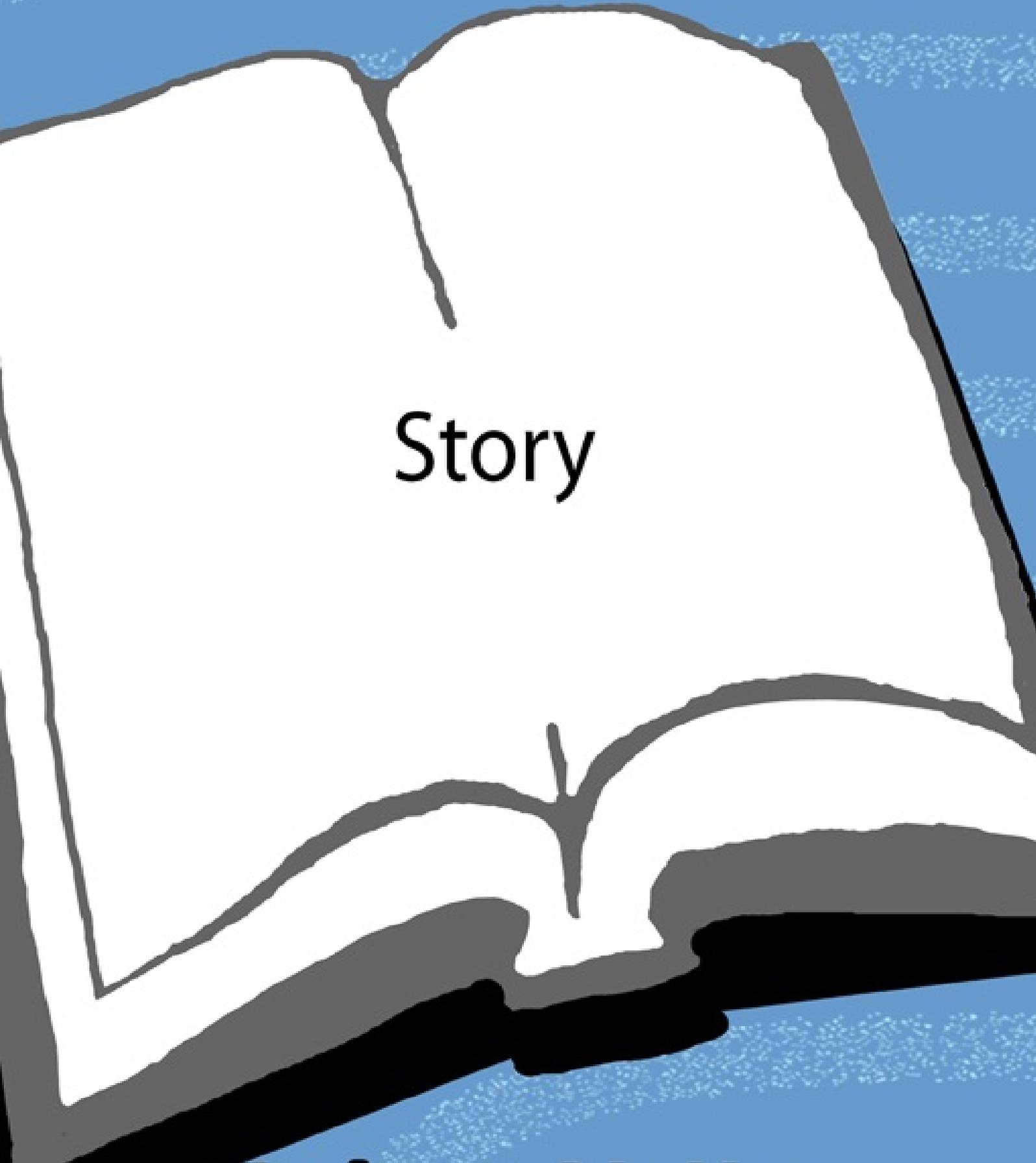


 HarperCollins e-books



Story

**Robert McKee**

S·T·O·R·Y

# STORY

S·T·O·R·Y

*Substance, Structure, Style,  
and the Principles of Screenwriting*

R O B E R T M c K E E

 HarperCollins e-books

I dedicate this book to the happy memory of my parents who, in their very different ways, taught me the love of story.

