

FRAMED #08: POETRY IN CINEMA – THE SECRETS TO WRITING YOUR FILM
Thursday 27 September 2007, 12.30 – 1.30pm, Digital Harbour Docklands

Introduction by Catherine Leos, Marketing & Development Manager, OPEN CHANNEL.

Welcome to today's Framed seminar, the eighth in the series of free monthly seminars presented by OPEN CHANNEL, Digital Harbour and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School.

The secret to the perfect screenplay – the film industry's holy grail. At a talk by the creators of *The Jammed* the other night, writer/director Dee McLachlan, pointed out that at some point during the upteenth draft of your screenplay you have to let go, stop listening to and inviting yet more feedback and trust your own instincts. You accept that your script will never be 'perfect' but ask yourself - is your script, in its current form, worth bringing to the screen? Dee's second piece of advice was something she picked up from a seminar by none other than the great Robert McKee, who said that one should delay the writing as much as possible, that is, don't rush to write down your ideas. Let those ideas gestate before bashing them out. This afternoon Ian Dixon will discuss how to 'put your self in your film', how to find your own self-identity in the film form. The essential ingredient according to Ian is one's own unique take on the world, one's own 'Weltanschauung'.

Ian Dixon is an actor, filmmaker and writer, and recently produced and directed his first feature film *Crushed*. He's in demand as a lecturer at University of Melbourne, Monash University, the VCA and OPEN CHANNEL and recently completed his PhD on John Cassavetes. Ian has also been funded to write feature films through AFC and Film Victoria - and he once took over from Guy Pearce to play the lead role in *Grease!*

Of course it's arguable whether one can ever teach good writing, let alone how to write a successful screenplay, but I hope you'll find today's talk instructive; I *know* you'll find it entertaining, and one thing I can promise is that there'll be one or two references to John Cassavetes. To talk about all this, and to explain what "Weltanschauung" means, I give you Ian Dixon!

THE SECRETS TO WRITING YOUR FILM by Ian Dixon

Who are you to tell me what writing is all about? Haven't you felt like screeching that at some point?

Hello. My name is Ian Dixon and I am nobody you need worry about. I am just another guy making films. We all have our opinions. And we have the right to disagree. But let's disagree from an informed basis.

In this current environment of illegal war and paedophile paranoia, let us imagine the unimaginable; let us imagine that our own voices are as strong as those who tell us we are wrong to make films our own way.

At a recent Screenwriters Conference a certain unmentionable American Producer declared that he had read Orson Welles' unproduced screenplays which were then in his possession in the vaults of RKO (I should explain that Orson Welles and Ingmar Bergman have long been heroes of mine). This unmentionable American Producer described Welles' screenplays as overly operatic. As if that was not enough, he then proceeded to tell us that the new Global cinema ought to follow American rules for genre and structure. Tell your stories, he announced, but tell them on a global scale that all cultures can understand. By this he meant an American story structure. It was, after all, the way of all film in the future.

Well, I was prepared to accept such Uncle Sam Imperialism, I was prepared to swallow the bitter insult to my hero Orson, but when he began to deride the late, great Ingmar Bergman – I saw red. I found myself on my feet in seconds, hand sawing the air for attention. I asked whether he felt such greats as Bergman and Welles ought also to bend to this Imperial vision as well. He replied (with some concession to the fact that I had dared contradict the reign of popular culture) that such filmmakers were a "force of nature" and that nothing could stop them. "Doesn't that place in question the over-arching definition "all" films then?" I replied. It soon became clear the man did not like me.

But apart from making myself unpopular, I had at least extracted an admission: that such a "force of nature" could not be quelled.

Believe me folks, I am no champion of the people, I am no rebel and, unlike the protagonists I attempt to scribe, with humility, I am no hero. Just a guy who thinks he has something to say.

The late John Cassavetes suggested: that filmmakers were an arrogant bunch. Who, after all, has the right to tell others how to run their lives? And the moment you think you do not have the right to tell others how to run their own lives, you should get out of filmmaking.

Now we who put pen to paper are clearly an arrogant bunch indeed as we assume we have something to say and something that is worth listening to. Do you know a better way to live life than those around you? Hands up.

