
Preface

OFTEN I ask screenwriters, Why not abolish the entire film and dramatic enterprise which consumes billions of dollars a year and endless hours, to say nothing of the money involved in related industries, and use all that money, time, and effort for the elimination of poverty, say, in Africa? Or Appalachia? Why not take all that money and invest it in the elimination of a particular killer disease? Wouldn't that be morally better and a far more humane activity than writing another screenplay or producing another film? Wouldn't relieving the suffering of one child be reason enough to abolish an industry whose only widely accepted function is entertainment? To their credit a few writers in a given discussion group vote to do just that.

Most do not, although even the arguments offered after we get past easy and cynical responses are unconvincing. One response that emerges repeatedly is that abolishing the film and entertainment industry for these purposes wouldn't work: creating drama and all that entails by way of production and dissemination would start again from the ground up. There is something necessary about this creative activity, hard as it may be to put that necessity into words.

The nature of that necessity certainly cannot be found by writing another screenwriting manual or reviewing the literature within the field. Drama, which includes the continual creation of new dramas, occupies so pervasive a position in our culture and one so caught up within the argument modern culture is having with itself that to understand its role demands perspectives that go beyond those discussed within the field into broader cultural, psychological, and philosophical areas. This is also true for understanding what we must do when we believe we are caught up in purely technical writing problems, for a continuous theme here is how dramatic structure roots in psychic structure.

These reflections led me to adopt the more personal essay style. This does not imply these are essays of aesthetics or criticism. I hope writers will get as much real use out of these essays as any more traditionally specialized text, for the goal is to give them a better understanding of what the various technical tools they use are for. Much of what is offered here has grown from reflection based on long experience as a writer and teacher, although any necessary documentation is given in the notes.

I use the term “drama” broadly, applying drama equally to stage and film. And like the ancient Greeks, I include comedy within drama as one of its two great divisions in treating human nature and experience. Tragedy may have its suffering mask, comedy its laughing, but if we look at traditional renderings we can find ourselves struggling to distinguish between the pain in either mask, just as in life it can be hard to tell tears of joy from tears of grief. Yet both are part of the great river of drama on which we so strongly float.

Including screenwriting as “drama” seems obvious on the face of it, although I suppose some don’t realize writing drama for the stage or film is the same, allowing for the adjustments caused by using the different production mediums. A production medium makes for a variety in the art of drama but is not drama itself, not the exploration of the human spirit through the guise of dramatic action.

Beyond this, the dramatic impulse has moved powerfully to film in the last sixty years. If we reach for an illustrative dramatic example for some point we are making, we are far more likely to do so from a film than stage drama, including filmed versions of notable dramas such as the multitude of filmed versions of Shakespeare. Even in England the example reached for is far more likely now to stem from a filmed version of Shakespeare than ever before, with arguments over whether Olivier got Henry V right in *Henry V* or Branagh, in their *film* versions, or whether Olivier or Branagh got Hamlet right in their *film* versions.

I will think of this book as a success if the reflections offered here, however sure or tentative, spark further reflection and help some writer give a screenplay that extra dimension that ensures success and meaningfulness.

The Death and Life of Drama

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