

Encouraging Intercultural Understanding and Empathy in a Multicultural World: Shifting From Mythopoetic Paradigms in Film Screenwriting

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the dominant Hollywood Aristotelian-based paradigm of three-act filmic narrative structure inherently obscures the subjectivities of filmic characters through normative expectations of a formulaic temporal organisation of filmic events in script structure. It further encourages discourses of conflict in narrative content through the paradigmatic narrative structure terminology, all of which is inappropriate in a multicultural environment characterised by high discursive levels of conflict, since it discourages empathy and social healing.

Prologue: Complex Multiculturalism in Teaching and Learning

This paper is based on two underlying questions:

- How do I integrate complex conceptions of multiculturalism into what I teach as lecturer in film screenwriting at a vocational university, and
- How do I make space for the voices of the broad spectrum of students to be heard?

These ideas are driven by an explicitly political agenda: to move beyond the mere achievement of 'political goals' of seeking rights for distinctly identifiable cultural groups

(Bernstein, M, 2002), which is in constant lively debate in South Africa. In the sphere of media and culture we have a unique opportunity to change how people perceive themselves and the socio-cultural world around them, and thereby to achieve 'cultural (social-change) goals' (Bernstein, M, 2002), and thereby to shift dominant paradigms without merely reversing the polarity of (culturally) oppositional politics.

In an attempt to assist film-makers in multicultural societies such as South Africa to transform their world in meaningful ways through culture and the art of film, we must consider ways in which storytelling and film-making can drive transformative cultural change without merely putting more images of 'different' cultures on or multiplying narratives about marginalised-people-in-protest, which so easily becomes commodified to feed the global news and entertainment machine. Happy, pretty pictures of 'cultural others' or sad, desperate scenes of cultural conflict don't adequately represent the multi-layered, multi-faceted, multiply-cultured real people who live in multicultural societies and don't have neatly collective needs and desires which represent their 'culture'. We must transcend these to enact notions of multiculturalism as more than the 'them' vs 'us' paradigm which underpins certain simplistic notions of people 'having' distinct and discrete 'cultures'. For, as Kaye & Davis (2011) note in the context of nationalist discourses, communities are not 'real', but are 'imagined',

where all citizens cannot know one another and yet believe, often fervently, in tropes and expressions of their kinship, connection or shared identity. Cultural and national identities ... are not monolithic and can be elusive and in flux.

Act 1: Student Narratives

Each year my undergraduate diploma students write documentary and narrative film scripts on subjects of their choice. In 2012, the themes extracted from their stories were as follows:

<u>Film Student Story Themes- 2012</u>	<u>First year</u>	<u>Second year</u>	<u>Third year</u>	<u>total</u>	
Gender/Sexuality					
teen pregnancy	1			1	
rape/ women abuse/ family abuse	3	3	1	7	
homophobia/ violence against lesbians	2	2	3	7	
arranged marriage		1		1	
circumcision			1	1	
HIV			1	1	
incest (rape)		2	1	3	21
Violence					
murder	4	1	3	8	
gangsterism	1	3		4	
violent community justice	1		1	2	
housebreaking	1		1	2	
kidnapping	1	1		2	16
Love					
falling in love	3	5	1	9	
infidelity	1	2	3	6	
love on the run			1	1	16
Politics					
race/racism/xenophobia/refugees	1	3	2	6	
corruption		2	1	3	
political liberation	1			1	
land restitution			1	1	11
Career/Work					
life and work after prison	1			1	
lack of work/poverty	1			1	
making it' (in the music industry)(at interviews)	2	1	1	4	
career choices		1		1	
first day at university	1	1		2	9
Meaning of Life/Life and Death					
life after death of a spouse	1			1	
life after death		1		1	
religion		1		1	
death in the family	1			1	
attempted suicide	1			1	
monotony of life			1	1	6
Other					
parties	1	1	1	3	
drugs & drug dealing	3			3	6

These themes reflect a high level of consciousness of political, personal, economic and existential conflict, playing themselves out in complex socio-cultural spaces. This is perhaps to be understood in a post-conflict society such as South Africa, and in light of the socio-economic

realities of my students. Some come from disadvantaged backgrounds and gang- and drug-infested urban communities where violence and poverty are commonplace. Some come from extremely patriarchal and traditionalist rural areas where gender/sexuality equality and acceptance of social 'difference' are largely non-existent. Those from middle-class urban homes have grown up with the fear of muggings, break-ins, hijackings, and often live in security estates or behind high walls topped with barbed wire and electric fences. More broadly, all South Africans are habituated to news reports and personal experience of discord and violence, and much of the social and political discourse rests on conflict.

