

Philip Shelley

Screen-
writing

The Craft and The Career



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Introduction: The Inspiration of Story

The real inspiration for this book is a life lived enjoying story in all its forms. Storytelling is an inextricable part of all our lives. The way we think about our own lives is often the same way we think about fictional stories. The way journalists work is to select information and work it into the coherent shape of a ‘story’.

Life is fundamentally mysterious and we all have a deep need to create and/or experience fictional stories – or fictionalised dramatisations of ‘true’ stories – to inform and impose order on the ordinary and extraordinary, strange and often unfathomable events of our real lives.

Story helps to make sense of the confusion, mystery and messiness of real life. Story in all its forms addresses the primal mysteries of birth, death, procreation, individuality, fate, time, disease, natural disasters, love – and all the other multifarious aspects of life that defy rational explanation.

Story goes some way to providing both an intellectual – but more importantly emotional – response to the Great Uncertainties of Life.

At its epic, large-scale best, the way we experience story is akin to a religious experience. (What is the New Testament if not a series of artfully constructed, character-driven, human stories?)

We all have an intimate, personal connection to those televisual and cinematic stories that we first experienced and enjoyed at a formative, impressionable age. For me those stories were films like *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*, *One*

Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Annie Hall, Manhattan, A Hard Day's Night, Harold and Maude, The Graduate, Kramer vs. Kramer, American Graffiti, Jaws... I could go on. Those films that still say something fresh to you every time you see them, while at the same time giving you that repeated appreciation of those story moments that make your heart jump, that send a chill down your spine. *The Godfather* is packed full of those – images and moments that are imprinted on my retina.

The first time I saw *The Godfather* I was in the US, where we lived for two years in the 1970s. The film had just come out and was already a big hit. I can't remember exactly where we saw it but it was in a packed movie theatre somewhere in the suburbs of Philadelphia. As well as being struck by my first experience of a US movie audience – and how vocal and raucous they were in their expressions of excitement at the film – I remember being taken by what I saw as some of the explicit sexual moments; and simultaneously by the uncomfortable awareness that the most explicit sex scenes I had ever seen in a film (it had been a sheltered upbringing) were experienced sitting next to my dad.

But also I remember being incredibly excited by the visceral power of the story, the images and moments that felt so powerfully dramatic and have stayed with me to this day. *The Godfather* is one of those seminal films where virtually every scene and sequence feels like a 'greatest hits' moment.

I have seen the film many times since and every time I watch it, I marvel at some other scene or sequence that strikes me anew as brilliant screen storytelling.

Among other formative cinema-going memories is one of the very first films I ever saw in a cinema (by which I mean one of the first films I saw, full stop, as films on TV weren't a thing back in the mid-1960s). This was The Beatles' Richard Lester-directed *A Hard Day's Night*. I still recall the joyful rush that film and The Beatles' music gave (and still gives) me. Many years later I had two stints working as drama script editor for Sally Head Productions at Twickenham Studios. There was one small office on our corridor that belonged not to SHP but to the great man himself, a film-maker with a key role in the history of British Cinema – Richard Lester – a gentle presence who would quietly and politely greet you on his way to and from his office.

Two John Wayne films also come to mind: firstly, *The Alamo*, to which my mother took me as a desperate displacement activity on the last miserable day

of the school holidays before I was packed off to boarding school. This was actually one instance when a film story didn't work its magic – the memory of the whole experience of this visit to an empty-ish matinee in a cinema in Canterbury, Kent, is one of misery.

And then another Wayne film, *True Grit*. There is a scene where a character falls into a pit of snakes. The woman in the row in front was so lost in the film that she started hitting her rolled-up newspaper on the back of the seat in front of her, yelling and warding off the imagined snakes. A wonderful and funny example of the power of cinema to enable you to inhabit a story so completely.

Cinema continues to this day to be one of the hugely positive aspects of my life. Nothing compares to the escape and joy of being pulled into a compelling story in the comforting isolation of a cinema.

★ ★ ★

In my youth, television fiction soon became as big a joy as cinema – from the comedy genius of Monty Python and Morecambe and Wise to wonderful TV dramas – the riches of BBC drama in the 1970s and '80s – *Play for Today*, and so many other brilliant writer-led strands (*The Wednesday Play*, *Screen One*, *Screen Two*, *Second City Firsts*, etc.). In fact it was this sort of wonderful TV drama – strands that highlighted the creative primacy of the writer – that first alerted me to the exciting world of dramatic writing in general and screenwriting in particular – exceptional writers like Jack Rosenthal, Dennis Potter, Mike Leigh, Peter Nichols, Stephen Poliakoff, Howard Schuman, Ken Loach, Alan Clarke, G. F. Newman, Jim Allen and Alan Bennett, all starting to make their mark as dramatists for the screen. (Not a lot of gender or racial diversity in the profile of TV writers of that period!)