When I was first learning to read, but not always behaving appropriately, my father introduced me to the fables of Aesop in the hope that these ancient cautionary tales might improve my deportment. Each evening, after working my way through the likes of “The Fox and the Grapes,” he would nod and ask, “And what does this story mean to you, Robert?” As I stared at these texts and their handsome color illustrations, struggling to find my interpretations, I slowly came to realize that stories mean much more than words and pretty pictures.

Later, before entering the university, I deduced that the best possible life includes as many rounds of golf as possible, and therefore, I would become a dentist. “Dentist?!” my mother laughed. “You can’t be serious. What happens when they cure all teeth problems? Where will dentists be then? No, Bobby, people will always need entertainment. I’m looking out for your future. You’re going into show business.”

## Contents

Notes on the Text

Part 1 The Writer and the Art of Story

Introduction

1 The Story Problem

Part 2 The Elements of Story

2 The Structure Spectrum

3 Structure and Setting

4 Structure and Genre

5 Structure and Character

6 Structure and Meaning

Part 3 The Principles of Story Design

7 The Substance of Story

8 The Inciting Incident

9 Act Design

10 Scene Design

11 Scene Analysis

12 Composition

13 Crisis, Climax, Resolution

Part 4 The Writer at Work

14 The Principle of Antagonism

15 Exposition

16 Problems and Solutions

17 Character

18 The Text

19 A Writer's Method

Fade Out

Suggested Readings

Filmography

[Index](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

## NOTES ON THE TEXT

The hundreds of examples in *Story* are drawn from a century of film writing and filmmaking around the world. Whenever possible, I offer more than one title of the most recent and widely seen works I know. Because it's impossible to select films everyone has seen and remembers in detail, I've leaned toward those readily available on video. But first and foremost, each film has been chosen because it is a clear illustration of the point made in the text.

To deal with the pronoun problem I have avoided constructions that distract the reader's eye, such as the annoying alternation of "she" and "her" with "he" and "him," the repetitious "he and she" and "him and her," the awkward "s/he" and "her/im," and the ungrammatical "they" and "them" as neuter singulars. Rather, I use the nonexclusive "he" and "him" to mean "writer."

**PART 1**  
**THE**  
**WRITER**  
**AND THE**  
**ART OF**  
**STORY**

*Stories are equipment for living.*

— KENNETH BURKE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Story is about principles, not rules.**

A rule says, “You *must* do it *this way*.” A principle says, “This *works* ... and has through all remembered time.” The difference is crucial. Your work needn’t be modeled after the “well-made” play; rather, it must be *well made* within the principles that shape our art. Anxious, inexperienced writers obey rules. Rebellious, unschooled writers break rules. Artists master the form.

### **Story is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas.**

All notions of paradigms and foolproof story models for commercial success are nonsense. Despite trends, remakes, and sequels, when we survey the totality of Hollywood film, we find an astounding variety of story designs, but no prototype. DIE HARD is no more typical of Hollywood than are PARENTHOOD, POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE, THE LION KING, THIS IS SPINAL TAP, REVERSAL OF FORTUNE, DANGEROUS LIAISONS, GROUNDHOG DAY, LEAVING LAS VEGAS, or thousands of other excellent films in dozens of genres and subgenres from farce to tragedy.

*Story* urges the creation of works that will excite audiences on the six continents and live in revival for decades. No one needs yet another recipe book on how to reheat Hollywood leftovers. We need a rediscovery of the underlying tenets of our art, the guiding principles that liberate talent. No matter where a film is made—Hollywood, Paris, Hong Kong—if it’s of archetypal quality, it triggers a global and perpetual chain reaction of pleasure that carries it from cinema to cinema, generation to generation.

### **Story is about archetypes, not stereotypes.**

The archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, culture-specific expression. A stereotypical story reverses this pattern: It suffers a poverty of both content and form. It confines itself to a narrow, culture-specific experience and dresses in stale, nonspecific generalities.

For example, Spanish custom once dictated that daughters must be married off in order from oldest to youngest. Inside Spanish culture, a film about the nineteenth-century family of a strict patriarch, a powerless mother, an unmarriageable oldest daughter, and a long-suffering youngest daughter may

move those who remember this practice, but outside Spanish culture audiences are unlikely to empathize. The writer, fearing his story's limited appeal, resorts to the familiar settings, characters, and actions that have pleased audiences in the past. The result? The world is even less interested in these clichés.

