

## Petri Kempainen

### Opening Up To Me

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*My lecture will tackle writer's fears of exposing his/her project as a writer – including ownership – and mentor's ways of building trust as a mentor – including asking the why questions. I will try to explore different paths towards the off beaten track of finding and clarifying the premises of the story without losing the way back.*

Thank you to Sources 2 for allowing me this possibility to talk. I truly value it. The request to do this could not have come at a more fit moment. As right before that request I had had the luxury of having some time to think about what I would be doing next in my professional life. And I had made a decision. But preparing this lecture made me revisit and analyse why I made that decision. And as always, some unanswered questions popped out. Thank you for sparking them with your request, Marion and the team.

This evening I will take you to a journey. I will discuss fears, ownership, building trust, among others. Some sidesteps will be made into an uncertain terrain, off beaten track. But we will find the way back, which is the relationship between the author of the project and the mentor of the project.



To get there I need to start by talking about my background. I have been working in journalism, publishing and then most recently in the film and TV business, in the latter for 25 years. No need to go into details of the CV, they're on my website, but looking back, what is of course important to note is that everything I have worked with plays a role in how I communicate with an author. It is not a rucksack of tools I am carrying, but I can certainly identify many moments where I have been discussing something someone else is creating with him or her. It has almost always been part of my profession, be it helping with a manuscript of a graphic novel to interviewing a creator for a magazine article – before buying TV series, understanding where they originate from and reading film scripts became the core of my professions.

The structures of production have become part of this understanding. Most of the last 25 years, the time in film and TV as a financier, the bias has varied between the financing and production structures and the scripts. The latest aspect is, looking and giving notes at the rough cuts of the projects I had financed. Before the locked edit. Me giving notes to the filmmakers who are hard at work fighting to get the final version done.

So you can imagine there is a variety of cases and a diversity of relations around one project.

About a year and a half ago I decided that after having done six years I will not continue in my position as the CEO of the Nordisk Film and TV Fund. I thought: "I'm done with this, I need to move on and do something that is different, something where I can use everything that I've learned so far for the good of projects".

And so, I decided to quit. I left my position almost exactly a year ago. I gave myself a few months to think about what I really want to do. And then, just right before Covid-19 started I founded my own company and started offering my consulting services to different players of this industry.

Now I consult companies, individual writers and directors. In addition, I'm also doing these training initiatives and workshops. The aim is to build a package to fulfil the rest of my working life in a way that I can use the experience that I have.

Why this change? This is a *why* issue and this whole lecture will end up in a *why* as well. Why did I want to do this?

I wanted to do this even though I loved most of what I was doing in my previous job. The same actually goes with most jobs that I have had. I have enjoyed the challenges and cherished the results. A few times things have taken the wrong direction, of course. But there are many more of those rewarding experiences. The problem, if there is one, has been that there is always so much. A lot to do.

I felt that I wanted to focus and go deeper into some of the projects that come to my table. In many cases the most interesting phase of the project is around the premise of it, in the development phase. At least for me.

I've always loved the development part, because I feel that's where you can really give impact to the project. You can even advise the ones you do not personally like. But, of course the most rewarding ones are the ones that become dear to you. And here a disclaimer: this could lead into a dangerous domain, which I will come back to later.

It was not only about my own enjoyment. On the contrary, I have noticed that people appreciate my commentary. There is probably something in me. Again, a pleasure to be at service. Equally so in the rough cut phase before locking the edit.

These are my two strengths, and these I wanted to develop, and use for the benefit of others. Bread and butter, for both parties hopefully!

Before going any further let's question this for a while.

Why do I feel so good about myself? Why *me*? Some explanation is probably needed to avoid a feeling of bragging.

I think there is something here related to my emotions around being a writer. Unlike many others that do mentoring in the audio-visual business, I have not written a feature film script. In fact, I have not written anything at that length. Not even written short stories, to be precise. I have written scripts for factual programming, and that's the only thing I've done as a scriptwriter – apart from my diaries!

