

Establishing a Meaningful Connection with Your Audience

Four Basic Ingredients to Season Your Screenplays

by Michael Karp, SOC

Considering some of the basic elements of almost all movies, films show:

- A relationship forming or ending
- Secrets
- A clash of cultures or ideas
- Scenarios that make the audience cry

Although it may seem mechanical, I would suggest to all filmmakers that they, *by rote*, ensure their screenplays contain these basic ingredients.

It is hard to think of very many movies that do not concern a relationship forming and/or ending. Once human beings overcame the basic obstacle of mere survival by acquisition of food, water, shelter, etc., we have become free to focus on our greatest primal need, which is obtaining and maintaining pleasurable and functional human relationships. In fact, the very survival of primitive man required the creation of social and romantic relationships. Homo sapiens, unlike orangutans, are not a hermit species. Like most primates, humans require rich social situations to achieve both happiness and economic existence.

In modern life, humans spend huge amounts of spiritual and economic capital to create relationships, especially romantic ones. We also spend huge amounts of spiritual and economic capital making and watching films about relationships.

Consider the relationships forming and ending in *The Graduate*, *Casablanca*, *Blade Runner*, *Titanic*, *Unfaithful*, *Shawshank Redemption* and *Austin Powers*. There are some films such as the

Korean *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring* that advocate a celibate, hermit lifestyle. But such a system is incompatible with the dreams and psychic wiring of most humans. Although we might admire the discipline and spiritual rigor of Buddhist or Catholic monastics, we secretly rejoice that others foolishly make that choice and that we are free to party, be fruitful and multiply. In any case, any widespread popularity of monasticism would quickly obliterate the human race through demographic attrition, so this philosophy is not likely to achieve widespread popularity in our, or *anyone's* lifetimes.

Successful films typically deal with humans who have too many relationships, like Austin Powers, or those who have too few, like Austin Power's girlfriend Vanessa Kensington. In *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman's character Ben has no friends of his own age and is so maladjusted that the only romantic or platonic relationship that he has is with the neurotic, manipulative, alcoholic Mrs. Robinson, a married woman twice his age. Ben achieves his redemption when he rejects his unhealthy relationship with Mrs. Robinson and bonds with her daughter Elaine.

In *The Graduate*, Ben must experience relationship *pain* in order to deeply appreciate the value of his relationship with Elaine, or the value of relationships in general. Pain, and the descent into spiritual hell, separates the wheat from the spiritual chafe.

Beginning filmmakers often attempt to craft films about a protagonist's relationship with his computer, video game, television or with himself. Consider the films about relationships forming or ending between two or more vertebrates, sentient creatures that interact and cause growth in one another. I include vertebrates (Mammals, Amphibians, Fish, Birds and Reptiles), since many

brilliant films have been made about human relations with animals. In James Brooks' *As Good As It Gets*, Jack Nicholson is redeemed from being a pathetic misanthrope, by his involuntary relationship with a dog named Verdell. From the dog, Nicholson learns to reconnect with humans, including his love interest Helen Hunt.

There are certainly books such as *Catcher In The Rye* which are predominately about a character's relationship with himself. But books are not movies and the exception does not make the rule. Cinema is a medium that requires the externalization of a protagonist's character. Books have the luxury of talking about relationships, but films must *show* them.

We all know people who love their dogs and cats more than they love people. Although I personally am very into my pet felines, in no way are pets a valid surrogate for a healthy relationship with another human being.

In *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford plays an assassin. But much to his surprise, he falls in love with one of his victims, Sean Young. And she is just as much in love with him, much to her own surprise. Their romantic relationship is the gateway to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. The destructive racist ideology of the *Blade Runner* world is revealed as evil, when Deckard and Rachel's love focuses their spirit on the true nature of good and evil, right and wrong.

In *Unfaithful*, Diane Lane must choose between the safety and affection of her relationship with husband Richard Gere or the wild, *uncontrollable* passion of her affair with her French lover. When Gere eventually murders his wife's lover, both Gere and Lane are forced to consider what their marriage and relationship really means to them.