On the other hand, this repressive custom could become material for a worldwide success if the artist were to roll up his sleeves and search for an archetype. An archetypal story creates settings and characters so rare that our eyes feast on every detail, while its telling illuminates conflicts so true to humankind that it journeys from culture to culture.

In Laura Esquivel's *LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE*, mother and daughter clash over the demands of dependence versus independence, permanence versus change, self versus others—conflicts every family knows. Yet Esquivel's observation of home and society, of relationship and behavior is so rich in never-before-seen detail, we're drawn irresistibly to these characters and fascinated by a realm we've never known, nor could imagine.

Stereotypical stories stay at home, archetypal stories travel. From Charlie Chaplin to Ingmar Bergman, from Satyajit Ray to Woody Allen, the cinema's master storytellers give us the double-edged encounter we crave. First, the discovery of a world we do not know. No matter how intimate or epic, contemporary or historical, concrete or fantasized, the world of an eminent artist always strikes us as somewhat exotic or strange. Like an explorer parting forest leaves, we step wide-eyed into an untouched society, a cliché-free zone where the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Second, once inside this alien world, we find ourselves. Deep within these characters and their conflicts we discover our own humanity. We go to the movies to enter a new, fascinating world, to inhabit vicariously another human being who at first seems so unlike us and yet at heart is like us, to live in a fictional reality that illuminates our daily reality. We do not wish to escape life but to find life, to use our minds in fresh, experimental ways, to flex our emotions, to enjoy, to learn, to add depth to our days. *Story* was written to foster films of archetypal power and beauty that will give the world this dual pleasure.

### **Story is about thoroughness, not shortcuts.**

From inspiration to last draft you may need as much time to write a screenplay as to write a novel. Screen and prose writers create the same density of world, character, and story, but because screenplay pages have so much white on them, we're often misled into thinking that a screenplay is quicker and easier than a novel. But while scribomaniacs fill pages as fast as they can type, film writers cut and cut again, ruthless in their desire to express the absolute maximum in the fewest possible words. Pascal once wrote a long, drawn-out letter to a friend, then apologized in the postscript

that he didn't have time to write a short one. Like Pascal, screenwriters learn that economy is key, that brevity takes time, that excellence means perseverance.

### **Story is about the realities, not the mysteries of writing.**

There's been no conspiracy to keep secret the truths of our art. In the twenty-three centuries since Aristotle wrote *The Poetics*, the "secrets" of story have been as public as the library down the street. Nothing in the craft of storytelling is abstruse. In fact, at first glance telling story for the screen looks deceptively easy. But moving closer and closer to the center, trying scene by scene to make the story work, the task becomes increasingly difficult, as we realize that on the screen there's no place to hide.

If a screenwriter fails to move us with the purity of a dramatized scene, he cannot, like a novelist in authorial voice, or the playwright in soliloquy, hide behind his words. He cannot smooth a coating of explanatory or emotive language over cracks in logic, blotchy motivation, or colorless emotion and simply *tell* us what to think or how to feel.

The camera is the dread X-ray machine of all things false. It magnifies life many times over, then strips naked every weak or phony story turn, until in confusion and frustration we're tempted to quit. Yet, given determination and study, the puzzle yields. Screenwriting is full of wonders but no unsolvable mysteries.

### **Story is about mastering the art, not second-guessing the marketplace.**

No one can teach what will sell, what won't, what will be a smash or a fiasco, because *no one knows*. Hollywood's bombs are made with the same commercial calculation as its hits, whereas darkish dramas that read like a checklist of everything moneyed wisdom says you must never do—ORDINARY PEOPLE, THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST, TRAINSPOTTING—quietly conquer the domestic and international box office. Nothing in our art is guaranteed. That's why so many agonize over "breaking in," "making it," and "creative interference."

The honest, big-city answer to all these fears is that you'll get an agent, sell your work, and see it realized faithfully on screen when you write with surpassing quality ... and not until. If you knock out a knockoff of last summer's hit, you'll join the ranks of lesser talents who each year flood Hollywood with thousands of cliché-ridden stories. Rather than agonizing over the odds, put your energies into achieving excellence. If you show a brilliant, original screenplay to agents, they'll fight for the right to represent you. The agent you hire will incite a bidding war among story-starved producers, and the winner will pay you an embarrassing amount of money.