Each generation form their beliefs, passions and identities at least partly around the films, plays, books and music they experience at that formative age.

One of the real strengths and virtues of screenwriting is in the narrative possibilities, the range and richness, of series TV – multi-stranded, ensemble series like *Call My Agent!* (Fanny Herrero), *Euphoria* (Sam Levinson), *Orange Is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan) and *Last Tango in Halifax* (Sally Wainwright).

Series TV at its best is about our emotional investment in character and how this investment deepens and grows with every passing episode and season. Of course, it's also about story and the situations in which these characters find themselves. But without character, story can soon wear thin. *Money Heist* is an example of brilliant storytelling but with characters who don't, in my opinion, have the requisite texture of the very best TV series. I stuck with this for ten episodes, but my interest waned as the writing revealed the limits of the character definition.

On the other hand, the pilot episode of *Succession* is a wonderful example of the most brilliantly flawed and fascinating characters arriving fully formed on screen the moment you meet them. The way characters enter the story in this opening episode is memorable; inspiring examples of how to introduce your characters – Kendall on the way to his meeting in the chauffeur-driven limo, psyching himself up to rap music on his earphones, cousin Greg being humiliated in an animal costume at one of the Waystar theme parks; Logan waking confused in the night and pissing on the carpet. All of these opening character moments are utterly distinctive, idiosyncratic and dynamic; and they instantly get us to the heart of each of these characters' internal conflicts.

The shows that first really excited me in the way they exploited the series format were US productions like *Homicide: Life on the Street* (Paul Attanasio), *Oz* (Tom Fontana) and *Thirtysomething* (Marshall Herskovitz, Edward Zwick).

All the best series make a necessary virtue of their limitations, of containing their stories in particular settings (precincts). In this way, series set in prisons, hospitals and police stations have spawned so many brilliant formats over the years.

★ ★ ★

My experiences running the Channel 4 screenwriting course feel like a wonderful mirroring of my first experience of TV dramatists. Remembering the joy and education (above all, a political education, for which I am eternally grateful) those writers above mentioned gave me, it's now deeply pleasing to be part of a course that introduces new dramatists to TV drama – brilliant, innovative, original writers like Charlie Covell, Anna Symon, Vinay Patel, Theresa Ikoko, Inua Ellams, and so many more, who I feel confident will be among the groundbreaking screenwriters of the next decade and beyond: the

2020s equivalents of current star TV dramatists like Sally Wainwright, Russell T Davies, Jack Thorne, James Graham, etc.

I'm in the privileged position of being at the cutting edge of trends in new dramatic writing. Above all, over the last ten years, it's been a privilege to see the blossoming of increased racial diversity in UK screenwriting. The range and quality of dramatic writing by new voices from the Black and Asian communities in particular has been a joy to behold and be a part of – writers like the aforementioned Inua Ellams (writer of acclaimed stage play *Barber Shop Chronicles* – a National Theatre production), Theresa Ikoko (*Rocks*), Vinay Patel (*Murdered by My Father*) and Abraham Adeyemi, Dipo Baruwa-Etti, Archie Maddocks, Nathaniel Price, Chandni Lakhani, Matthew Jacobs Morgan, Matilda Feyisayo Ibini, Anna Ssemuyaba, Shyam Popat, Jenny Takahashi Stark, Kirsty Rider and many others – these are all writers who are starting to make a real impact and about whom you will hear much more in the coming years.

★ ★ ★

Screenwriting is hard. There are a lot of screenplays, a lot of films and TV shows, and not many of them are outstanding. Not only that, not many of the initial *ideas* for films and TV shows are outstanding. So it's something to strive for – to write a seriously good screenplay is a real achievement. Perversely this doesn't necessarily mean you have to suffer, that it will be a hard, painful, stressful process. Sometimes the best scripts will come easily, will pour out of you. Equally, sometimes a good script will take months and years of dead ends, strife and rethinks. There is no rhyme or reason to the process, to what clicks. There are some brilliant writers who have written some poor scripts; and some writers who have written one brilliant script and are then never able to repeat it. Not only is it difficult, it's mysterious and mercurial. So this book doesn't attempt to offer artificial short cuts. Trying to reduce the process and the template for stories to a single, reductive formula is simplistic, unrealistic and, frankly, insulting to the real writers who strive endlessly, coming at story from so many different angles, constantly learning, over a career of writing good scripts.