You can see that these great films could not even exist without relationships forming or ending. No narrative film can exist without relationships, so figure out which ones are in your film and how they will change your protagonists, for the worse or for the better.

Next, we consider *secrets* in films. Almost all movies contain lots of them. *Casablanca* has the following secrets: The location of the letters of transit, the affair between Rick and Ilsa, the marriage between Ilsa and Victor, and the elegant machinations of Rick's plot to free Ilsa and Victor from the Nazis.

Titanic is *built* on secrets:

- Rose is broke
- Rose is unhappy with her fiancé Cal
- Rose attempted suicide
- Where is the diamond?

- The ship is sailing too fast
- There are icebergs dead ahead
- There are not enough lifeboats
- The ship is sinking
- Who is the woman in the drawing?
- Where is Jack being held prisoner below deck?
- Jack did not steal the diamond, but is the victim of Cal's nefarious plot
- Rose's grand daughter Lizzie does not know who her grandmother really is (a Titanic survivor, and much more)
- Rose was a "hottie" with a past
- And the biggest secret is that Rose's spirit is a secret from herself.

Consider the last point carefully. The biggest secrets in life are the lies that we tell ourselves.

There are other types of secrets in films. In *Titanic*, the audience knows that the ship will sink, but the characters do not. But in *Casablanca*, it is the opposite. Rick knows how the story will end, with Victor and Ilsa together in America, and with Rick alone, except for his erstwhile friend *Claude Rains*. In *Titanic*, the audience knows that the ship will sink, but it doesn't reduce the suspense of the film, because the characters are tested, grow and change when the secret is revealed to them.

In *Unfaithful*, Diane Lane's affair and the murder are secret, but most importantly, her true volatile inner passion is the important secret that she hides from herself. She does not really know who she is, although her French lover Olivier Martinez can read her like a book. Lane's true character is no secret from her lover, who knows her dark inner self much better than she does herself.

So what's the secret in your screenplay? If you don't have *many*, the audience will be very unhappy with you.

There once was a joke in Hollywood that if you want to send a message, call Western Union. If you are too young to understand that joke, ask someone old enough to explain it to you, now that the Internet has rendered the humor obsolete.

In any case, audiences *thirst* for messages about the meaning of life in their films. Intellectually, audiences may claim that they merely wish to be entertained, but emotionally, they want to be led through a moral path laid out by the filmmaker.

Austin Powers is about something. The clash of cultures or ideas concerns the conflict between promiscuity and sexual repression. The conflict is resolved with the synthesis of a happy medium: "Freedom *with* responsibility."

Titanic is about something. The clash is between rich and poor, and the hubris of man's unquestioning faith in technology. But most importantly, Rose transcends when she realizes that her poverty and emotional barrenness can be overcome.

Casablanca is about something. The clash of cultures and ideas concerns the battle between isolationism and interventionism, between bowing to evil and self pity, or doing the right thing. Humphrey Bogart gives up the love of his life so save the lives of millions of people. What an amazingly selfless political statement.

Blade Runner is about something. The clash of cultures and ideas concerns racism. We ask how could the Nazis kill so many humans in the concentration camps, when the victims are just like the murderers, just as human. And what is the difference between the assassins and the victims in *Blade Runner*? The android Replicants are human. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. So why does the audience initially approve of Harrison Ford killing off of innocent humans, also known as Replicants? Because racism and xenophobia are sad parts of the human psyche.

Hotel Rwanda is about something. The clash of cultures and ideas concerns about why we sent troops to watch a million human beings get hacked to death. Obviously the answers to that situation are not completely morally clear cut, but the question is still haunting.

When you make your film about something, "they will come."

Audiences love to cry at the movies. Consider the tear jerker endings of *The Sound of Music*, *Field of Dreams*, *Swingers*, *Stepmom* and *Monsters, Inc.*

It is not that easy to make an audience cry, but theoretically, the process is simple. Make the audience fall in love with your characters and their situation, and then yank it away from them.

