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Character Over Concept: Writing dialogue in search of story

Abstract

Screenwriting manuals such as McKee's *Story* or Synder's *Save the Cat*, uniformly instruct the writer to begin their work by defining a concept; from this, they will develop the characters and build the rest of the story. These manuals and their methods dominate in Higher Education and in the film industry. However, their methods' overreliance on structuring the writing process may be at the detriment of considering more creative approaches to building a story. One such approach, criticised by McKee in *Story*, is writing dialogue in search of a story. Using interviews from Noah Baumbach, his collaborators, and other mainstream screenwriters, alongside my observations teaching screenwriting, this article argues for the importance of allowing a screenplay to develop through writing dialogue in search of scenes, characters and story. It proposes that this method can enhance the quality of the individual character voice and form a stronger basis to structure a plot based on the development of characters.

Keywords: character, concept, Noah Baumbach, dialogue, screenwriting manuals

'Writing from the outside in - writing dialogue in search of scenes, writing scenes in search of story - *is the least creative method*.' [Italics in original] (McKee 1999: 417)

INTRODUCTION

'How-to' screenwriting manuals and script gurus are prevalent in the subject of screenwriting. They are an affordable and accessible resource for novice writers, and they are often required reading for Higher Education creative writing courses across the world (Conor 2012: 122). Though these texts may differ in form and terminology, they share similar practices, concepts and theories. They tend to guide the reader, chapter by chapter, in a linear step-by-step process, from initial idea to a rewritten 'final' draft.

There is a consensus within screenwriting manuals that the writer should discover the concept of their film before they write a first draft: 'exactly what *is* your movie about?' [italics in original] (Alessandra 2010, 6), 'But what's it about?' (Synder 2005, 1), 'What is the SUBJECT of your screenplay? What is it about?' (Field 2005, 18). Manuals usually ask for the writer to then develop this initial idea into a dramatic premise or logline. They

stress that without a premise or a logline, *'maybe you should rethink your whole movie.'* [Italics in original] (Synder 2005: 8).

The practice of screenwriting is depicted by this literature as linear and straightforward, which does not necessary reflect the experience of many screenplay writers. Neither are screenwriting manuals (nor script gurus) able to convey the input of the writer's (at times, chaotic) creativity into screenplay development. Though manuals regularly note that there is no one way to create a screenplay, they tend to only focus on one model (their own), in effect promoting their profile and approach rather than other 'lesser' models. This article explores why then screenwriting manuals remain so successful, and considers the consequent risk of standardisation their success may pause to the industry.

By comparison, an approach adopted by Noah Baumbach (Feld 2005) and other professional screenwriters is writing dialogue to explore a story. This article investigates the advantages of using this 'alternative' practice in the initial stages of writing a screenplay. (It should be noted that though this case study focusses mainly on Baumbach, he is not the originator of this method; there is little evidence to specify who first began to develop stories in this manner.) This article argues that Baumbach's approach to developing story from writing dialogue reveals flaws in the approach promoted by screenwriting manuals, and is a key factor in producing compelling, engaging, true-to-life stories and characters. In exploring this method, this article has three secondary aims: to illustrate the advantages of studying other writers' methods over rigidly following screenwriting manuals and script gurus; to highlight the benefits for a writer to learn about the art and craft of screenwriting by reflecting on their work; and to encourage the teaching of creativity alongside structure in Higher Education screenwriting courses.

Screenwriting manuals

In ordering the writing process into chapters, manuals requires the writer to form a concept, or to understand what their story is about, right from the start, so that they are able to instruct them on how to develop characters, plot, and so forth. Manuals often tell the writer to 'keep returning at all stages of the writing process to these checklists, [so] you can continually modify and build on the ideas and concepts you have selected until they become commercially and artistically successful screenplays (Hauge 2011: 42) (as well as, Alessandra 2010; Frensham 2012). This standard trajectory uses the same model as other self-help books, which structure their content to take the learner from 'acquiring

knowledge to applying knowledge, from learning to doing' (Chiapello and Fairclough in Conor 2014: 127). Ideas on structure are perhaps prevalent in screenwriting literature because they are presented in schemas, paradigms, and checklists, which can be grasped by the writer. Whereas creativity cannot be as easily graphically presented.

