deliver emotionally.

Anyway, the ability to do this in a short space of time – create stories that make sense and have meaning, and convey that meaning in an entertaining way – never fails to inspire me. How universal it is, and how seemingly easy it is. Yet we all know that any of those stories would take a long time to write up as a script, and whether they would work as scripts is far from guaranteed. It's also interesting to consider Point of View – it's no surprise that, asked for a quick response, they all plumped for Macedonian characters, but what might the stories be like if they changed this. And what if we gave it to a group of American, or German, or British, or Chinese writers?

I've led a lot of workshops in Eastern Europe, and worked with some writers from there, and the other thing that struck me is how a difference in storytelling emerges. As Olga Tokaczuk, the great Polish novelist said in an interview recently:

"The literature of central Europe is very different from that of the west. The first thing is that we don't trust reality as much as you do. Reading English novels I always adore the ability to write without fear about inner psychological things that are so delicate. In such a form you can develop a story in a very linear way, but we don't have this patience. We feel that in every moment something must be wrong because our own story wasn't linear. Another difference is that you are rooted in psychoanalysis while we're still thinking in a mythical, religious way."

And I think that holds in our filmmaking too – sure, you only have to look at the films that we make to see this. Even where Western storytellers take on the mythical or religious in their stories, they still do it in Jungian way. I am certainly guilty of constantly reading drama psychoanalytically, and of course it's not the only way to understand or engage with characters on the page or the meaning in a story.

As I'm now talking about workshops, I should move on to…

TEACHING WRITERS, OR, WHY I HATE SCREENWRITING MAs

It is such a privilege to teach writers. I still find it humbling that I'm allowed in to talk to people studying their craft. I'm no writer, but I guess the experience of reading so many scripts, and working professionally as a script editor, means I can be of some use. Many of the MA courses I have visited over the years have depressed me. Talking to their students and alumni depresses me even more. Why should any writer spend two or, god forbid, three years of their life (and all the money that goes with it) and emerge with one terrible feature length screenplay at the end? This has been happening in institutions around the UK and it makes me fucking furious. Why is there only one script? Because the bar is set so low so everybody passes. Furthermore, the script usually stems from the one idea that the poor student has arrived with and they have written it up, month after month, responding to whatever classes they've had on whatever topics are covered that semester, trying to apply what they've learned, with feedback from their tutor and peer group to help them on their way. No need, therefore, for me to tell you why these scripts are terrible. I no longer tutor on Screenwriting MAs…except at NFTS

Brian Ward, the Head of Screenwriting at the NFTS, has done a terrific job with the course. It is also at a Film School, and screenwriters are integrated within the quasi-studio structure of the school. They make films. They work with directors, with animators. They do film and TV. Radio and a little theatre. They even write Games. When they graduate they must do so with a portfolio of at least five different works, plus whatever else they've made whilst they were there. One of the things Brian has introduced (and I was banging the drum for) is a module that happens early in the first year and gets the monkey off the back with respect to a feature script. I'm happy to say I'm a visiting tutor for this module and it's called "Movie in a Month". I guess I don't really need to explain what happens in the module. The writers find out how quickly they can write, and it's a really great "shoot from the hip" exercise. For all the craft they need to learn, and relationships they must cultivate, and styles and genres they study and learn from, there is more value in the act of writing than anything else. They learn a huge amount about themselves, and their ability to write, that stands them in good stead for the future. It also proves to them that they can in fact do without that great screenwriter crutch and distraction – the internet and "research".

In terms of shorter workshop exercises, this next one is rather sedate and has become a favourite of mine, especially in workshops where you get to know each participant and read some of their work. Again, I offer it to you as it has revealed to me much about how writing works and how that helps in development. It's my Writer's Voice exercise that I stole and adapted from…I am not sure where – I think I read about in an Asian Film magazine. Anyway, at some point early on during the workshop you ask the writers to write down their favourite song lyric, or perhaps one that popped into their head recently and they haven't stopped singing. Then, a little later, you ask them to write down three significant objects in their house: their favourite mug, a vase, a rug, a piano, a painting, a wedding dress, a crack in the wall, anything that has emotional importance to them. Then later on, you ask them to retrieve these jottings and write a fictional story that contains the significant object – may even be about it – and also contains the song lyric. Then they read them out (I often swap them so they read out each other) and you really can hear their voice, hear something that is unique, that resonates with who they are. Swapping them has the additional benefit of making for a nice guessing game that forces participants to really listen to each other, and prove that each voice has a recognisable identity.