PART ONE
THE CRAFT

I

Creativity and Screenwriting: Getting Started

Creativity is where craft begins. As writers you need to be constantly returning to the well of invention and imagination. If you're very unlucky, your career will go like this: you will write one or two excellent 'spec' (as in 'speculative' – unpaid) scripts that will attract industry interest. This will lead to you being hired to write episodes on existing TV drama series. Your work on these episodes will lead to more of this work. This will (at first) be demanding but exciting, creatively satisfying, and financially rewarding work. But as the years go by and you are continuing to write these series episodes on other people's shows, as the demands of this work begin to sap your creative energy, you may lose your excitement and enthusiasm, the episodes you write will begin to lose their sparkle. You will start to feel used, overworked, and the originality of your voice will become tarnished and stale. You will forget the excitement and inspiration that first made you want to write; it will become just a job.

Gradually this regular series work will begin to dry up as you are replaced by younger, hungrier, fresher writers.

The industry can be brutal like this and it's so important that you do all you can to avoid this cycle by constantly refreshing your work and your voice.

This is where the 'spec' or 'calling card' script comes in.

Where We're At

The film and TV drama industry in the UK – but I think globally too – is in a fascinating place at the moment. When I first started working in the world of scripts back in the 1990s, in TV drama, genre was very much the staple – a lot of one-hour, 9 p.m. dramas were being made by the BBC and ITV, most of which were returnable crime, medical or legal shows. Variety came in the shape of longer-form episodes of shorter-run mini-series – but most of these were also crime – or adaptations of famous books (Dickens, Austen, Christie, etc.) that had been adapted several times before.

Now though, with the proliferation of broadcasters and platforms looking for scripted content, everyone is trying to cut through and make their mark – and conventional genre shows have become the exception rather than the rule. There are far more opportunities and openings now for genuinely innovative, authored work – often, the more outlandish and unexpected the better. In short, there has never been a better time for new writers to find their place in the industry and to make a mark by announcing themselves through the uniqueness of their work. (Much more about this in Part 2, the ‘Career’ section of this book.)

Your ‘Spec’ or ‘Calling Card’ Script

At the start of your career it's your spec script that is going to open doors for you and get you work. New writers sometimes tell me they have a great idea and ask if I can introduce them to potential employers and help them to try to interest producers in this idea. But this is putting the cart before the horse. No producer worth their salt will hire you as a writer – no matter how wonderful the idea – if they don't know your work as a writer, if they haven't read a script or scripts by you. As I will go on to discuss, good, exciting ideas will be the cornerstone and starting point of your script – but there is obviously a huge leap from brilliant idea to brilliantly executed, full-length script.

Writers get on to the Channel 4 screenwriting course principally through the script they write (and partly through the interview, more on which later) but these scripts, sadly and frustratingly, don't generally get made.

In the US there is a thriving spec market. Such a thing doesn't exist in the UK in the same way. To date, of the 150+ scripts written in the first fourteen years of the Channel 4 course, while literally dozens of these scripts have been 'optioned' by production companies – and many are still in active development – only one has been made: a script by Tom Wells that was made in the Channel 4 *Coming Up* series of films.

Your first few spec scripts, even though they probably won't get made, may well be the most important scripts you will ever write. I know of countless examples of writers for whom one or two of the first ever scripts they've written (or at least the first scripts they've shown to the world) have opened countless industry doors for them and sustained their writing careers for many years.

If you're not going to fall into the trap I laid out above, of the writer who gradually gets used up and spat out by the system (writers who become 'hacks?'), it's important that you keep writing spec scripts. As your career develops, as you get older, as the world changes and as you change, so will your outlook on the world, and what you have to say as a writer and how you say it.

It's therefore vital that you try to find the time to keep writing spec scripts, those scripts that highlight your unique talents and sensibilities as a writer. I have often heard agents talking about how they encourage their clients to write fresh spec scripts that they (the agents) can use to showcase their clients. After a few years your original spec script may not seem as relevant and impactful as it once did. For a writer, this process is about keeping working at developing and showcasing your particular strengths and passions as a writer, and letting the wider industry know that you're still relevant, still writing about the things that matter, and are still remaining creative and prolific.