I have a number of story ideas in my mind, but I have not yet been braving enough to develop them into scripts.

I was a journalist before and know how to write longer interviews and feature stories for a magazine. I know the dramaturgy and the structure of a story of ten pages in a magazine, I know that. But to do a unique feature film is too scary for me for the time being.

So, I know about the fear. I fear that my ideas are not going to be good enough. Maybe they are too personal. Perhaps even unclear, or not so unique, if someone would question them. It is not easy for me to talk about the most personal ideas I have. I am fragile. But I have started writing...

Does this sound strange or familiar? A rhetorical question.

I wanted to share this with you because I want you to know that I haven't dared to do what you are doing, and that it's really important that you are doing it: Writing. And that I do understand that it is a very fragile process to write a story.

That's my root position as a mentor. I think and do know that I am not alone. Many others who are doing mentoring do it because they feel a connection to the people who are writing their stories and really want to give advice that is relevant to these people. So, the question may well be, how to give advice that is relevant!

Let me tell you a story about an experience that shaped my thinking towards MY WAY, how I would want to give advice to others. This was one of my early experiences, as a Film Commissioner at the Finnish Film Foundation, when I was in charge of making recommendations for our CEO on which film projects to support in screenwriting, development and production.

So, back then I participated this training course for script mentors and editors. We had a task to take a script that someone had written and to make it better, make some improvements, and then try to sell it to the people who are "playing" as the commissioners or funders. I worked on the script with my colleague, we worked for like 24 hours, worked overnight and did several improvements, so that in the end it became our project.

And then, when you are presenting this outcome, you actually are defending it, and at the moment when you feel that somebody does not like some parts of it – you really are surprised to notice that you have started feeling like it's your own project and nobody can attack you.

To me, as a younger person than now, it was significant to realise that the position I had at this workshop was the same position that many of the writers who are presenting their projects to me, for my funding decisions, are in. Finding yourself in wet pants I would say. But was I enjoying it?

To me the main revelation was to be in the shoes of the writers' and to become humbler. To realise how I could use this experience, this mixture of feelings, in my future work when I'm helping people in the same situation. By understanding my emotions I may have a clue what they may feel and thus I can help them to find out what is the core of their story, the *why* of their story.

I mentioned fragility before. But there are other feelings that came to play as well. I understood the meaning of ownership. It means that someone owns the story and that someone cannot give the ownership to somebody else who is helping you, and that the person who is helping you should never go and take the ownership either. Here is the disclaimer I mentioned earlier redeemed. IF this happens, it is not mentoring, it is co-writing or co-creating.

Let me explain more. I am sometimes puzzled in a situation where the writer or the director does not know where to go if they have two options that they are juggling with and they ask for help to decide. These are probably the most difficult situations for me, because I cannot take the role I am asked to take. They – the other - have to decide, because it's his or her film, not mine.

What I can do is to try to help them to understand the situation, go into details about the characters and their arcs, and dig out what they want with the story. Maybe then point them to a direction or give alternative variations.

Sometimes this is not easy. They may not understand their want themselves, and I cannot make them explain that to me so that I understand. And it is of course fine not to be clear on everything, as writing is a process!

We will revisit ownership a bit later, and go into the content, as two very important keywords have come out now, characters and arcs. The long road very often starts by talking about the characters. Because the characters are the ones we follow when watching a film. They make us feel. Exploring and enquiring, talking about their qualities and about their reactions in the different phases of the story.

Going through every character like this is usually quite good because through their arcs you spot the potholes of the narrative. Through the characters you approach the logic of the dramaturgy and it unfolds.

And it is not only the potholes. Very often as a writer one gets lost in the process, and the characters start to live their own life. They may take a larger role than anticipated and even turn the direction of the story. Something in the original setup may then become totally different. Probably for the good of the project, as this may be somehow unconscious. But at the same time leaving some loose threads and unsolved matters to the story. A mentor who comes and reads with fresh eyes usually notices these inconsistencies easily.