In *Monsters, Inc.* Sulley falls in paternal love with Boo. But all parents must give up their children to adulthood. We cry when Boo is taken away from her second father Sulley and we cry when Boo later remembers and loves him.

In *Stepmom*, we cry when Susan Sarandon is dying, and we cry when she and Julia Roberts conciliate. Love is taken away from the characters (and the audience) and then given back. The filmmaker (like God) takest and givest back.

In *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner risks losing everything for his fanatic dream...and then "they come."

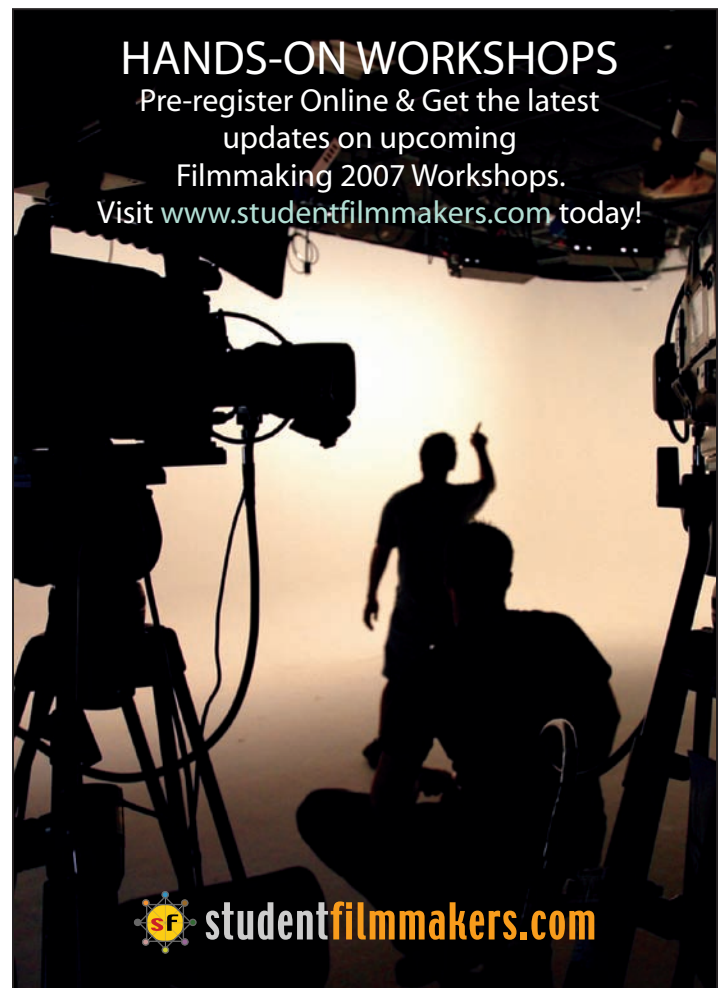
In *Swingers*, Jon Favreau loses the love of his life and we cry. And then he gets someone even better, Heather Graham and we cry

again. The filmmakers tear a hole in the heart of Jon Favreau (and our own) and then they fill it up again.


The process of making the audience cry is based on the fact that humans want what they can't have, and more deeply love the true object of their desire when that devotion is tested by loss.

Great screenwriting is based on immersing the audience in the great pageant of life. Our existence is filled with the drama of relationships, of secrets, of the battle over culture and ideas. And at the very root of things, audiences want to feel something, to laugh, to cry, to be deeply emotionally connected with *meaning*.

Michael Karp, SOC is a twenty-five year veteran of the motion picture industry. Working as a visual effects artist and VFX cameraman on such blockbusters as *Titanic*, *T2*, *Apollo 13*, *X-Men 2*, *True Lies*, and other movies, Michael has pushed the state of the art in that field. He is also an experienced Director of Photography and story development analyst. Michael is a graduate of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, as well as a longtime film instructor there.



HANDS-ON WORKSHOPS
Pre-register Online & Get the latest
updates on upcoming
Filmmaking 2007 Workshops.
Visit www.studentfilmmakers.com today!

 **studentfilmmakers.com**