What's more, once in production, your *finished* screenplay will meet with surprisingly little interference. No one can promise that unfortunate conjunctions of personalities won't spoil good work, but be certain that Hollywood's best acting and directing talents are acutely aware that their careers depend on working within quality writing. Yet because of Hollywood's ravenous appetite for story, scripts are often picked before they're ripe, forcing changes on the set. Secure writers don't sell first drafts. They patiently rewrite until the script is as director-ready, as actor-ready as possible. Unfinished work invites tampering, while polished, mature work seals its integrity.

### **Story is about respect, not disdain, for the audience.**

When talented people write badly it's generally for one of two reasons: Either they're blinded by an idea they feel compelled to prove or they're driven by an emotion they must express. When talented people write well, it is generally for this reason: They're moved by a desire to touch the audience.

Night after night, through years of performing and directing, I've stood in awe of the audience, of its capacity for response. As if by magic, masks fall away, faces become vulnerable, receptive. Filmgoers do not defend their emotions, rather they open to the storyteller in ways even their lovers never know, welcoming laughter, tears, terror, rage, compassion, passion, love, hate—the ritual often exhausts them.

The audience is not only amazingly sensitive, but as it settles into a darkened theatre its collective IQ jumps twenty-five points. When you go to the movies, don't you often feel you're more intelligent than what you're watching? That you know what characters are going to do before they do it? That you see the ending coming long before it arrives? The audience is not only smart, it's smarter than most films, and that fact won't change when you move to the other side of the screen. It's all a writer can do, using every bit of craft he's mastered, to keep ahead of the sharp perceptions of a focused audience.

No film can be made to work without an understanding of the reactions and anticipations of the audience. You must shape your story in a way that both expresses your vision and satisfies the audience's desires. The audience is a force as determining of story design as any other element. For without it, the creative act is pointless.

### **Story is about originality, not duplication.**

Originality is the confluence of content and form—distinctive choices of subject plus a unique shaping of the telling. Content (setting, characters, ideas) and form (selection and arrangement of events) require, inspire, and

mutually influence one another. With content in one hand and a mastery of form in the other, a writer sculpts story. As you rework a story's substance, the telling reshapes itself. As you play with a story's shape, its intellectual and emotional spirit evolves.

A story is not only what you have to say but how you say it. If content is cliché, the telling will be cliché. But if your vision is deep and original, your story design will be unique. Conversely, if the telling is conventional and predictable, it will demand stereotypical roles to act out well-worn behaviors. But if the story design is innovative, then settings, characters, and ideas must be equally fresh to fulfill it. We shape the telling to fit the substance, rework the substance to support the design.

Never, however, mistake eccentricity for originality. Difference for the sake of difference is as empty as slavishly following commercial imperatives. After working for months, perhaps years, to gather facts, memories, and imagination into a treasury of story material, no serious writer would cage his vision inside a formula, or trivialize it into avant-garde fragmentations. The "well-made" formula may choke a story's voice, but "art movie" quiriness will give it a speech impediment. Just as children break things for fun or throw tantrums to force attention on themselves, too many film-makers use infantile gimmicks on screen to shout, "Look what I can do!" A mature artist never calls attention to himself, and a wise artist never does anything merely because it breaks convention.

Films by masters such as Horton Foote, Robert Altman, John Cassavetes, Preston Sturges, François Truffaut, and Ingmar Bergman are so idiosyncratic that a three-page synopsis identifies the artist as surely as his DNA. Great screenwriters are distinguished by a personal storytelling style, a style that's not only inseparable from their vision, but in a profound way is their vision. Their formal choices—number of protagonists, rhythm of progressions, levels of conflict, temporal arrangements, and the like—play with and against substantive choices of content—setting, character, idea—until all elements meld into a unique screenplay.

If, however, we were to put the content of their films aside for the moment, and study the pure patterning of their events, we'd see that, like a melody without a lyric, like a silhouette without a matrix, their story designs are powerfully charged with meaning. The storyteller's selection and arrangement of events is his master metaphor for the interconnectedness of all the levels of reality—personal, political, environmental, spiritual. Stripped of its surface of characterization and location, story structure reveals his personal cosmology, his insight into the deepest patterns and motivations for how and why things happen in this world—his map of life's hidden order.