This leads naturally into a talk about the intentions of the writer. There may even be a written document about it in the start that could be revisited. If the intentions seem to change, the new direction can be clarified in a discussion and the false direction or even unimportant characters can be polished out by the writer. Or rewritten into more precise persons – again to answer better into the question why it is important to tell the story of each character in this way.

Do not expect talking and explanations to come easy. They do not. Sometimes it is about a finding the appropriate words. If you have understood something very well - one character, the theme or even the strong emotional tone of the story -ask a question about it from the writer. Try to help the writer to vocalise his or her intention. This way you can together discover a common way of expression, a mutual vocabulary that you share, which will take you further.

As you are surely going to enter the more fragile terrain. Asking difficult questions about things that are not clear in the script. How to find out about them without being too direct. Avoiding failures to communicate.

Now, I strongly think we need to talk about the editing phase for a while, before coming back to the exploration of the script. Or maybe it is all the same, I am not sure. This example is related to *The Square* by Ruben Östlund, which I am sure many of you have seen, but actually for the benefit of my story that is not even necessary.

As Nordisk Film & TV Fond was one of the financiers, I had of course had the chance of reading the script. More fascinating, and even before that, he talked the story through to me and my colleague. He is an impressive storyteller whose characters come to life and whose sideplots are equally interesting and condensed. And then, we watched the rough cut, the same version that was submitted to Cannes, which was some 15 minutes longer than the final film.

We were taken by surprise, in a positive way, but at the same time puzzled. The film had the numerous wonderful sequences, some of which were exactly like he had told us, but all in all it felt too long. Me and my colleague had a number of thoughts on how to shorten it, related to some characters that did not work so well in the narrative, but at the same time we were not sure what the filmmaker himself wanted. Where was the need now?

We submitted our feedback politely, discussed the alternative options, and were open to talk about them. We wanted so much to help in something we felt was a bit of a trouble.

Well the end result was shorter, and it won the Palme d'Or. Many of the sequences were praised, some not. But this sequential form was also something fresh, and it talked to audiences rather well. I later talked about the process, which was of course a fight against time, submitting a second version, and a twist in the original why, as I would like to put it. I can now see part of the more non-linear structure was already there when he talked us through the story, at the same time as a narrative was expected.

This and some other projects with writer-directors have of course helped me to remember that when talking a script you need to imagine how it will look and feel as a film. Writers explain their characters in various ways. Some are obviously more visual than others, others leave a lot of room for interpretation. Sometimes there is very little explanation in the parenthesis. Recently I worked on a script that me and my colleagues partly misread. There was a strong collaboration between the writer and the director, and the writer had explained very little about the characters in the parenthesis. Because it was so clear to them how the director would direct and what he wanted.

We got there through a discussion but of course, it would have helped to have the directors and/or writers note on the characters.

I know that there are a few documentary people in this group. I am not very experienced in mentoring documentary projects, even though I love creative documentaries a lot. With them the script of course usually is shorter, often also about the form and structure on how the matter is presented. Outside eyes are very vital when the material is being edited. I have listened to lectures of some magnificent editors who also mentor projects, like Joshua Oppenheimer's and Pirjo Honkasalo's editor Niels Pagh Andersen, who talks about giving space and time for details and finding the authentic moments.

His podcast in POV magazine is fascinating – where he talks about a kind of paradigmatic change of documentaries from *Cinéma Verité* towards today's more hybrid formats and as even documentaries are structurally now much more staged about the need to find the authentic moments in the materials. He is an editor as I said, and many editors have proven to be good script mentors – if they dare to say what they are thinking without fearing loss of their professional identity and market value...

Let's take into account the production angle for a while. Because I think it will give some very concrete mentoring tools.

With a producer friend of mine I often talk about the *identity* of a project. He goes very far with the idea of identity. He even produces a document on the identity of the project. It is an identity deal memo – something to be communicated and agreed between the producer, writer and director “before they embark on their common journey”.

It has the title of course, the logline, premise, genre, the synopsis and many of the aspects that are also needed in funding applications like a budget sum and how to finance it, how they want to distribute the film, where they aim to launch it etc. He insists on this so they can see if they agree that they are making the same film.

