

What is development?

What do we mean when we speak of development within the context of writing for the screen?

Something surfaces...

.. an idea, an image, an atmosphere. It sparks a creative process. The – let's call it – 'idea' attracts other elements: images, sounds, emotions, more ideas, words. It becomes more than this one thing and in this process begins to resemble something that will be(come) larger than the sum of its parts – a story, a film, a work. It grows gradually into something that wants to be communicated, that wants to engage.

What follows this first spark is a period of collecting and gathering. Ideally this period is uninhibited, uncensored, from both the outside and the creator. I like to think of this stage (or at least, I wish this for writers) as one taking place in a kind of cocoon. Secure and a little bit lonely. An activity that is unencumbered by outside (and self-) critique, feedback, opinions. It is a time of growth, of becoming – of coming into being – and therefore one that is both tenacious and fragile.

At some point what has been collected will begin to take on a shape that asks, or even requires, to become more defined. The writer may examine and reflect upon what is there, and begin to shape and structure this. During this process some elements will be whittled away, others may be added. It is an ongoing activity, one that is neither final, nor finite. Things that are 'deleted' may return, things that are added may later be found to be unnecessary.

It's useful to understand that this is a *process*. One that might feel like it's moving backward when it is moving forward or rather, through moving backward is also moving forward. One that comes seemingly naturally to some and is arduous to others.

A simple but succinct definition of development from a colleague speaks of development as “the enormously difficult work of making it clear.” This is what comes after the first steps described above. After the spark, the attraction and the gathering of related elements. These are some of the first moments of creation, but what happens when the elements are there and the shaping and structuring begins? Shaping and structuring is about defining and selection: What fits, what does not? What belongs to this and what doesn't? This can happen only after there is an idea of what 'this' is.

And this idea may be preliminary. As the process of development continues this idea may mutate, shift into something else. But over time the clarity of intention increases.

What exactly is being made clear?

‘Making it clear’ doesn’t necessarily mean ‘what is the story’ or even ‘what is it *really* about’? Just as vital is: *how* does this want to be told? This is often related to why this is being created by this writer or filmmaker. What is the connection between the material and the creator? This is significant, not only because of the connection to the creator, but also because ‘how it is told’ is directly connected to how the finished film will invite an audience to experience it. A filmmaker who seeks to explore a situation or investigate a state of being, for example, will most often allow the audience to participate in the exploratory nature through the film’s narration, whereas another filmmaker who may have had a similar question, but also thinks they have an answer to it, may narrate in an entirely different way, often with their answer contained within the film. The audience of this latter film may be less active than in the former case.

Making it clear is not only about making it clear to oneself, but also, once the clarity is there, to be able to communicate to others with more precision. Knowing what and how you want to engage an audience and being able to communicate this to producers, financiers, broadcasters, anyone connected to your work or seeking to become involved. It means that you can talk about the same thing, avoiding misunderstandings about ‘what it is’. After all, the screenplay is part of the foundation for the film that is to come, not yet the finished work. The less clarity is in the text but also in other, written and verbal, communication about it, the greater the possibility of people seeing things that are not there, not fully seeing what *is* there, or imagining it could be something it is not.

Thus, another effect of achieving clarity during development is being able to respond to feedback with confidence, rather than feeling the need to defend. In our work we hear various feedback that writers receive from different sources and it is surprising how often the feedback is inappropriate because it is actually inapplicable to this screenplay¹. There can be several reasons for this, the two most obvious are: the script is not fully communicating what the writer intended OR the reader hasn’t read attentively and at some point started imagining a different kind of film. (Much can be said about this, but should be addressed to the readers, rather than the writers of screenplays.)

¹ To be further expanded on in *The Alleged Truisms of Screenwriting*

Finally, some form of development continues and may continue all through production, sometimes even postproduction. It's impossible to avoid, we are not robots, we learn and discover as we go along. Nonetheless, at some stage you will have a final draft, hopefully as precise as possible, to communicate as clearly as possible with all collaborators and eventually through the film, with an audience.

I am rereading this text now, in March 2020, knowing that many of you are either in lockdown or approaching lockdown, knowing also that many of you have had to cancel, postpone or interrupt film productions. I see now this text never had an ending, it just tapered off, probably I had a plan to come back to it and to continue writing about later stages of development, but at this moment, it doesn't seem right to write about these later stages.

Instead, if you are writing, please keep writing. If, for now, you cannot, don't despair. Start writing something new, start writing something without knowing why or what it is. Don't write for an unknown audience, write for yourself, write about something that you are curious about or something that feels familiar, write about what you long for or you fear. Pick that dream or memory that keeps coming back and allow it to spend some time with you or let it hook up with another idea, one that seems to have nothing to do with it. It is peculiar how the disparate, contradictory things inside us can turn into fireworks if we let them meet. There are so many routes you can go, just pick one and keep going for a little while. There is no right or wrong here.

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