The other favourite (in addition to the fairy tale exercise, discussed earlier) is stolen from my old friend and colleague Rob Ritchie. Groups are tasked with creating and telling a story in five pictures, using only themselves, their available surroundings in the workshop location, and the camera on their phone. The rule is they can only take five photos, that's it. No reshoots, no deleting, no editing. We used to do this exercise with Polaroid cameras – yes, it's really that old. Anyway, we upload the pictures and the groups come back and look at each other's set of five pictures projected up on a screen, with the order scrambled, in turn. They are then tasked with putting them in some sort of order to tell a story, and we see if it matches the story the creating group was trying to convey. It is surprising how often they guess right and, once everyone has guessed, we revisit each story and see if we can remove two pictures without compromising our understanding of the story. Again, it is pleasing to see how often they can do this and how much the valuable lessons of telling a story visually, and of story structure, really sinks in.

One day when I run my own Script Lab, I will spend the morning doing these kinds of exercises with the participants before the one-to-one development meetings in the afternoon. I'm convinced it will put the writers in a better state, psychologically, to more effectively discuss their own stories and think about them as films.

I should say, given my brief rant about Screenwriting MAs, that film schools aren't perfect either. I have my issues with them too, and one day I would love Mark Cousins to realise his provocative film school idea. For all the fun he has with the idea, I think there is much we can take from it.

In my dreams, we join forces to make it happen:

MENTORING MENTORS

I see fledgling mentors grapple with a number of issues, and it is useful for me to be reminded of them, to see them manifest in a number of different ways, and to try and help the mentor realise what is happening and find a way to address it. It's also a sobering experience as you are reminded that these issues never really go away, that with experience they just find another way to raise themselves and that we all have to be wise to it to stop it getting the better of us. One of the most common mistakes that I see occur time and again while watching other mentors work, usually within the auspices of one of the courses I run, is something I named the Victor Meldrew effect. Have any of you heard of him? He was the character in a long running 90s sitcom called ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE, written by David Renwick and starring the incomparable Richard Wilson, who became synonymous with the role of Victor Meldrew, the retired grumpy old man and pain in the arse to friends, neighbours and anyone who came across him. Confused and exasperated by modern life, or, indeed, life he would work himself up into a frenzy that would end with his catchphrase, "I DON'T BELIEVE IT!".

In script analysis and development, it's one of the things mentors instinctively reach for, a common note, or basis of it. "I don't believe this character would murder her father". "I don't believe the teacher character would hit his pupil". "I don't believe this moment where this country would vote to leave the European Union". "I don't believe this moment where all the turkeys vote for Christmas". "Or Geese vote for Christmas". These examples are crass but I see it all the time and it just starts an unnecessary argument with the writer about the credibility of their story. They simply reply that they've seen it happen. It happened to a friend. It happened to them. And then where to you go from there, as a mentor?

Of course, credibility is something that should be discussed. The psychological credibility of the characters is important, and only if they are credible in some way will we be interested in them and engaged in their fate, in their action and in their story. Similarly, as an audience we expect that the world of the story is consistent, and there may be moments where this is questioned, compromising our suspension of disbelief, but this is the crucial point, we need to measure our credibility (incredulity) by the given <u>world</u> of the story, the setting, yes, but also the tone, genre, milieu. You don't read the script of TOY STORY and say – "Look, I just don't *believe* those toys come to life – when has that ever happened? – and it's just so *convenient* it's never when any humans are looking!" You need to check this response.

A QUICK NOTE ON THE FUTURE, or, THE PRESENT WE MAY NOT YET KNOW):

Show of hands – who has heard of Wattpad? The app? Okay, good. I hadn't heard of it until recently either. Wattpad, a social storytelling platform, has its (usually young, female) writers mentored by other users *as they write*. Comments are made, changes are made, new chapters added, taken away, characters and dialogue changed etc. all in response to comments from the readers, who are, of course, other users – sorry, writers. It's all mainly done through their app – so on phones and tablets.

Let's take a look. By the way, when you sign up for an account you *have* to select three books to add to your library before you can proceed. You must select from the covers it shows you, by genre, or enter a word or phrase into the search engine and select from the suggested titles, again, from the cover only. So, while "you can't judge a book by looking at its cover", it seems you can be

judged by the covers you look at. Anyway, here's one that is still open to comments, in the "editing" phase, so let's have a read….

You see, I'm out of a job. I spent years reading thousands of screenplays, years talking and listening to screenwriters. Years talking and listening to people who worked with them. Watching, reading, listening, thinking, studying, discussing, and it has come to this. It is my Victor Meldrew moment – "I don't believe it!". Our role as mentors is being replaced by millions of readers. And a machine.