No matter who your heroes may be—Woody Allen, David Mamet, Quentin Tarantino, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Oliver Stone, William Goldman, Zhang Yimou, Nora Ephron, Spike Lee, Stanley Kubrick—you admire them because they're unique. Each has stepped out of the crowd because each selects a

content like no one else, designs a form like no one else, combining the two into a style unmistakably his own. I want the same for you.

But my hope for you goes beyond competence and skill. I'm starved for great films. Over the last two decades I've seen good films and a few very good films, but rarely, rarely a film of staggering power and beauty. Maybe it's me; maybe I'm jaded. But I don't think so. Not yet. I still believe that art transforms life. But I know that if you can't play all the instruments in the orchestra of story, no matter what music may be in your imagination, you're condemned to hum the same old tune. I've written *Story* to empower your command of the craft, to free you to express an original vision of life, to lift your talent beyond convention to create films of distinctive substance, structure, and style.

# 1

## THE STORY PROBLEM

### THE DECLINE OF STORY

Imagine, in one global day, the pages of prose turned, plays performed, films screened, the unending stream of television comedy and drama, twenty-four-hour print and broadcast news, bedtime tales told to children, barroom bragging, back-fence Internet gossip, humankind's insatiable appetite for stories. Story is not only our most prolific art form but rivals all activities—work, play, eating, exercise—for our waking hours. We tell and take in stories as much as we sleep—and even then we dream. Why? Why is so much of our life spent inside stories? Because as critic Kenneth Burke tells us, stories are equipment for living.

Day after day we seek an answer to the ageless question Aristotle posed in *Ethics*: How should a human being lead his life? But the answer eludes us, hiding behind a blur of racing hours as we struggle to fit our means to our dreams, fuse idea with passion, turn desire into reality. We're swept along on a risk-ridden shuttle through time. If we pull back to grasp pattern and meaning, life, like a Gestalt, does flips: first serious, then comic; static, frantic; meaningful, meaningless. Momentous world events are beyond our control while personal events, despite all effort to keep our hands on the wheel, more often than not control us.

Traditionally humankind has sought the answer to Aristotle's question from the four wisdoms—philosophy, science, religion, art—taking insight from each to bolt together a livable meaning. But today who reads Hegel or Kant without an exam to pass? Science, once the great explicator, garbles life with complexity and perplexity. Who can listen without cynicism to economists, sociologists, politicians? Religion, for many, has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in traditional ideologies diminishes, we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of story.

The world now consumes films, novels, theatre, and television in such quantities and with such ravenous hunger that the story arts have become humanity's prime source of inspiration, as it seeks to order chaos and gain insight into life. Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience. In the words of playwright Jean Anouilh, "Fiction gives life its form."

Some see this craving for story as simple entertainment, an escape from life

rather than an exploration of it. But what, after all, is entertainment? To be entertained is to be immersed in the ceremony of story to an intellectually and emotionally satisfying end. To the film audience, entertainment is the ritual of sitting in the dark, concentrating on a screen in order to experience the story's meaning and, with that insight, the arousal of strong, at times even painful emotions, and as the meaning deepens, to be carried to the ultimate satisfaction of those emotions.

Whether it's the triumph of crazed entrepreneurs over Hittite demons in *GHOSTBUSTERS* or the complex resolution of inner demons in *SHINE*; the integration of character in *THE RED DESERT* or its disintegration in *THE CONVERSATION*, all fine films, novels, and plays, through all shades of the comic and tragic, entertain when they give the audience a fresh model of life empowered with an affective meaning. To retreat behind the notion that the audience simply wants to dump its troubles at the door and escape reality is a cowardly abandonment of the artist's responsibility. Story isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence.

Yet, while the ever-expanding reach of the media now gives us the opportunity to send stories beyond borders and languages to hundreds of millions, the overall quality of storytelling is eroding. On occasion we read or see works of excellence, but for the most part we weary of searching newspaper ads, video shops, and TV listings for something of quality, of putting down novels half-read, of slipping out of plays at the intermission, of walking out of films soothing our disappointment with "But it was beautifully photographed ...". The art of story is in decay, and as Aristotle observed twenty-three hundred years ago, when storytelling goes bad, the result is decadence.