One of the things an uncommissioned, spec script allows you is the freedom to write about whatever you like: a rare opportunity (if you are so inclined) to write a screenplay of real scale. Maybe the sort of script that – because of its potential budget or controversial subject matter – will never get made but that is about something utterly distinctive to you and your personal passions.

Voice

Writing is individual. No two writers are the same just as no two people are the same. How your work as a writer, as an individual, comes across to reader and audience can be identified as your unique writer's voice.

'Voice' is something that is talked about a lot in the industry. It's that hard-to-define quality, the thing that makes a writer stand out. 'A new, exciting, distinctive voice' is the quality that producers, script editors, development executives and literary agents are looking for in new writers. But what does this mean?

There are certain stories that you as writers were born to tell. The stories that come from your guts, the stories that you can't *not* tell. The more you write, the clearer your voice will become to you – even if you have to get through a lot of hours of writing before you start to get a strong sense of this. Your voice is the ability to tap into and write about your own truths. We all feel strongly about something (and if we don't, we have no business being writers). Voice is about finding those ideas, stories and characters that stir you up, that ignite your passion and enable you to produce stories that feel natural and important to you. But persevere. If writing is one thing, it is hugely time-consuming. You have to put in the hours.

So, without getting too hung up and unhelpfully self-conscious about it, you need to work at finding your individual voice as a writer. If we think about successful, high-profile writers, with some it's easy to identify their unique voice, with others less so.

I suppose one of the ultimate examples of a screenwriter who has become absolutely identified with a very particular style of storytelling that feels utterly distinctive to them is Quentin Tarantino. Of the few genuinely well-known screenwriters (don't go into screenwriting if it's fame you're after!), Tarantino is arguably the most imitated and influential (even if he's known more as a director than a writer). It's telling that so many writers who don't yet have the confidence of knowing their own voice fall back on Tarantino-esque dialogue and style. It's interesting to observe that Tarantino's voice developed from his own deep obsession with cinema. Often his 'voice' is itself one of homage or imitation of other screenwriters who came before him.

Sarfraz Manzoor is a journalist and writer, whose book *Greetings from Bury Park* is the inspiration for the film *Blinded by the Light* (2019, screenplay by Paul Mayeda Berges, Gurinder Chadha and Sarfraz Manzoor). Growing up the son of Pakistani immigrants in 1980s Luton, Manzoor's guiding light and inspiration as a writer was Bruce Springsteen. It's hard to think of a story that is more specific than a British-Pakistani growing up in Luton in 1987 and falling in love with the music and philosophy of Bruce Springsteen. Here is Sarfraz Manzoor, writing in the *Guardian* (29 August 2019):

The film is uncompromising in its cultural specificity... What I had not appreciated was the power of storytelling to engender empathy. The feeling that you don't fit in – discovering your identity through music (or film, writing). In telling a very specific story, it turned out, I was actually telling a universal one... Perhaps I should not have been surprised. After all, I was deeply moved and affected by This Is England, Wild Rose and Annie Hall, even though I am neither a young white English skinhead, a Scottish country-music-loving single mum, nor a neurotic middle-aged American-Jewish comedian.

★ ★ ★

Nina Stibbe's first novel was published in 2014 – thirty years after she'd started writing. Another excellent *Guardian* article, 'How Nina Stibbe found her voice' (Sam Jordison, 21 April 2020), talks about how Stibbe had a series of unsuccessful writing ventures because she was writing in a style that was too self-consciously literary. It was only when, years later, her sister Victoria found the letters the younger Nina had written to her when Nina was working as a nanny in the 1980s and Nina reread them, that she realised where her strengths as a writer lay, how her 'voice' had been there all along. As the article says:

It's to Stibbe's credit that she realised where the appeal lay and applied her rediscovered voice to her novels. Those sharp observations, period details and cheeky moments of insight and open-hearted affection are all present and correct in Stibbe's other novels.

There are clear lessons from the work and experience of these two writers: in telling the truths of their own stories, in finding the detail, minutiae and specifics of their own stories, their stories become universal. To quote Sarfraz Mansoor, *'In a time when politicians seem intent on defining us by our differences, my film may remind them that all of us are characters in a larger human story.'*

As audiences, we value the magic of spending time with characters and in worlds we wouldn't encounter in real life – but that feel utterly personal and distinctive to the writer – and therefore somehow relatable.