Nevertheless, I am often shocked by some of the details nonchalantly recounted in certain stories. Although not every day, I am far too frequently faced with narratives of people being 'necklaced' (having a tyre placed around their neck and set alight) in community justice scenarios, or of rapes of mothers by sons, young children by community elders, young women by their fathers, lesbians by just about any man in order to 'correct' their sexuality, and many other nasty scenarios. Although there is often a sense of righteous indignation on the part of the writers, written in through the offending characters getting their comeuppance at the end of the story, the fact remains that, by almost anyone's estimations, conflict is far too intimate a part of the fabric of South African society.

Act 2: Unpacking Hollywood Film Generation Discourses

In the face of such issues I have begun to explore how to adequately reflect the complexities of a troubled society whilst at the same time helping to shift the underlying, often essentialist social discourses in deeper ways. In the context of film, and the global power of Hollywood, this entails looking carefully not only at what local film-makers are saying, but also at how the invisible frames of reference for storytelling might unconsciously undermine a developmental agenda.

The Troublesome Spread of Hollywood

The Hollywood 'studio system' designed an efficient mode of film-making on a grand scale, and thereby enabled the relatively inexpensive export of film content worldwide. Hollywood has an extremely strong position in both established and emerging world markets: regularly more than 70% of films on circuit in Europe are of US origin (FOCUS 2009). The top-grossing films worldwide are often predominantly American, and Hollywood films feature highly in Latin America, Australia, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates, and, of course, South Africa (<http://www.the-numbers.com/market/>). And the scenario corresponds in world television (World TV Market 2010).

The Hollywood foreign drive towards a global cinematic industry has problematically resulted in the decline of national film industries through the colonising of local markets, audiences and businesses (Nicoli, 2008), and in the process, the "American Dream" has been presented as universal. Narratives of this 'Dream' are, of course, largely initiated and constructed by Hollywood screenwriters who are often represented as creative spirits driven by passion for the story. The reality is somewhat different: the films which reach us are often decided on by economic factors. Hollywood spends more than \$500 million per year on script development,

75% of which is paid to writers for options and rewrites that will never be made (Millard 2006, Millard 2010).

The problem therefore is that:

“[t]he fundamental concern of writers is to pitch to catch the interest of agents, readers and producers during a pitch session... The goal of writers is to come up with a screenplay that flies, material that pitches well. They no longer care what happens on the screen.” (Geuens 2000 pp88)

The films which go into production and are distributed locally and globally are therefore those seen by the studio executives as a good financial bet (Ross, 2010). And the screenwriters trying to make their mark write according to a ‘formula’ which ‘works’. For this formula, they often turn to ‘the professionals’ who write the ‘how-to’ screenwriting books (Ross, 2010).

Three Problematic Texts

Three key self-help texts, and amongst the most widely read, are Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Style and Principles of Screenwriting* (1997, 1999), Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (1999), and Syd Field's *The Definitive Guide to Screenwriting* (2003). All three are based on the Aristotelian organisation of recognition, reversal, pity, fear and catharsis, and see 'story' as the seamless melding of structure, setting, character and genre, whereby a protagonist moves over a discernably continuous period of time, in a consistent, causally connected fictional reality, towards a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change.

On the face of things, this structure is a neat, simple and useful narrative paradigm, and therefore can be seen as a timeless reflection of the human condition. Why should we disagree?

The most obvious objection is simple: why should European mythopoetic history be automatically adopted everywhere in the world? After all, in a postcolonialist and (post) postmodernist world, we recognise that history is always partial and contingent, there is no objective 'truth', and nobody's cultural-historical version of 'meaning' should take precedence over any other.