Conor's (2014) discourse analysis of screenwriting manuals notes their uniformity in promoting structure as the key to any successful and commercial screenplay (2014: 128). Many present their own theories on structure, with their own terms and film examples to evidence their approach to plotting a story. Yet, as John Yorke demonstrates, all manuals offer more or less the same useful information (2013: 256). So why do they continue to sell their wares as the secrets and keys to creative and commercial success? The answer is exemplified by Yorke's description of why we tend to order and address stories in acts:

> In simplistic terms, human beings order the world dialectically. Incapable of perceiving randomness, we insist on imposing order on any observed phenomena, any new information that comes our way. We exist; we observe new stimuli; and both are altered in the process. It's thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Students encounter something of which they're unaware, explore and assimilate it, and by merging it with their pre-existing knowledge, grow. (Yorke 2013: 27)

Simple reasons behind this approach are pragmatism and efficiency: a novice writer can easily begin to develop a story out of an idea written down in one or two sentences. From this idea, they can discover characters, objectives, possible conflict. It minimizes the risk of their writing a first draft that is devoid of, or has problems with, these key story elements. Another reason is commercialisation. Refining the concept of their film into a pithy, accessible logline allows the writer to focus on the compelling (and sellable) aspect of their idea. Yet another reason for this concept-focussed approach could be practicality. Screenwriting manuals are divided into chapters, their authors understandably tackling one aspect of the craft at a time, assisting the transference of knowledge between author and reader. Thus, by instructing the writer to begin by defining a concept, the author ensures the writer has a tangible idea that can be developed into a final draft. And by compartmentalising the various aspects of screenwriting into bite-sized chapters, the author can teach each aspect of the writing process without overwhelming the reader.

Stories shape randomness and chaos into order and meaning. Screenwriting manuals provide the same ordering function to the writing process. Their popularity lies

in their ability to untangle the stages of screenwriting, often using steps in its process (idea generation, research, character development, outlining, first draft, etc.) as chapter headings, breaking it down into digestible and distinctive tasks. Screenwriting manuals satisfy our need to process complex ideas by 'individualizing mechanisms' which we can apply to our own writing. However, they also shape 'the writer's work and their perceptions of what screenwriting can and should be' (Conor 2014: 127), which is presented as a linear trajectory from concept to final draft. But this linearity is not always akin to the writing process, which can be chaotic, especially when starting out. The novice writer may move back and forth between their idea, their characters, their outline, or even develop a first draft initially as an outline. Therefore, a novice writer, led by the instructions of a screenwriting manual, risks applying each lesson to their own writing without considering other creative factors.

Batty and Waldeback (2008) express the same concern that much of screenwriting training, conferences and script editing meetings focus on structure and craft skill, overshadowing the creative process (2008: 6). Their view is that this imbalance creates scripts that are 'well-written, but often tell unexciting or over-familiar stories' (2008: 6). Screenwriting manuals tend to offer one model and path. They are therefore unable to explore the variations in methods and approaches to writing, perhaps because of physical space limitations. Though they often note, as McKee (1999) does, that their approach is not the only way to develop a successful screenplay, it is likely, without knowledge of alternative approaches, that the novice writer will closely follow the professed method or structure before adapting or rejecting it (1999: 417). Consequently, the variety of information on screenwriting practices are rarely discussed in screenwriting manuals, and there are no comparative studies of screenwriting methods.

The personal and individual experience within screenwriting is rarely communicated because screenwriting manuals emphasise concepts and schemas of structure, making the writing experience at times somewhat sterile and impersonal. This limitation suggests that screenwriting is less personal than other forms of writing, like the novel or the play, as filmmaking is also a viable business model: Dancyger and Rush note that 'it is assumed we cannot find something in the details of our lives that is sufficiently broad' and that screenplay texts are unable to communicate the 'meaningful and universal' life experiences that a writer could develop into a story for the screen (Dancyger and Rush 2013: 433). My teaching experience identifies with this. Students welcome a particularly path or pattern to correspond their story to, like Synder's beat sheet in *Save the Cat* (2005), only later to

discover the result is not a story they feel connected to. At times, I observe that students fear exploration and personal expression when writing a feature length screenplay.