Flawed and false storytelling is forced to substitute spectacle for substance, trickery for truth. Weak stories, desperate to hold audience attention, degenerate into multimillion-dollar razzle-dazzle demo reels. In Hollywood imagery becomes more and more extravagant, in Europe more and more decorative. The behavior of actors becomes more and more histrionic, more and more lewd, more and more violent. Music and sound effects become increasingly tumultuous. The total effect transudes into the grotesque. A culture cannot evolve without honest, powerful storytelling. When society repeatedly experiences glossy, hollowed-out, pseudo-stories, it degenerates. We need true satires and tragedies, dramas and comedies that shine a clean light into the dingy corners of the human psyche and society. If not, as Yeats warned, "... the centre can not hold."

Each year, Hollywood produces and/or distributes four hundred to five hundred films, virtually a film per day. A few are excellent, but the majority are mediocre or worse. The temptation is to blame this glut of banality on the Babbitt-like figures who approve productions. But recall a moment from *THE PLAYER*: Tim Robbins's young Hollywood executive explains that he has

many enemies because each year his studio accepts over twenty thousand story submissions but only makes twelve films. This is accurate dialogue. The story departments of the major studios pore through thousands upon thousands of scripts, treatments, novels, and plays searching for a great screen story. Or, more likely, something halfway to good that they could develop to better-than-average.

By the 1990s script development in Hollywood climbed to over \$500 million per annum, three quarters of which is paid to writers for options and rewrites on films that will never be made. Despite a half-billion dollars and the exhaustive efforts of development personnel, Hollywood cannot find better material than it produces. The hard-to-believe truth is that what we see on the screen each year is a reasonable reflection of the best writing of the last few years.

Many screenwriters, however, cannot face this downtown fact and live in the exurbs of illusion, convinced that Hollywood is blind to their talent. With rare exceptions, unrecognized genius is a myth. First-rate screenplays are at least optioned if not made. For writers who can tell a quality story, it's a seller's market—always has been, always will be. Hollywood has a secure international business for hundreds of films each year, and they will be made. Most will open, run a few weeks, close, and be mercifully forgotten.

Yet Hollywood not only survives, it thrives, because it has virtually no competition. This wasn't always the case. From the rise of Neo-realism to the high tide of the New Wave, North American cinemas were crowded with works by brilliant Continental filmmakers that challenged Hollywood's dominance. But with the death or retirement of these masters, the last twenty-five years have seen a slow decay in the quality of European films.

Today European filmmakers blame their failure to attract audience on a conspiracy of distributors. Yet the films of their predecessors—Renoir, Bergman, Fellini, Buñuel, Wajda, Clouzot, Antonioni, Resnais—were screened throughout the world. The system hasn't changed. The audience for non-Hollywood film is still vast and loyal. Distributors have the same motivation now they had then: money. What's changed is that contemporary "auteurs" cannot tell story with the power of the previous generation. Like pretentious interior decorators, they make films that strike the eye, and nothing more. As a result, the storm of European genius has become a slough of arid films that leave a vacuum for Hollywood to fill.

Asian works, however, now travel throughout North America and the world, moving and delighting millions, seizing the international spotlight with ease for one reason: Asian filmmakers tell superb stories. Rather than scapegoating distributors, non-Hollywood filmmakers would do well to look to the East, where artists have the passion to tell stories and the craft to tell them beautifully.

## THE LOSS OF CRAFT

The art of story is the dominant cultural force in the world, and the art of film is the dominant medium of this grand enterprise. The world audience is devoted but thirsting for story. Why? Not from a poverty of effort. The Writers Guild of America script registration service logs over thirty-five thousand titles yearly. These are only those that are registered. Across America hundreds of thousands of screenplays are attempted each year, but only a handful are quality screenplays, for many reasons but this above all: Today's would-be writers rush to the typewriter without first learning their craft.

If your dream were to compose music, would you say to yourself: "I've heard a lot of symphonies ... I can also play the piano ... I think I'll knock one out this weekend"? No. But that's exactly how many screenwriters begin: "I've seen a lot of flicks, some good and some bad ... I got A's in English ... vacation time's coming ..."

If you hoped to compose, you'd head for music school to study both theory and practice, focusing on the genre of symphony. After years of diligence, you'd merge your knowledge with your creativity, flex your courage, and venture to compose. Too many struggling writers never suspect that the creation of a fine screenplay is as difficult as the creation of a symphony, and in some ways more so. For while the composer scores with the mathematical purity of notes, we dip into the messy stuff known as human nature.