But this objection to 'Western Narratives' doesn't necessarily fit with a more complex, non-oppositional notions of multiculturalism, which suggest there are no such things as a 'Western' or 'Non-Western' narrative in any essential way. Aristotelian mythopoetic frameworks should therefore not merely be thrown out in the fits of 'anti-Western' sentiment which are so many people's bread and butter these days.

Instead, the reason to question this framework is that it masks the subjectivity of narrative characters.

Prescriptive Narrative Time

McKee's assertions (1997) that the structure has an in-built focus on character growth that is appropriate in all times and all places is problematic since the Hollywood narrative 'formula' inherently prioritises action over complex emotion, and thereby sets up the 'American Dream' narrative as the standard against which all narrative is measured. This is patently not true in complex multicultural contexts.

As Blumenberg (1990) argues, classical Aristotelian narrative reflects the historical desire for order and cohesion. This is clearly seen in the 'page-a-minute' prescription of screenplay format: one page of a screenplay in the correct format translates into about a minute of screen time, resulting in a thirty-page first act, a sixty-page second act, and a thirty-page third act. When

matched with a simple three-act structure prescribing an inciting incident, a mid-point, a climax and a clear resolution presented in a causally connected reality lodged in a single time and place (McKee 1997, pp45), this means that there is very little wiggle-room in the structure to narrate characters' subjective conceptions of time which do not reflect the prescribed linear order.

In other words, real people in the real world don't conveniently come across a problem and then deal with it in neat quarters over an identifiable period of time within a three act structure. Nor do they come to convenient 'truths' or endings, happy or otherwise. Nor do cultures the world over necessarily experience time in a linear way: some have historically seen time as circular (Miller, 2006), or episodic (Hallam & Marshment, 2000), or even holographic (Wagner, 2001), depending on their cosmology. The 'formula' therefore doesn't allow the 'voice' of the character or his/her culture to emerge on its own terms. Instead, it prescribes the logic and sensibilities of the 'American Dream' narrative.

As a result, audiences are likely to perceive characters as merely being variations on a theme, as if they are the same as any other character on the screen. Audiences are likely to feel 'I've seen many people in your situation before on screen. As a result, I don't see how you are special, and I feel sorry for your circumstances in some unspecified way, and I dare you to be more innovative in getting out of those circumstances than the others I've seen'. In other words, audiences merely *sympathise* with characters, as if from the 'outside'.

Surely it would be better for audiences to feel for characters 'I could be there, in your shoes'? In other words, to *empathise* with character subjectivity.

Narrative Conflict

This disconnect between audience and character is particularly problematic when the structure implicitly perpetuates discourses of conflict. And clearly McKee, Vogler and Field all rely on discourses of conflict to characterise structural paradigms.

McKee's structure consists of three distinct acts:

ACT 1: INCITING INCIDENT (including Set-up)	ACT 2: PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATIONS	ACT 3: CRISIS CLIMAX RESOLUTION
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He calls on terms such as 'incitement', 'complications', 'climax' and 'resolution', which speak of overcoming challenges derived from an outside force in order to get to a defined conclusion. These concepts are clearly conflictual in nature.

Vogler's work, based on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1993), details story in terms of the mythical Hero's Journey and is based on Jungian archetypes. It entails eleven stages:

ACT 1: ORDINARY WORLD CALL TO ADVENTURE REFUSAL OF THE CALL MEETING WITH THE MENTOR CROSSING THE FIRST THRESHOLD (30 pages)	ACT 2: TESTS, ALLIES, ENEMIES APPROACH THE INNERMOST CAVE ORDEAL (SEIZING THE SWORD) REWARD (60 pages)	ACT 3: THE ROAD BACK RESURRECTION RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR (30 pages)
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His 'tests, allies and enemies', 'ordeal' and 'swords' are clearly words of war.

Field's book is unequivocally about a beginning, middle and end:

ACT 1: BEGINNING Setup (pp. 1-30) inc Plot Point 1 (pp.25-27)	ACT 2: MIDDLE Confrontation (pp. 30-90) Plot Point 2 (pp. 85-90)	ACT 3: END Resolution (pp. 90-120)
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The notion of 'confrontation' needs no more explanation.