The lack of alternative creative practices featuring in manuals may exist because most manuals are written by script readers and editors (who have a vested interest in receiving clear, easily readable, 'by numbers' scripts), rather than writers themselves (who may have more interest in trying a variety of creative approaches). Industry gatekeepers in script development use screenplay manuals as guidance to provide feedback to the writer. Consequently, a novice writer may be more likely to stick to one manual's approach rather than explore alternative methods and ideas that exist in practice. Worryingly therefore, the proliferation of screenwriting manuals could mean therefore that there is risk of standardization in the industry, even though there are unlimited ways to approach writing a screenplay. The manuals' favoured concept-driven model, with its emphasis on structure, could be limiting creativity and hindering the development of original material.

Noah Baumbach and his writing process

Noah Baumbach is an American writer and director of feature films, including *Squid and the Whale* (2005), *Frances Ha* (2012), and most recently *While We're Young* (2015) and *Mistress America* (2015). Baumbach's first feature film, *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), about a group of university graduates who struggle to cope with the real world, found critical acclaim when it premiered at the New York Film Festival. Baumbach's next two films, *Mr Jealously* (1997) and *Highball* (1997) found less critical and commercial success, and Baumbach removed his name as writer and director of the later film. Baumbach's third film (if you discount *Highball*) was *The Squid and the Whale* (2005), a semi-autobiographic story about two boys dealing with their parents' divorce, set in Brooklyn in the 1980s. *The Squid and the Whale* was voted best screenplay by the New York Film Critics Circle, Los Angeles Critics Association, and the National Board of Review; its received an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay, six Independent Spirit Awards and three Golden Globe nominations.

Baumbach has remarked that writing *The Squid and the Whale* was a 'personal breakthrough' and was a closer reflection of him as a filmmaker (Quart 2005: 28). The film has been praised for its realistic characters and a 'sharp and touching' account of divorce (Preston 2006: 24). Its style is different from the concept-focussed centre of *Mr Jealousy*. According to Baumbach, *Mr Jealousy* is a weaker movie because he was caught up in executing the premise (Feld 2005: 123). In writing *The Squid and the Whale* however,

Baumbach took a different approach and discovered the story by writing scenes of characters talking. As Baumbach describes:

> …I try to keep the ideas small and try to work out the scene and the logic of who these people are talking. In this case, I started with a sixteen year old brother and a twelve year old brother talking about their parents. I knew that the parents weren't going to be getting along. How do they internalise, how do they talk about it? And the scene where they're walking to school earlier in the movie is I think one of the first scenes I wrote and that was sort of a way. And that then informs other scenes, it's like 'what's the next scene after this?' (Creative Screenwriting Magazine 2005)

Developing a story from characters does not mean there are no initial ideas about the film to begin with. Baumbach had ideas and expectations about the *The Squid and the Whale*, but he kept an open mind and allowed for the story to turn out differently than he expected it to (Feld 2005: 122). Baumbach knew the topic of the film would be about divorce but there was no overall premise that informed the rest of the film. Baumbach remained open to changing the direction of the story and allowing what he found interesting in the conversation to inform the rest of the material. Baumbach returned to this process with *Margot at the Wedding* (2007), *Frances Ha* and *Mistress America*. He co-wrote the last two screenplays with Greta Gerwig, who also plays the protagonist. Gerwig shares the same approach to developing a story:

> Whenever you have an "idea," as in a concept that you could explain to someone, like a hook or at worst a gimmick, that is a bad thing. It feels good, but it's not good. The best ideas reveal themselves, you don't "have" them. For me, anyway. (Sternbergh 2013)

Gerwig's remark that producing a concept with a strong hook 'feels good' refers to the writer being able to visualise and identify the key aspects of the story from the "idea". Indeed, a character's objective, motivation, and what is in jeopardy or at stake may be implied from a concept (written as a longline or a premise statement). However, as Gerwig suggests, the disadvantages of beginning a story based on a 'hook' or 'gimmick' are that the other key components of a story are in service to what is clever or interesting or

funny about the concept. I have witnessed screenwriting students begin with an engaging logline or premise statement; but at times, as they develop the story, they become detached from their work as the story becomes something different from the idea, or the idea 'gloss' fades away. When a writer 7focusses on concept over character, the characters may become shallow and unreal, their actions implausible, and the audience may feel disconnected from what the protagonist may lose or gain. Baumbach has experienced this too: pitching an idea to get a job and afterwards finding it difficult to recreate the entertaining story he told in the room (Creative Screenwriting 2005).