In a way this exercise is a difficult one, because you have to squeeze the idea of the film into a few words and see if you all agree on that. It can be tricky, if several writers, a producer and a director, have to come into a conclusion.

However, to me this demonstrates that discussions and agreeing between the key team of the film are vital. They should agree on the basics, find the strength of the project, the novelty aspect. The fact that there is an identity, already means that there is uniqueness, and the earlier you can agree on this, the better, because later in the process you will get questions like “what is this story is about”.

Maybe this is a question from a careless mentor.

It depends very much on the writer how much he or she has thought of all these fundamental questions related to the identity. But trying to find out about them – the logline, premise – will give tools to guide the discussion further.

I think it is no harm done if we take a sidestep into the development process. I believe that when there are tough questions and hard times, the basic identity of the project should be one’s safety net to see the core again.

When I talk about key people I most often think about the triangle of director, writer and the producer. Knowing very well that in some cultures the director is the *auteur*. And in some cultures, the producer has the lead. I once got this question which I am quoting here:

“Our project has a love-hate triangle, I would say. Two scriptwriters, one director and me, the humble producer. How much should I intervene in this creative process of script development?”

My answer: I think it depends on the ownership of the project. Who is behind the project? Sometimes it’s the producer’s project, it can be a writer’s project, a writer-director’s project or a you have somehow devised the concept together. I’m talking on a general level here; you know what applies to your case. But that’s what it depends on, who is taking the lead.

I think understanding the creative voice of the project is important, and quite often disagreements are part of that creative process. If there is something that is not clear, it has to be solved. If there are conflicting opinions in the end – the other person wants to take the story to another direction – a decision has to be made on who is the strongest voice. That decision probably has to be made by the owner of the project.

If a producer has the ownership, then of course the producer can go and try to do the story with another person. The same with the writer or producer, they can go and try out the vision with another producer. But yes, these are obviously the easy options.

I do think that many of today's generation of producers do get into the creative process, giving comments to scripts. If there is a producer listening there may be some tools in this lecture but c'mon – a producer is no different than Joe Doe here. Sometimes even the comments that seem to be raw tell you something important. Even from people who don't have the language to express certain things, we may get valuable comments.

I personally believe the producer should be part of the creative process, *unless* they explicitly decide to stay out of it. But in my experience, this is rather rare lately. Filmmaking is a long, collaborative process and it needs to be like that.

So, the answer was: don't be humble but take your role in the collaborative process. And thank you for the question, and for daring to ask it.

Hope you are still with me, as we are entering something very controversial now. The audience. I still hear some voices saying this should not be discussed at all when writing the script or even when developing the project for shooting.

I could not disagree more. I think every storyteller wants an audience. But don't get me wrong, it is not the size that matters. I accept that some films are made for festivals or for a very niche audiences. But I am not very fond of generalised definitions or expressions of hope that "we aim to have this film in the critics week of Cannes" as I have heard too many of these statements without an answer to a *why* question – and maybe more importantly – to a *how* question.

When I'm mentoring, I quite often want to ask about the audience. How as a writer do you want the audience to feel in some situations? Specifically, I want to hear this if it is not clear from the script. How do you want me to feel at the end of the film? How do you want me to feel about the relationship in the film, for example, and how do you then think this should be presented? Often, it's not clear, and if that is the case, I am anticipating the problems we will face in the editing phase.

The identity document I talked about earlier also include the target audience – I did not mention it earlier for safety reasons. Who are you trying to reach audience-wise, it could include the whole package of what you see as the outreach of the project and how you plan to do it?

Now let's make a brief sidestep and talk about different types of films – genres and themes if you will.

Genre projects that I have worked a bit with usually have strong stories to tell. They might feel similar or even generic in relation to other genre stories, the identity may be well rooted, but there is a different take, in visuals or in the story details that heightens the project. In comparison to arthouse drama, genre films sometimes have more distinguishing elements and more originality. But not always!