The Kissing Booth, written on Wattpad in 2011 by a then 15 year old Beth Reekles, has been read over 19 million times. It has recently been turned into a Netflix film that Ted Sarandos said is "one of the most watched movies in the country, maybe the world". (Hey Ted, still won't back that up with any figures, eh? Interesting that your happy to offer imdb's "popularity rankings" as sufficient evidence – gee, thanks). And you can't read it on Wattpad anymore, as Penguin Random House have bought book publishing rights. It's a teen romance set in California, that is as chaste as it is distasteful – a girl falls for love of her life when they kiss at a kissing booth, a fairground stall where boys pay to kiss the girl– anyway, the writer is in fact from South Wales, Newport in fact, and if you live in Newport I suspect you think of California quite a lot. The writer is also now a physics graduate and I suspect has become a model for how to pay your way through expensive British University. I digress…

…The Kissing booth is no flash in the pan. Wattpad Studios has output deals with almost every major film studio and publishing house, and, fittingly given the location of this lecture, Bavaria Fiction did a deal with them this year for Wattpad's German content. Anyone from Bavaria Fiction here? Or Bavaria Film or ZDF? Hello, you are the future!

This is from the Wattpad masterplan, 11 Nov 2016, in which they tell their story from their inception in 2006 to…

"Ten years later, the Wattpad community has over 45 million monthly users, with over 2.3 million writers who've shared 15 million chapters in the last 30 days alone. If we print these stories on paper, every two weeks we would create a stack of stories as tall as Mount Everest. Today, Wattpad has more writers and content than the entire publishing industry."

And, to bring us further up to date, from the Bavaria Fiction press release in June 2018 some more facts:

"From its flagship app, Wattpad, is home to a community of more than 65 million people who spend over 15 billion minutes a month engaged in original stories"

I worked that out for you, that's a mean average of four hours per month.

Anyway, why is this the future? I think this is interesting – their first statement of intent in their masterplan is:

"#1 - *Leverage machine learning to discover more great stories*
Millions of new stories are shared on Wattpad every month. The community does an incredible job of finding the stories they love. As machine learning advances, we will be able to identify the next Harry Potter before anyone else and even help the story gain traction among the community. ***Machine learning can also help writers improve the quality of their stories. The community will teach the machine, and in turn, the machine will help us accelerate the success of creators in the community.***"

From https://company.wattpad.com/blog/2016/11/30/the-master-plan

This is both thrilling and terrifying. I understand that it's only happening with a few stories, that books are not films, that there is way more variation in the movies than there is in Wattpad, that I can comfort myself that I probably wouldn't end up working on a film like THE KISSING BOOTH anyway (though I do love a teen comedy or romance), that the audience is so narrow as to make it uninteresting. It may be narrow, of course, but it's still huge. And this is just the beginning. This is the dawn of the next age, and it is advancing rapidly. Again from the press on the Bavaria deal:

"Entertainment companies around the world are recognizing the importance of data-based decision-making," added head of Wattpad Studios Aron Levitz. "**Development doesn't need to rely on guesswork or instinct. The new model we're building across the industry uses real insights from millions of users and billions of data points, resulting in more wins**."

People want to know what they are getting. Do we accept this and our place as a data point in technological singularity? What *do* we do? Surely it's not long before we see one of the screenplay hosting platforms start to do something similar? BlackList? Inktip? They are surely not that far from turning into a Wattpad for scripts? With Scriptbook already claiming to be able to predict the box office success of film just from its screenplay, and the first Short Film from a script written by AI made a couple of years ago. We can watch with interest to see how the film industry adopts machine learning, but we certainly can't stop it.

As mentors, can we work harder to help writers and, perhaps, help original stories make it to screen. Can we try first to reverse the trend for adapted material? For writers we must implore you to write, to convince you of the need for individual voices in a world where we seem to be increasingly afraid of leaving our groups. Group identity appears to be surpassing that of the individual, and not in a good way, politically or culturally. Writers: it falls to you to show us this in ways we're not expecting, to worm your way into our brains and hearts, so that we might see ourselves as we truly are and act accordingly. To Mentors, we must encourage our writers to discover this truth, to guide but not lead, and be a trusty companion on the journey.

Right, that's me almost out of time, but before I go, a final dedication to Lucy Scher.

These are her Ten Commandments of Script Development, given at the end of the Creative Collaborations workshops for the British Council, of which I was a part, leading the Sarajevo leg of a European wide tour.

1. Thou shalt have no other god but good development
2. Thou shalt not skim read
3. Thou shalt not rewrite the story oneself
4. Thou shalt not be critical, rather constructive
5. Thou shalt not quaver in the line of defensive reaction
6. Thou shalt not profess to be the last word, or a know it all
7. Thou shalt read lots of scripts
8. Thou shalt remember to invite us to the premieres
9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's ox
10. Thou shalt be true to the heart of the story

Amen.