Beginning to develop a story based on discovering characters through writing dialogue assists Baumbach to produce stories that reflect reality.[i] Baumbach is interested in films that focus on who a character is, and how they interact with other characters, as he notes:

> That said, I do think I am interested in fractured emotional states creating narrative, or at least having an effect on it. I always resist movies with a pitch line like, "because of the bet, he's got to win the woman by Saturday…" or, "If he can get to this point in time, he'll inherit…whatever," which I guess is an excuse to make the middle part of the movie—the human interaction—interesting to people. I'm more interested in the middle part without that contrivance thrown on top of it. I'd like to make the messier stuff compelling. I would hope, if it's done well, the result is even more identifiable because the audience doesn't have to bite off on some ridiculous premise. I don't know anybody in the real world who makes elaborate bets that change their lives, you know? If those people exist, I don't want to know them. (Feld 2005: 122)

Does this approach then only assist screenwriters who want to write 'character-driven' stories? The perhaps over-used term 'character-driven' applies to a large range of films, genres, and styles of films. But certainly there are other types of stories, like 'event-driven' films, such as *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Independence Day* (1996) where a forthcoming event or the impact of an event is the main driving force taking the story forward. There are 'premise-driven' stories, such as, *Wedding Crashers* (2005) and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), where the plot is driven by exploring and playing with an 'engaging' concept. Do screenwriting manuals' approach suit those, arguably more common, story types better? It may seem that the manual's emphasis on first finding an appealing concept or

premise, rather than developing and finding a story through character or writing dialogue, would be appropriate in 'event-' or 'premise-driven' stories. In this case, starting and finding a story by writing dialogue should be an uncommon approach. However, research into the writing processes of screenwriters (rather than script gurus and screenwriting manuals) shows that other screenwriters take a similar approach. British screenwriter Steven Knight developed *Eastern Promises* (2007) by writing the characters conversing, as 'it's dialogue […] that gives you the clue to what comes next in the plot' (Munso 2007: 18). Knight explains his 'best stuff' comes from letting 'the dialogue go', following what the characters would do rather than a preconceived notion of the plot (Munso 2007: 18). Knight continued this practice writing *Locke* (2013) and was nominated with several awards for Best Original Screenplay. Quentin Tarantino also discovers characters and story as he writes dialogue (Bauer 1998). Screenwriter, director, and producer, Judd Apatow writes 'hundreds of scenes' before forming any outline, to discover story and characters (DP/30 2012). Writer and director Wes Anderson develops his films from a combination of various materials and ideas, and never based on a single premise statement: 'I've never had any of those. I don't have any gift for that. Every movie I've done is this accumulation of information about these characters and who they are and what their world is, and slowly figuring out what's going to happen to them.' (Seitz 2015: 96).

Other screenwriters also use writing dialogue not just a method to begin and find a story, but as tool that can enhance scene writing. Knight advices that when writing a scene with two characters talking helps avoid heavy exposition when writing to fulfil the purpose of the scene, and makes the characters feel real (Bafta Guru 2014). John August, screenwriter of *Go* (1999), *Big Fish* (2003) and *Frankenweenie* (2012), puts his characters in a scene that is not intended to be included in the movie, and writes them talking: this process helps him find the characters' voice and discover who they are (August 2010). If so many high-profile screenwriters use this method, why is writing dialogue in search of story not more widely known an approach to script writing? Is the proliferation of script gurus and the domination of screenwriting manuals in the study and practice of screenwriting skewing other views? And if so, to what extent do screenwriting manuals 'represent or emanate from film industries or practitioners themselves' (Price 2013: 206)?

(Footnote: Baumbach remarks that when he was writing *The Squid and the Whale* he avoided watching films with similar subject matter, wanting to make the script to be 'as

personal an expression as possible' (Quart 2005: 29), which may have also helped him to keep an open view about the type of film he was writing.)

Inside Out or Outside In?

McKee warns that writing dialogue before knowing a story's structure is *'premature'* and *'chokes creativity.'* [Italics in original] (1999: 417). Presenting only one approach, though admitting there are other successful ways, McKee advises the writer to write from what he calls the 'inside out', which is to explore and develop a structure before writing what happens in each scene. This typical advice told in many screenwriting manuals (see Aronson, Field, Seger, Synder) involves creating characters by writing biographies and at the same time building a structure with a step-outline or a treatment before writing scenes.

