

Revealing the Secrets of the Universe through Cinema

by Michael Karp, S.O.C.

Insights on what makes an emotionally gripping story

All of us who have worked on student and professional films have had the experience of suffering through a movie that just wasn't emotionally gripping. Perhaps the work was technically brilliant, but there was something indefinable that was "missing" about the story.

I had the pleasure of working on staff for James Cameron for six years and from that, I have some simple insights to share with you about what makes a great movie grab you by the heart and drag you on a ride that you won't forget.

If a filmmaker fails to make that visceral connection with the audience, your film is dead in the water. The brilliant directors that I've worked with, such as Ridley Scott and Ron Howard, really understood that concept.

Let's take some famous films and identify the flaw in the hero of the movie. Then we'll follow as our character travels from a virtual purgatory, into a symbolic hell and then arrives at a heaven at the other end of the road. Taking that journey is something that humans are deeply wired to desire and crave like a drug. Audiences love to watch interesting characters wrestle with their flaws, transcend them and then become better human beings. Perhaps this all sounds very artsy fartsy and theoretical, but we will take some concrete

examples and use that analysis to improve your film project's story.

Consider that great crowd pleaser, *The Graduate*. Our hero Benjamin's flaw is that he is passive, has no friends and is confused about the meaning of life. Thus, he is easily seduced by an older woman named Mrs. Robinson, who is alcoholic, neurotic and manipulative. When Benjamin's father suggests that Ben should be dating Mrs. Robinson's beautiful, intelligent and (for the most part) emotionally healthy daughter Elaine, Ben foolishly refuses.

Do you see the cornucopia of flaws in the protagonist? Do you see that Ben's rich collection of flaws provides the fuel for the plot of the film?

If a film has no plot and no story, the audiences will not shell out ten dollars to see your movie. No ten dollars at the box office and your film career is over. It is vital that your characters have interesting flaws, and then overcome those flaws. If not, you have no story, and you have no audience.

When considering *The Graduate*, it is interesting to note that all of Ben's epiphanies are obvious in hindsight. It is not immediately obvious that Ben should give up Mrs. Robinson in favor of her

daughter. Although Ben's father seems clueless, he actually is the only person who gives Ben any valid advice, such as... date Elaine.

Titanic contains the same interesting process of exploring character flaws. We have a beautiful, intelligent young girl named Rose. She has a problem, which is that she's broke. And so her mother is forcing her to marry a man that she does not love. Rose's flaw is that she incorrectly thinks that her only way out of her misery is suicide. She is in spiritual purgatory. But by going through the hell of the sinking of the Titanic, she transcends her suicidal thoughts, learns to think outside her box and transforms into a new person. At the beginning of the film, Rose is broke, has no man to love and is thus suicidal. But at the end of the film, Rose is still broke, the love of her life has died, but she paradoxically yearns for life. This is an amazing change, because only a day earlier she wanted to die.

Once again, we see that a film like *Titanic* is riveting because the protagonist has huge flaws and overcomes them. There are certain experiences that humans are genetically programmed to desire: Love, music, food, etc. When one hears a catchy melody or beat, smells a delicious meal cooking or meets one's soul mate, humans have no choice but to be primally attracted. And the same goes for a great narrative. Homo sapiens have no choice but to be attracted to a compelling storyline. A great story is based on exploring the hero's flaws and then watching the protagonist overcome those flaws.

Once again, in hindsight, we see that Rose's epiphany is sort of obvious. If you are broke, the answer is not to prostitute yourself or to become a gold-digger. Rather, think out of the box, improve one's self and transcend one's poor luck. Don't be a victim. Grab life by the horns and change yourself.

If your film doesn't contain characters with fascinating flaws, then perhaps a rewrite is in order. When you have a bad story, the audience gets restless. Their butts wiggle uncomfortably in their seats. You want your audience on the edge of their seats, yearning for more. And the audience yearns for story and story is based on flaws.

Next, we examine, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Tim Robbins plays a banker falsely imprisoned for the murder of his wife. While we soon come to believe that Robbins is a victim of a failed justice system, the truth shortly becomes more complicated. In actuality, Robbins' character yearned to murder his wife, to punish her for her infidelity. But he never gets the chance to literally murder her, because fate intervened and his wife was infortuitously murdered by a stranger.

However, there is a poetic justice in Robbins' incarceration, since his dream of murdering his wife was almost as poisonous as actually doing so. Hence the deep, dark beauty of Shawshank rises: Robbins is not a victim. He craved to do evil, and he was punished until the hell of the prison catalyzed his redemption.

Remember this: Victim movies are boring. Don't make them!

Make movies about people who victimize themselves. Although the world is filled with injustice and hate, for most people who want to see their worst enemy, they need only look in the mirror.

Finally, one more example of character flaw, the smash hit *Austin Powers*, *International Man of Mystery*. Students and professionals alike are often mystified that I find the script of Austin Powers so brilliant. But the force was with Mike Myers and Jay Roach when they created this incredible piece of work.

Austin Powers is a 1960s playboy, a promiscuous consumer of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. He thinks he is happy, but has lost the love of his life (played by Mimi Rogers) due to his commitment phobia. Austin thinks that he can have his cake and eat it too; both play the field and get "The Girl". That is his purgatory. That is his flaw.

Austin is magically frozen and transported forward thirty years to the uptight, sexually repressed, HIV plagued 1990s. As fate would have it, he falls in love with Vanessa, the daughter of his former beau, played by Elizabeth Hurley. Austin's new love interest is his exact opposite: where Austin is too free romantically, Vanessa's flaw is that she is not romantically free enough. Austin represents freedom, Vanessa represents responsibility. Each character has the flaw of taking those noble characteristics much too far.

When Austin is hurt by Vanessa's romantic rejection, he is in hell. He has déjà vu of losing Vanessa's mother, who sadly married another. Austin is in hell, at emotional rock bottom. However, in the depths of his despair, Austin decides not to take advantage of the drunk, unconscious Vanessa... and becomes a better person. Austin's flaw is that he is a gross libertine, unaware of the ramifications of his actions. But, through the crucible of his hell, he recognizes his flaw, hybrids freedom with responsibility and becomes a better human being.

Completely shagadelic.

When analyzing the storyline of your own film, it may sound simplistic to break it down to the superficially rote inventory of character flaws. But I urge you to go through the exercise.

Your audience is yearning for you to make them happy. Paradoxically, you must take your audience and your protagonists to the depths of hell, explore the flaws of mankind and come out the other side of your film stronger, wiser and better. This is what makes audiences happy. If your audience is unhappy, nothing else matters.

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