The novice plunges ahead, counting solely on experience, thinking that the life he's lived and the films he's seen give him something to say and the way to say it. Experience, however, is overrated. Of course we want writers who don't hide from life, who live deeply, observe closely. This is vital but never enough. For most writers, the knowledge they gain from reading and study equals or outweighs experience, especially if that experience goes unexamined. *Self-knowledge* is the key—life *plus* deep reflection on our reactions to life.

As for technique, what the novice mistakes for craft is simply his unconscious absorption of story elements from every novel, film, or play he's ever encountered. As he writes, he matches his work by trial and error against a model built up from accumulated reading and watching. The unschooled writer calls this "instinct," but it's merely habit and it's rigidly limiting. He either imitates his mental prototype or imagines himself in the avant-garde and rebels against it. But the haphazard groping toward or revolt against the sum of unconsciously ingrained repetitions is not, in any sense, technique, and leads to screenplays clogged with clichés of either the commercial or the art house variety.

This hit-or-miss struggle wasn't always the case. In decades past screenwriters learned their craft either through university study or on their own in a library, through experience in the theatre or in writing novels,

through apprenticeship to the Hollywood studio system, or through a combination of these means.

Early in this century a number of American universities came to believe that, like musicians and painters, writers need the equivalent of music or art school to learn the principles of their craft. To that end scholars such as William Archer, Kenneth Rowe, and John Howard Lawson wrote excellent books on dramaturgy and the prose arts. Their method was intrinsic, drawing strength from the big-muscle movements of desire, forces of antagonism, turning points, spine, progression, crisis, climax—*story seen from the inside out*. Working writers, with or without formal educations, used these texts to develop their art, turning the half-century from the Roaring Twenties through the protesting sixties into a golden age of the American story on screen, page, and stage.

Over the last twenty-five years, however, the method of teaching creative writing in American universities has shifted from the intrinsic to the extrinsic. Trends in literary theory have drawn professors away from the deep sources of story toward language, codes, text—*story seen from the outside*. As a result, with some notable exceptions, the current generation of writers has been undereducated in the prime principles of story.

Screenwriters abroad have had even less opportunity to study their craft. European academics generally deny that writing can, in any sense, be taught, and as a result, courses in Creative Writing have never been included in the curriculum of Continental universities. Europe does, of course, foster many of the world's most brilliant art and music academies. Why it's felt that one art is teachable, another not, is impossible to say. What's worse, disdain for screenwriting has, until recently, excluded it from study in all European film schools save Moscow and Warsaw.

Much can be said against the old Hollywood studio system, but to its credit it was a system of apprenticeship overseen by seasoned story editors. That day is gone. Every now and then a studio rediscovers apprenticeship, but in its zeal to bring back the golden days it forgets that an apprentice needs a master. Today's executives may recognize ability, but few have the skill or patience to turn a talent into an artist.

The final cause for the decline of story runs very deep. Values, the positive/negative charges of life, are at the soul of our art. The writer shapes story around a perception of what's worth living for, what's worth dying for, what's foolish to pursue, the meaning of justice, truth—the essential values. In decades past, writer and society more or less agreed on these questions, but more and more ours has become an age of moral and ethical cynicism, relativism, and subjectivism—a great confusion of values. As the family disintegrates and sexual antagonisms rise, who, for example, feels he understands the nature of love? And how, if you do have a conviction, do you express it to an ever-more skeptical audience?

This erosion of values has brought with it a corresponding erosion of story.

Unlike writers in the past, we can assume nothing. First we must dig deeply into life to uncover new insights, new refinements of value and meaning, then create a story vehicle that expresses our interpretation to an increasingly agnostic world. No small task.