Write the stories you want or need to write. First and foremost, write for yourself.

UK screenwriters and what defines their voice

Of contemporary UK TV dramatists, Sally Wainwright's hallmarks as a writer are numerous – her brilliance at dramatising character and story, her dark sense of humour and underlying well of humanity. She writes about social injustice but always as an integrated part of a human story; and her stories are (almost) exclusively rooted in the communities of Northern England where she's from.

Jimmy McGovern has a clear, distinctive and powerful voice as a writer. His work is very much rooted in his Liverpool background. The stories he tells are mainly about injustices perpetrated on working-class (often Catholic) communities and individuals. The brilliance of his craft as a storyteller is characterised by dramatising knotty character dilemmas, telling stories of emotional intensity that feel rooted in an everyday, working-class reality.

Russell T Davies is another outstanding UK screenwriter with a highly distinctive voice. His stories are always full of colour, imagination, almost operatic passion; and a real narrative flair for telling stories in unexpected and

exciting ways. He is also, like McGovern, a pioneering, campaigning writer; many of the stories RTD chooses to tell are in celebration of queer characters and communities; of under-represented characters swimming against the tide of the conventional mainstream.

Charlie Brooker's wonderful *Black Mirror* series was foreshadowed by *Dead Set*, and the brilliance of his writing – which is darkly comic, usually set in a dystopian future and subversively political – is also evident in his comedy shows like *Screenwipe*, taking eviscerating, satirical swipes at the absurdities of modern political life.

On the other side of the pond, Aaron Sorkin has a huge body of work that is always recognisable as his – from *The West Wing* to *The Social Network*, *The Newsroom* to *Steve Jobs*, among many, many others. Sorkin's screenplays are characterised by their liberal politics, by the intelligence and articulacy of the dialogue and characters. His scripts are slick, sentimental, but full of formal flair and brilliant, playful cut-and-thrust dialogue. As with Tarantino, the term 'Sorkin-esque' has become part of the screenwriting lexicon.

What so many of these writers have in common in their voice is a sense of passion, a burning need to tell the particular stories they tell, to dramatise the lives of the people they are writing about. Drama driven by righteous, humanitarian anger – but all dramatised through detailed, layered, grounded characterisation. Above all, their voice is defined by their choice of story material. All the stories these writers tell, the subjects they choose, seem to have factors common to these individual writers.

Ultimately a writer's voice comes down to a writer's conviction and integrity – filtered through their own unique personal circumstances and experiences. We should all be trying to tell the stories that mean something to us on a deep emotional level. We don't need to analyse exactly what that is – but we need to recognise and connect with that passion that compels us to tell particular stories.

Voice is about finding universal themes and emotional lines in stories and characters that feel rooted in a very distinctive story world.

In exploring the concept of voice, and as a screenwriting education in its own right, it's really valuable to focus on the work of writers whose work you admire, and to watch (and more importantly read) as much of their back catalogue as you can. It's so interesting to see how their work and voice have developed and changed over the years; to see what elements their work always has, what never changes in the way they tell stories; to consider what is unique about them as writers.

What you absolutely shouldn't do is try to copy the way these writers write. What you should do is learn from their experience and from the way they craft their stories, and the example of how all of these writers have achieved success by finding a way to tell the stories they want to tell in the way they want to tell them; to see that one of the strengths of all of these writers is the specificity and individuality of their take on the world. A Jimmy McGovern story is a million miles from a Charlie Brooker story – but in their completely different and unique ways, they are equally brilliant.

Most of the best writers are not chameleons. They aren't equally adept at telling stories on screen across all sorts of different genres. To say they have their particular strengths means that they write to these strengths; this also means that they know where their strengths lie and what their limitations are.

There are the brilliant 'freaks', like Jack Thorne and Jesse Armstrong, whose voices (arguably) don't feel as strongly distinctive or identifiable as a writer like Jimmy McGovern; but Jack Thorne is a freak because he does, unlike most outstanding writers, seem equally adept at telling stories in so many different genres and styles – from a high-concept, family-adventure film like *The Aeronauts* to the gritty realism of *This Is England* (written with Shane Meadows) and *Help*.

Shane Meadows is the other side of the coin to Jack Thorne – a writer whose work is usually utterly distinctive to him, his voice instantly recognisable (in tone, style, character and story world).