There is obviously nothing worse than the armchair analyst who tells his friends how to be in this unpredictable and baffling world. And yet, that is exactly what we do.

Freud said: “where the id goes there shall I”. Meaning, of course that the internal, animal, sexual forces within us will eventually dictate the way our personalities are shaped. And it is this very process, the controlling of the *Return of the Repressed*, which fashions our stories and screenplays.

So, who am I to stand here and declare what good writing is? I am a person like any other. I am a person like you.

This is the essence of my talk today. That structure is crucial in your screenplay. That perhaps even genre is crucial. But that the most crucial element of all is you.

My mentor, the novelist Rodney Hall is fond of pointing out that the essence of structure exists in our own minds. Let's take up that premise. The blueprint for our reality, our relation to others and our ability to tell a good yarn is within us – jokes obviously come with their own Three Act Structure – but even jokes are pre-packaged before they fall upon our ears after a few beers in the pub. The story however – unless you are one of those plagiarising bastards who frequent pitching competitions for the morsels of stories you were too lazy to invent yourself – Stories are your experiences and fantasies attenuated into an express-able form – in short: structure.

Let us examine for a moment the Thriller: According to American Screenwriting Guru John Truby, the desire-line of a Thriller is to escape attack. Protagonist and Antagonist (Hero and opponent) are pitted against each other such that the latter wishes to destroy the former.

I wanted to deliver a letter but the dog chased me away. It is that simple.

I want to get away from this podium but the Marketing Manager of Open Channel will murder me is I don't stay for my complete time.

Obvious. Puerile even. Desire and obstacle.

Nonsense that such stories should be worth our attention. And yet the principle is the same for Clarice Starling and Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*. Who am I to spell out such obvious rules of cinematic writing? Well, I told you I am nobody. But You are somebody and when you imagine yourself taking revenge on those nerds who have consistently gotten in your way in life, you are in the process of finding your story form: Need plus obstacle equals drama. Even better: Your need vs. their need amounts to conflict. Drama. Story.

If that is an easy task, your story is lame. If that is insurmountable - like myself or yourself taking on the Hollywood machine (or even worse) me escaping the wrath of the Open Channel Marketing Manager – we have a noble opponent and a worthy story. Unfortunately, too many of us are the hero's of our own stories without reflection. Let's be honest with ourselves, we are more fallible than we think. Which brings me back to you and the structure of your own lives – let it rise to the surface, not to be made generic, or without individuality (this is your strongest tool), or to remain untempered by honest editing, but to express the lovable, exasperating, compelling you.

I'm sure you are all familiar with the term “transition” by which I mean that point in a scene when the protagonist changes the manner in which they seek their goal – or as grumpy ol' Robert McKee puts it: when the “value” changes from negative to positive or vice versa. But where does the “transition” arise organically within our fantasies?

In a short film screenwriting class I once ran I asked students to remember a time in their lives when they felt unbridled, and wicked joy. One student came up with a memory of being out with his mates who were having a fat time playing with matches in a derelict building. Our hero was swept along in the glee of it until the bins and then the building caught fire. The police arrived and though most of the boys escaped, he was caught. The balance of fantasy and reality was obviously tampered with. But this tampering produced a real conflict situation and it ran like a film in his head. He even sweated when he told his tale. In this we can already see: A hero, an opponent, a desire or need, and a transition, not to mention the presence of The Big Three: Vivid character; Dynamic Action; and Interactive Location.

The essentially Freudian notion of pleasure becoming unpleasure sits right in the centre of this fantasy – it is the turning of the “value” – not from the screenwriter's plan (at this stage of his creation) but from his own psychic activity.

So, let's not ever stare at the empty page wondering about structure, let's pour it out, from memory, from fantasy, from desire and let it *find* its form.

What about stakes, you might say, what about the Three-Act Structure? What about character consistency? What about holes in the narrative?

Well, if your fantasies are driven by the one motive – and if Bertolucci's contention that the best filmmakers are always telling the one story over and over, you can guarantee that fantasies are driven by the one motive. And, in this sense, structure arises from our identification with our own hero, from stacking up of odds against our hero's achieving his/her goal... until such time as the goal is achieved. If you can sort shelves you can tell the difference between high and low stakes. Characters arise from you, even if they are based on that guy on the bus with his nose-picking, bum-scratching idiosyncrasies – the fact is that just as the cinema audience find themselves in your film not by what you tell them, but by what you don't.

