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Form over content is damaging the film industry

In the first issue of *ScriptWriter*, Jürgen Wolff described how many years ago he used to read scripts not submitted through agents. In the main, they were unproducable but they were written with great passion by people who seemed to care about what they were writing; years later, after the deluge of how-to books on script writing, he noted that the scripts he now read were beautifully structured and laid out, but were rarely about anything.

As an agent I see many hundreds of proposals or scripts every year and although the majority look good and are presented with aplomb, they are unproducable. Over the last ten years I am either becoming fussier or the quality of scripts is not actually improving. Perhaps it is both.

I realise that with the significant increase in the number and variety of degree courses being offered in scriptwriting, the huge range of books on scriptwriting, the exponential growth in short courses and the considerable increases in funding for training generally, it seems almost perverse – with all the hard work going into the training of writers to write, readers to read and producers to produce – to suggest that perhaps the emperor has no clothes on.

But such is the nature of the challenge of creativity, of the need we have to discover a new talent or a brilliant script that we encourage at every opportunity when perhaps we should do the opposite.

Instead of opening the gates to everyone with a wish to be the next Tarantino, we should be making it more difficult. Michael Hauge was asked by a writer in one of his workshops 'How long should it take me to earn say £40,000 a year?' His answer was, 'Seven years, working six days a week, fifty weeks a year, for twelve hours a day. The room was silent as he explained that that was how long it would take to qualify as a doctor and he went on to ask whether anyone in the room thought scriptwriting was easier than being a doctor.

I believe there are two related matters – genre and training – that we should examine. Let's start with genre and look more closely at training later.

In the *Telegraph* (24 May 2003) David Gritten made some excellent points but he, like many other critics, concluded that 'It's depressing to see [the Film Council] promoting an approach to storytelling in film that imitates Hollywood's reductive approach to film-making...there's that wretched insistence on genres – horror, comedy or thriller. Must every story fit neatly into one of these categories? Seemingly so. After a period of telling our film-makers that they should strive to make bigger, more expensive films, the Film Council urges them to concentrate on cheap genre pictures. "Right now," a leading British film producer told me recently, "the easiest way to get money from the Film Council is finding an idea for some low-budget horror flick."

This magazine has embraced articles about genre from issue 1 but I barely recognise what our contributors have been saying from this description of genre. As Lucy Scher of The Script Factory said in her article in issue 1, 'It is important at the outset of any discussion of genre to dispel the negative associations: genre is not about stereotype, formula or predictability. The real meaning of genre is defined by the audience's expectations.'

Genre does not mean discouraging vision or original ideas. The notion that if it is genre it cannot be original is a frightening failure to understand audiences. The myopic, academic attitude to the industry of film and television is undoubtedly partly responsible for some of that.

Genre is not the artistic equivalent of painting by numbers, except to those with little or nothing to say who have studied the how-to books, or to those who sit on the sidelines and snipe without having read the back issues of *ScriptWriter*.

There are three categories of 'experts' who have a profound influence on what scripts are written and offered to the market. There are those who teach, those who criticise and those who make the decisions about what to greenlight.

Training will be examined in part two of this Editorial in the September issue. So what about the critics and the greenlighters, the gatekeepers? The first observation to be made about those who can buy or greenlight a film or television programme is how much smaller the group has become. Where once the BBC had a raft of maverick and ambitious producers each trying to outshine the other, so that writers had numerous individuals of differing tastes and persuasions to whom to pitch their ideas, the system has become far more centralised even though it continues to take about 25% of its programming from independents.

ITV is even more monolithic at the top although it can be more attractive to independent producers and can offer a better deal. The advertisers though are so star-struck that without a household name in the cast, there is less chance of getting on to ITV.

Channel 4 has gone through many changes and its drama has lost some of the profile of a decade ago although it has had some great hits like *Teachers* and *Queer as Folk*. Channel Five and Sky are making some inroads into drama production, both bringing out new drama series.

But overall the sense of diversity that existed has gone and in their need to connect with this ever-decreasing number of greenlighters, writers and independent producers have narrowed their own outlook in an attempt to impress conservative buyers.

Many of the critics of genre films and of the Film Council's 25 Words or Less initiative (see the three articles on pages 28, 30 and 34 of this issue) clearly think that genre is a pejorative term, which is like suggesting that audiences don't know what they like and they shouldn't be trusted to decide what to watch. Why this elitism of the critic and bureaucrat goes so unchallenged is a mystery.

Genre is a tool that writers, having hopefully developed stories from interesting characters, should apply to ensure that they connect with audiences. Part of the reason that American films still take over 70% of the UK box office is because audiences know what to expect when they go to an American movie.

Even the successful British movies – *The Full Monty*, *Trainspotting*, *East is East*, *Billy Elliot* and *Bend it Like Beckham* – are genre films as Phil Parker explained in his article in issue 9 and *The Hours* is another genre film (see Martina Nagel's article in this issue).

Shorts are praised by many for being experimental, for extending our vision and for changing the way we see the world. Genre movies – like soaps – tend to give us what we already know that we like, or at least what we can recognise, and therefore allow audiences to make an informed choice as to what to see at the cinema.

What the men and women in suits must not forget is that there is a difference between form and content; unless they do, writers will continue to write scripts that are all form and little substance. This is why teaching the three-act structure as if it were a cure-all even when it ignores depth, complexity and fascinating motivation, is bound to fail. This is why we must question the very foundations of the training that writers have been receiving for the last decade. But that's for Issue 12.

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