

8. Film Writing and the Obsession With Technique

The writers should not get off too easily of course.

After all they do get paid, quite well, to write scripts for films that will probably never get made. Producers and directors must work almost for free, sometimes even pay for the privilege of working on films that will probably never get made. And if the writers were doing what they're paid to, the rest of us could get paid to do what we want to do - actually make good films.

Why is it then that they are - not all of them thank god, not the ones working with me, the ones I hope will want to keep working with me – failing so badly?

There is one area where I don't think we are going to find the answer. Unfortunately it's also the area to which the most attention is directed – it's the realm of technique.

A script writer who has no understanding of the fundamentals of script writing technique should be taken no more seriously than a cinematographer who lacks an understanding of lenses and lights. However because film writing is an art that comes with such clearly articulated ideas regarding structure and form, not to mention the vast forests that have been destroyed to print all the books that have been written about these ideas of structure and form, these have a strong tendency to come to the fore when the real problem with most scripts is often not so much a technical story problem but one of a lack of a story to tell.

Without a story to tell, script analysis has a tendency to disintegrate into technical discussions of escalating pointlessness.

It leads to the endless self-referentialities that occur when people start dissecting their own scripts as if they were in fact written by some other person, or have emerged mysteriously from some unknown source. It leads to diagnosis of bewildering complexity being pronounced upon ideas that have barely been conceived, using techniques better suited to the origami club than a useful discussion of story.

When a story is powerful the questions of how it should be told have a powerful tendency to present obvious answers themselves.

When the story is lacking in vigor the techniques with which it is being told have a tendency to assume an importance which they shouldn't.

Why is it that so many of our film makers, having made internationally successful short films, disappear into development hell when it comes to making a feature? Why, when they do get to make a feature film, do so many of these disappoint expectations?

The answer is not that they haven't managed to get their heads round the technical intricacies of the three act structure, which isn't really all that technical anyway. The reason is that whilst one good idea, well realized, can sustain a good little short, one good idea does not a feature make. For a feature film, whether it is a drama or a comedy, you need more than a quirky idea, nicely shot. You need a depth of character and theme and a dramatic arc of sufficient power to sustain a full 90 minutes. We are not managing to do that all that often and a discussion of why that's the case is going to require considerations of more than just technique.

Here are some other questions to which a discussion of film writing techniques is not going to provide any useful answers:

Discussions of film writing technique will not help us with scripts in which adults behave like children in plot lines drawn as if by children. They will not help us to explain why it is that kiwi imitations of international genres bring so little that is new to the genre. They won't help us with questions of values, theme or perspective or the questions as to why a script shows no evidence of place or time, let alone the type of insight or power that might be of interest to people who live beyond our place and our times. Discussions of technique will not, in short, help us with anything that's of real importance.

I have witnessed and been involved in the development of literally hundreds of film projects over the past five years and this is what I see too much of: I see stories that are absent of theme, that posit characters who lack depth, who embark upon stories that find no direction, which quickly collapse in upon their own lack of any clear reason for existence within the first few pages.

These are not all projects that are being developed by fools. Often these are projects being developed by intelligent, creative, passionate and sensitive people with considerable craft skills. Given the remarkable number of people writing film scripts from every conceivable walk of life in this country, these scripts may be read as the grass roots expression of all that people living in this part of the world in the early part of the twenty first century find dramatic, comedic, inspirational and horrific. And they're a mess. If we are not to resort to the answer that this indicates that we are a nation of fools we must conclude that our current lack of story subjects and story-telling ability, one of the most fundamental ways in which we make sense of their existence, is reflective of a state of profound confusion.