As Robert Altman explains in his interview after *Gosford Park*: it is what the audience *does not see* that intrigues them.

Robert Evans, the producer of *Rosemary's Baby* declared: "you see nothing... it is as scary as hell"

So what does this have to do with the essence of you? Easy. The significance of a joke (to you, the individual who tells it) is the punchline: the punchline that you know and your friend does not (unless they are just being polite – in which case he will fake his laughter). The unseen thing (the punch-line) remains unknown for the duration and if we apply our filmmaker's eye to this and edit out the punchline, the mystery remains forever.

My girlfriend is German, which gives me hours of fun. Telling stories, the cultural significance of which eludes her: I know she just doesn't get it: the joke is cruelly reversed when she talks to her mother on the phone – 'cos I can't understand shit. The fact is that what is known to me is not known to her and vice versa. What is known to you is not known to your audience. And sometimes (and this is where it gets really good) what is known to you is not known to *you*. Sorry to bring Sigmund into this again, but it was him who stated that the power of the horror story lies in the fact that what is repressed in us will eventually rise to the surface with shocking clarity.

As Freud states:

... an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises, and so on (*Art and Literature*, p. 367).

And there in lies the essence of the story. A creeping fact, which is as canny as it is Uncanny: as known as it is unknown.

A film producer I had previously directed for was giving me feedback on a script I had written. The script kept returning to the image of a huge gas cylinder, which began hissing mysteriously at moments of dramatic cessation. At draft one level, this producer asked what the particular image meant. I had no answer, but I somehow knew it was significant. By draft three I had that answer, but the producer's objection was that I could not explain this initially. If any of you are familiar with the Lacanian term the *objet petit a*, you will know that there are certain things a person can never know about themselves – this "blind spot" remains with us always. Although the image may remain unexplainable the significance (in fact signification) within the script can most certainly be analysed as manifest content of the finished film. If you are defending your script, you had better have an explanation for the symbols within it, but do you need to know the mystery as it unfolds? I have had the experience of not understanding a particular image until I had shot and edited the film – and I was shocked at what I was "saying". If I had seen past my blind spot during the writing process I might have been tempted to cut the image thus sanitising the film (knocking the edges off it).

As Freud states of Dostoevsky: he was both moralist and criminal in his psychological make-up. Now, if I suggest a "*genre is within you*" theory (and without being diminutive about a great novel like *Crime and Punishment*), does this not lend itself to the crime genre, complete with the division between protagonist and opponent (in this case detective and criminal)?

So where does this leave us in terms of the short film screenplay. I say, if you are attracted to the uncanny, write horror: let your fascination for the macabre, the visceral, the psychotic in you dictate the genre you will write. Horror. After all the true essence of the Horror Story is that the monster is trying to become human – is this not the insistence of our own disavowed, our own unconscious? Alternately, if you are attracted to morality write crime. Truby says the best writers will only ever master one or two genres in their lives. Do you believe this? Examine your fantasies for the answer. Or better still, enrol in Open Channel's *Write your Short Film* course and I will examine them for you.

Let's look at just a few points the course covers....

- 1) Inspiration
- 2) Form
- 3) Dialogue

1. Where do you find Inspiration? And, contrary to some screenwriting gurus advice (who argue one should plough on devoid of inspiration) how does one maintain inspiration? Is there validity to what the Beat Poets called the "First thought, best thought" theory? i.e. When you think it, write and let the next image unfold – organically.

2. Form: which comes first: Story or Structure? Genre or taste? Imagery or Inspiration? Chicken or Egg? I would argue that trying to stuff yourself into a pre-ordained mould will not liberate you but limit you – and possibly create that phenomenon every writer fears: the blank page or as Dr Hall points out writer's block. You are brimming with stories. Don't judge. As Johnstone insists: "turn off the no-saying intellect". You have not two but three eyes: Images, Inspiration, Ideas.