All three constructions are variations on the theme that all protagonists are necessarily '*struggling foremost against external forces of antagonism*' (McKee, 1997). This is a problem from both a subjective (emotional) and objective (social) angle.

Firstly, not all people learn more about their lives, or experience subjective life-value, through external antagonism. Indeed, many of our most life-changing events, if seen differently from the popular Oprahfied version of things, come about through positive, non-combative experiences. Therefore, not all filmic protagonists should need to struggle against overt and external antagonism in order to reach catharsis, if they are to be seen as realistic.

Secondly, as Ruiz (1995) argues, ideas of 'central conflict theory' in screenwriting are not based on universal 'truths', but rather come from the socio-political history of the United States. They therefore cannot legitimately be projected to all multicultural societies.

To institutionalise such personal and social expectations within the prescribed narrative structure is therefore to entrench Hollywood's social and cultural norms, and therefore its filmic

narrative plots, cadences and tempos. In this instance, this means that Hollywood's implicit cultural and socio-economic biases towards conflict are also by definition entrenched.

This is particularly a problem in multicultural spaces characterised by histories of socio-cultural and interpersonal conflict. Even without direct causal links between narratives of conflict and socio-cultural violence such as one might link to propaganda, such narratives clearly become woven into the fabric of society, and, as can be seen by my students' narratives, recur in the social consciousness and media narratives of that society.

Act 3: Moving Towards Subjectivities

It is understandable that the Hollywood screenwriting guru's should advocate formulaic narrative frameworks through 'how-to' books which reflect the dominant Hollywood discourses. Their livelihoods depend on the perpetuation of the Classical Hollywood mythopoetic narrative structure based in conflict.

Yet, as Millard (2006) argues, such narration is not timeless, trans-cultural and fundamental to all societies. Pretending that it is automatically writes in the 'American Dream' narrative of the Hollywood 'everyman', who is irretrievably conflict-driven and conflict-ridden. This doesn't accurately reflect the complexity of multicultural societies inhabited by people with various and varying feelings, beliefs, world-views and relationships with others. Moreover, in multicultural societies with a history of conflict, narrative discourses that in their very bones encourage more conflict are not only inappropriate but positively dangerous. We need only look to the role of propaganda in 1930's Germany and 1990's Rwanda.

Instead, those outside of the Hollywood 'machine', people with complex lives in multicultural contexts, must re-inscribe narrative frameworks appropriate to the multiple stories

which accurately reflect complex social and personal circumstances on a local level within a globalised media reality. Some of these stories will of course reflect antagonism and conflict, yet writers should not be virtually *instructed* to do so through the meta-discourses of screenwriting itself.

Therefore, we must explore ways in which to mediate and perhaps even replace these inappropriately value-laden frameworks with more *value-neutral* paradigms which relate to the nature of the medium of film itself and which take account of film's wonderful contingencies, complexities and multiple potentials.

Epilogue: From Purported Objectivity to Self-Determined Subjectivity

So where to go from here, given that it is impossible to ignore the power of the global media-machine with its skewed priorities in favour of Hollywood, and given how many people outside of Hollywood hold it up as the gold standard?

We must look beyond fictions of conflict and antagonism as the driving force for all human experience, or as the necessary underpinning for all societies, especially those societies which require stories of healing, peace and a gentler version of human experience in order to move forward.

Instead, we should consider alternative frameworks for understanding the human condition which have more credence in complex 'real' worlds. This entails telling filmic stories *about* multiplicity (through stories recounting diversity of cultures and world-views), *as well as* framing them in narrative structures which enable that multiplicity to reveal itself, on its own terms and through the emotional engagement of characters with *their* worlds. Such value-neutral structures should enable screenwriters to recount their own subjective historical, cultural, social

and personal dialogues in accordance with their own discursive norms, some of which might reflect conflictual 'American Dream' narratives, and some of which might not.

Such an approach is to acknowledge that

“...the story of an individual life usually plays off on one or more historically and socially transmitted narratives, which serve as prototypes for the elaboration of personal identity.” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, pp xxiii)

But, more importantly, it is to refuse to make filmic characters into cardboard cutouts based on social caricatures of the inhabitants of the American Dream narrative, and to insist that filmic characters should be no less complex than the people inhabiting our complex, multiple, multicultural world.

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