## THE STORY IMPERATIVE

When I moved to Los Angeles, I did what many do to keep eating and writing—I read. I worked for UA and NBC, analyzing screen and teleplay submissions. After the first couple hundred analyses, I felt I could write up in advance an all-purpose Hollywood story analyst’s coverage and just fill in title and writer. The report I wrote over and over again went like this:

*Nice description, actable dialogue. Some amusing moments; some sensitive moments. All in all, a script of well-chosen words. The story, however, sucks. The first thirty pages crawl on a fat belly of exposition; the rest never get to their feet. The main plot, what there is of it, is riddled with convenient coincidence and weak motivation. No discernible protagonist. Unrelated tensions that could shape into subplots never do. Characters are never revealed to be more than they seem. Not a moment’s insight into the inner lives of these people or their society. It’s a lifeless collection of predictable, ill-told, and clichéd episodes that wander off into a pointless haze. PASS ON IT.*

But I never wrote this report:

*Great story! Grabbed me on page one and held me in its embrace. The first act builds to a sudden climax that spins off into a superb weave of plot and subplot. Sublime revelations of deep character. Amazing insight into this society. Made me laugh, made me cry. Drove to an Act Two climax so moving that I thought the story was over. And yet, out of the ashes of the second act, this writer created a third act of such power, such beauty, such magnificence I’m writing this report from the floor. However, this script is a 270-page grammatical nightmare with every fifth word misspelled. Dialogue’s so tangled Olivier couldn’t get his tongue around it. Descriptions are stuffed with camera directions, subtextual explanations, and philosophical commentary. It’s not even typed in the proper format. Obviously not a professional writer. PASS ON IT.*

If I’d written this report, I’d have lost my job.

The sign on the door doesn’t read “Dialogue Department” or “Description Department.” It reads “Story Department.” A good story makes a good film possible, while failure to make the story work virtually guarantees disaster. A reader who can’t grasp this fundamental deserves to be fired. It’s surprisingly rare, in fact, to find a beautifully crafted story with bad dialogue or dull description. More often than not, the better the storytelling, the more vivid the images, the sharper the dialogue. But lack of progression, false motivation, redundant characters, empty subtext, holes, and other such story problems are the root causes of a bland, boring text.

Literary talent is not enough. If you cannot tell a story, all those beautiful

images and subtleties of dialogue that you spent months and months perfecting waste the paper they're written on. What we create for the world, what it demands of us, is story. Now and forever. Countless writers lavish dressy dialogue and manicured descriptions on anorexic yarns and wonder why their scripts never see production, while others with modest literary talent but great storytelling power have the deep pleasure of watching their dreams living in the light of the screen.

Of the total creative effort represented in a finished work, 75 percent or more of a writer's labor goes into designing story. Who are these characters? What do they want? Why do they want it? How do they go about getting it? What stops them? What are the consequences? Finding the answers to these grand questions and shaping them into story is our overwhelming creative task.

Designing story tests the maturity and insight of the writer, his knowledge of society, nature, and the human heart. Story demands both vivid imagination and powerful analytic thought. Self-expression is never an issue, for, wittingly or unwittingly, all stories, honest and dishonest, wise and foolish, faithfully mirror their maker, exposing his humanity ... or lack of it. Compared to this terror, writing dialogue is a sweet diversion.

So the writer embraces the principle, *Tell Story ...* then freezes. For what is story? The idea of story is like the idea of music. We've heard tunes all our lives. We can dance and sing along. We think we understand music until we try to compose it and what comes out of the piano scares the cat.

If both *TENDER MERCIES* and *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK* are wonderful stories beautifully told for the screen—and they are—what on earth do they have in common? If *HANNAH AND HER SISTERS* and *MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL* are both brilliant comic stories delightfully told, and they are, where do they touch? Compare *THE CRYING GAME* to *PARENTHOOD*, *TERMINATOR* to *REVERSAL OF FORTUNE*, *UNFORGIVEN* to *EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN*. Or *A FISH CALLED WANDA* to *MAN BITES DOG*, *WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT* to *RESERVOIR DOGS*. Moving back through the decades, compare *VERTIGO* to *8 1/2* to *PERSONA* to *RASHOMON* to *CASABLANCA* to *GREED* to *MODERN TIMES* to *THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*—all superb screen stories, all vastly different, yet all produce the same result: an audience leaving the theatre exclaiming, “What a great story!”

Drowning in a sea of genres and styles, the writer may come to believe that if all these films tell story, then anything can be a story. But if we look deeply, if we strip away the surface, we find that at heart all are the same thing. Each is an embodiment of the universal form of story. Each articulates this form to the screen in a unique way, but in each the essential form is identical, and it is to this deep form that the audience is responding when it reacts with, “What a good story!”

Each of the arts is defined by its essential form. From symphony to hip-hop, the underlying form of music makes a piece music and not noise. Whether