

The Script Editor: adventures in sculpture

When asked how he was able to carve such beautiful angels out of a slab of rock, Michelangelo replied, 'I simply carve out everything that is not the angel.' The great Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky compared making films to 'sculpting in time,' and in some respects, writing a feature film really does have more in common with sculpture than novel writing.

Writing a feature film is a process that constantly alternates between chipping away at everything 'that is not the angel' and rebuilding again and again, with each new draft, 'the slab of rock.' It can seem interminable, and a successful writer needs to have the persistence and sheer bloodymindedness to keep on carving away and rebuilding for draft after draft. All too often, a writer can lose patience, throw his hands up in the air, and say 'I've had enough! That's as good as it gets! Do what you want with the bloody thing!'

And for his sins, they do.

Enter the Script Editor

Even very experienced writers know the feelings of confusion and exhaustion that can come after months of effort on a script. Many writers, after months of work in isolation, find themselves far too close to their work to be able to judge it objectively anymore. It's at this moment, when you can't see the forest for the trees, that a sympathetic, experienced script editor can be a welcome collaborator to your project.

The script editor's role is, firstly, to bring a fresh and objective eye to the story. A combination of dispassionate critic and passionate cheerleader, an instigator of, and sounding-board *for* ideas, the script editor sometimes doubles as therapist for the embattled writer. If there is more than one writer on the script, the editor may have to act as a diplomat, or even referee.

And although script editors tend to be writers themselves, the best writers don't always make the best script editors - because script editors also need to be script analysts, theoreticians, and even tutors. Editing a script involves a lot of hat-shuffling. It helps if script editors are writers, who can add their ideas into the mix, but only so long as they don't use their skills to rewrite *your* story the way *they* would prefer it.

As Billy Connolly wisely said: 'Avoid people who know the answers. Keep the company of people who are trying to understand the questions.' The best script editors belong to the second category. They need to know what the story means to the writer before they begin to 'edit' the script, and they don't offer too many answers of their own. They want writers to come up with their own solutions to their problems. So they ask a lot of questions.

They want to know what kind of story the writer is writing, and what audience it is intended for, and will ask questions about the characters and their motivations, why such and such a story choice was preferred over another, perhaps unexplored story choice, because rewriting is a seemingly endless process of questioning the choices that have already been made, or are about to be made.

The common perception that script editing is about cutting and pasting, correcting scenes and descriptions, and red-lining bad dialogue covers only a fraction of what the job entails. The bulk of the job is about investigating, testing and discarding ideas that don't quite work, and coaxing new ideas into being.

Getting to the heart and guts of a story is largely a process of trial and error. It's rarely a straightforward linear process, in which every session or pass over the script magically makes it stronger and clearer and more effective. It might just be about encouraging a writer to go off on tangents - because the odd detour or cul-de-sac in a draft is sometimes what triggers the biggest discoveries about characters or story, even if it doesn't stay in the script. The script editor's job is not about being critic or censor of ideas that appear on first sight to be turkeys. It's about being open and empathetic to the writer.

The essence of the edit

I've come to believe script editing really boils down to two main functions. It's about (a) inspiring, and (b) encouraging, the writer on his or her journey with the script.

According to the dictionary, to 'inspire' means to 'breathe in; to infuse thought or feeling into (person, his writings, etc.); to animate (person with feeling, idea)'. While to 'encourage' is to 'make bold, to put heart into; to urge (a person to do).'

To 'make bold and to put heart into' suggests a different kind of encouragement than the kind they say a writer can die of in Hollywood. Good script editors will urge a writer to be bold and take chances, to have faith in their story, and to put their heart, as well as everything else, into the script. They are open to new ideas on the part of the writer, and *inspire* the writer to come up with good ideas. They are respectful of the writer's story and of each writer's ability to dig it out of themselves.

The script editor brings, if you like, a breath of fresh air to the script. The good ones really *listen* to the writer, and have, above all other qualities, flexibility and the ability to subjugate their egos and their skills to the writer's vision. Why? Because it's the writer's journey, not theirs.

Getting there.

Writing a script is a journey whose destination may be subject to sudden changes, and whose route is largely unknown. The script editor is there to carry the lantern, but not to lead the way unless called on to do so, and even then only for short distances. When the writer gets bogged down or just plain lost, it's the script editor's job to give them a nudge or a hand up, and to help them keep going. But it has to be the writer who leads the way, even when they don't know for sure where they're going, because *the writer must own his story* - not the script editor, not the producer, not the funding body who bestowed the development funding. 'A camel,' as Mark Twain put it, 'is a horse designed by a committee.'

If a script editor loses faith in the writers' ability to find their way with a story, and starts to take responsibility for its direction, the collaboration is likely to turn into the blind leading the blind. Being a script editor is a very different thing from being a co-writer.

The wise script editor doesn't take on a script he doesn't like, because you can't fake encouragement - not for long, anyway. If, as a script editor, you don't have enough connection with the script to put your heart into it or get your writer to put his into it, do yourself a favour, pass. Even if you do need the money.

If, as a writer, you don't feel enough empathy with a script editor to assure you that they are the one to entrust your script to, pass. Find someone else. Someone you can talk to, someone who is flexible, and respects your story. Someone who understands that it's *your* story, not theirs. And someone who is fun to work with, too, because screenwriting is *supposed to be fun*, even though when you're on draft nine or ten it can be damn easy to forget that fact. And if the collaboration works well for both of you, hang onto it for the next draft too.

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