I was following Ali Abbasi's second feature *Border*, another Cannes winner, almost from a scratch as the project participated in a workshop Nordic Genre Boost. They came in with a short story by John Ajvide Lindqvist – the author of *Let the right one in*, but there was a problem. The short story had no decent ending, and it would all in all make 2/3rds of a film. But they managed, another writer Isabella Eklöf came in to write the side plot which was as minimal as possible and supported the main story, and Ali wanted a hopeful ending, which was nicely created. He also got his wishes true in presenting an "ugly" woman in the leading role.

In this case I was involved as a development and a production financier, read the first presentation, two versions of script and watched two rough cuts. But I was not the mentor, my role?

For how long can you stay with a project? I do think this is very different.

It really depends. There are projects where I come in very early and follow them, some where I come at the very end. It depends on what kind of relationship you establish with the producer or writer, or most of the time, the director. If they are asking you for advice later on.

It can usually be a few sessions in the development process before the end of the final script. In some cases where there is very strong trust between me and the director and producer, I am involved again at the editing phase. Then there is already more ground for discussion. In that way, script-editing and editing are a little bit similar.

It's a bond, it's a relationship that you create. There are also many informal situations where people may ask advice at a later stage.

With documentaries, it's something between editing and script-editing. You go to the editing room as well. And speaking about TV, which we have not talked so much about, the identity, the concept is very important. It works as a development tool, for several writers, or if new writers are brought in. In some TV series you also re-write during the shoot, as the characters grow through the acting.

As a mentor you may be surprised to find that there are trends in stories. Nobody knows why, but suddenly you may notice a number of projects that are obsessed around similar ideas. Emigration was the big theme some years ago that still has many waves left. LGBT. Female stories. A virus.

Sometimes it is easy to say no to projects with repeating themes without looking at them closer, but a distinctive identity can become the thing that takes one project further than the other. Keep an eye on that!

It has been a longish journey, into identity, understanding of the production angle and even audience, and I hope you do not feel I have been trekking too much on the off beaten track. Let's conclude and return to basics now, to exploration and communication, as it is of course obvious, that the production does not happen or even more so the audience will not be there watching before the script is ready.

We talked about characters and started a discussion about communication. How to go about in our further exploration of the script. Do we have the story already walking? Or is it perhaps already running or even flying? Or is it just learning to walk? Or still in its infancy?

The baby steps are preparation, testing and encouragement. We know there will be a way forward, but the writer can be impatient and maybe in fear of not making it. So just to repeat, a screenwriter who is presenting to a mentor needs to feel safe to be brave enough to say that he/she is not sure about something.

As a mentor you will experience this insecurity with some writers. My advice is not to distance yourself as it is very important for the writer to enter the terrain of insecurity with you. That's where something original can come out. Something that is specific and unique to the project. Then, something is discovered, something comes out from the unclear – suddenly you both know that this is the core, this is the direction to walk.

Let me put it this way: of course, every writer knows the basic concepts of desire and need. Most often the desire within the story, the desire of the characters, is defined. But that's not enough. To know what the character desires is not enough. The character has to find what they really need. You might show something on the surface, that is the desire, but actually there is something deeper and more comprehensive below the surface.



# SOURCES 2

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In my way of consulting or mentoring, asking people to pitch the story for me is part of the package. I think pitching is a way of developing the story, finding the *why*, the core of your story. Some may turn their back and find this topic annoying. These perhaps see pitching in a totally different light – more as a marketing tool.

I think frankly it is bit of both – depending on the situation. But to me it is clear that when you pitch several times to an audience – it does not have to even be a professional audience all the time – that's very helpful. You get closer to the core of your story; your project becomes less generic and you also connect with your own motivation for making the film. It helps answer the question at the bottom of this all – the *why* – why do you want to make this project? Knowing this makes all the rest – including financing – much easier.

This to me is also at the core of the relationship between the mentor and the writer. The reason *Why* I have wanted to be a mentor. Understanding the *why* of the other, and developing, strengthening the identity around it, for that unique script to become realised and produced.