And so to 3. Dialogue: if you can say it without words, say it without words. This is where we really attenuate our fantasies: If I was to repeat the trash that spills from the mouths of the hated personages that people my vengeful fantasies: "I'll tell you another thing, buddy, I am going to kick your arse" I see not only untruths, but also Imperial clichés. What the Americans call Globalisation equals Americanisation. What then happens to our local idioms?

You might say, this contradicts the theory of finding it within yourself and forces us to take our models from an external force.

But let us look a little deeper... into our dreams. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud insists that we do not invent dialogue, but merely repeat what has been said to us during the day. These "daily residues" form the basis for our unconscious to speak: but does so through process of condensation, absurd combination and sometimes ambivalence. In short, Compression and Economy.

Therefore the essence of good dialogue is to listen, to truly listen to our fantasies – not just our egotistical self-hero, but to the insistence of the id. If our characters speak they are they saying things worth listening to? A few rules (stop me if this is painfully obvious):

- A) Avoid real-life speech (it is wasteful and rambling)
- B) Emphasise hidden, but understood meaning.
- C) Observe the Eight elements of good dialogue:
 - i. Text
 - ii. Subtext
 - iii. Grammar
 - iv. Vocabulary
 - v. Accent
 - vi. Slang
 - vii. Professional Jargon
 - viii. Speaking Style (Rhythm)
- D) As good ol' Bob McKee says: "Screen Dialogue must have the swing of everyday dialogue, but content well above normal."
- E) Or as – Aristotle says: "Speak as common people do, but think as wise men do."

What's all this to do with that pesky Freudian fantasy? It is not only its genesis, but the essence by which we make our stories look like real life (Thus sucking the audience into our fallacy).

But what (to cite another example of manipulating form) of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* then? The alienation, the process by which we learn to see the ideology Naturalism attempts to disguise? Well, don't you hear your own dialogue, your running commentary during your dreams? Don't you ever wake to shout hang on, that's ridiculous (or far, far too pleasurable). Waking from dreams equates to the A-effect: a sudden change of stance, which puts our unconscious fantasies into a newer context.

Fantasy, Dream and Memory are just three examples of Inspiration – unique to you. But form existed before you were born. The expedient writer listens to both voices.

By way of a conclusion, I wish to cite the example of another student who came with a very poignant set of images, but could not find her story. It soon became apparent that she was not lacking in story, but suffering from an over-abundance of story. She had not one but two stories jammed up together. The moment she separated them she was off. In fact, the meaning within her images beggared analysis: I could add little to her writing from this first day on. The moment the stories became clear she was off – and this is

as it should be. She had only to learn scale and purpose and she kept that film running in her head for the entirety of the course and I was glad to see her do so. She was daydreaming her way into her film and she had found her structure within herself.

To cite another example, a theatre-maker I once worked as a dramaturge described in the program notes that I had brought a knowledge of story-structures to the writing of the play. She was, of course, well intentioned in this but a knowledge of story-structure is exactly what I did NOT bring. I had in fact, worked with her on her ideas to locate the crux of what she was trying to express – a “value” if you like, that we opted to call “The voice of Women” (as a woman she had frequently felt tongue-tied by certain influential men in her life – I encouraged her to think of the essence of her story as “The voice of Women”) The structure grew from this organically and I cited certain signposts she must emphasise in the telling of the story. Absolutely not from a knowledge of story-structure, but from a perception of the threads and themes of her un-structured work. The horrors she faced every day took on meaning due to a structure, which arose from within her. To cite a camping metaphor (as the Marketing Manager knows I am fond) the structure became more of a geodesic dome rather than a tee-pee: i.e. supported from within.

The screenwriter must be able to communicate their ideas in a meaningful and visually splendid manner, but lets not forget that Cassavetes was notoriously bad at verbalising his film art, yet he was an extraordinarily honest and compassionate man whom his actors adored. What Cassavetes had to “say” in his films defied the words he wrote on the page.

So this brings me back to my initiating question: Who am I to tell you what writing is all about? I am no-one. I am merely a gentle external voice prompting you to be yourself. Perhaps the person who needed to hear this most was myself: in which case, thankyou for listening – I think I’ve finally got it.

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