McKee remarks that due to this 'in-depth preparation' the 'characters have had tape over their mouths for so long' and this will result in the dialogue having 'character-specific voices'. To work in the opposite way, to write scenes in search of story, which is for McKee to write 'from the outside in', will lead to characters speaking 'with the same vocabulary and style' (1999: 416). It's unclear how a method of writing biographies and background information allows a writer to know the vocabulary and style of a character's voice. McKee also states that if we write dialogue before we know the purpose of a scene, the writer 'inevitably' falls in love with the words and thus is loathed to explore and play with their characters. McKee suggests that writers who begin with writing dialogue will never see the flaws of a scene or cull an extraneous scene because they won't understand the purpose of their scene in the first place.

Concepts and principles on structure dominate screenwriting manuals because they are graspable and tangible in forms of charts and checklists. Explaining a process where a writer finds form based on scenes from characters talking and interacting may not be as tangibly communicated and thus may not sell as many books. Yet Baumbach's method is at the centre of what structure should be built on: character. Feature film structure focusses on the main plot (what a character wants) and the emotional journey of the character (what the character needs). What and when a character learns, and possibly changes a key belief or flaw in relation to this development, is the structure most manuals reference. And yet, even McKee, who espouses that 'structure *is* character; character *is* structure' (1999: 100), does not conceive of forming a story by starting with a character, but advocates to start with a concept instead.

McKee's writing process, like many other screenwriting manuals, is guiding the writer to be analytical before being creative. This advice is logical when it comes to rewriting stage but is an unfounded assumption in the initial writing process. Rewriting is productive when examining the larger issues first (characters, plot) rather than smaller issues such as individual lines of dialogue.

By contrast to McKee's advice, Baumbach explains that outlining a structure before writing a scene does not help him 'because I would then start to try to force things to fit the story that I had laid out, as opposed to letting the story come from the characters.' (Creative Screenwriting 2005). He demonstrates that writing dialogue and discovering characters, a scene and consequently a story, does not necessarily mean the story is unstructured or boring. In discussing the collaborative process of writing *Frances Ha* (2012), Gerwig notes that: 'We wrote a ton, saw who the characters were and how they seemed to operate, and what the story was embedded in the scenes. Once we had generated a lot of material, we began beating it out.' (Feld, 2013). In this approach, form is discovered from character, rather than characters fitting a structure.

For Baumbach both structure and creativity can work alongside each other:

> For me, I really think of movies, from my perspective, as more of an emotional way to get into something. And then, after that, to try to find as much form as you can. But I don't want to start with the form, I want to start with the emotion. (Creative Screenwriting Magazine 2005)

Baumbach's films are evidence that writing dialogue in search of story does not equate to screenplays where 'the story sucks' (McKee 1999: 412) or 'the story concept sucks' (Hauge 2011: 16), or are unstructured because they have 'everything thrown in' (Hunter 1994: 88). *The Squid and the Whale*, *Frances Ha*, *While We're Young* all have the 'restorative' three-act structure Dancyer and Rush note is prevalent in modern cinema (2013: 17). Each films' protagonist, Walt, Frances, and Josh, all go on emotional changes shifts and there is relative closure on their stories by the end. Walt in *The Squid and The Whale* is able to stand up to his parents and accepts them for who they are; Frances in *Frances Ha* lets go of a dream (being a dancer) but discovers another one (being a choreographer); Josh in *While We're Young* accepts his lifestyle choices.

Furthermore, discovering who are characters are first before and forming a structure based on them creates believable actions and reactions that are also entertaining and dramatic in the overall shape of the story. Writing dialogue in exploration of character and plot, allows the characters to be judged as real people and not pawns or archetypes such as 'antagonist' or 'mentor' which, though possibly useful, may create characters who behave and talk in unrealistic ways when we view a character in the part they play rather than from the characters perspective. Exploring characters through dialogue and actions allows you to see through the characters' point of view. This understanding allows the development of characters in a non-judging manner. Tarantino observes his characters in the same non-discriminatory manner as Baumbach:

> The characters have gotta be true to themselves. And that's something I don't see in a lot of Hollywood movies. I see characters lying all the time. They can't do this because it would affect the movie this way or that or this demographic might not like it. To me a character can't do anything good or bad, they can only do something that's true or not. (Bauer 2014)

Characters are not designed to be sympathetic or unsympathetic, and this in turn allows the writer (as in Baumbach's case) to have affection for all their characters. This has resulted in Baumbach's films being praised for characters who 'remained believable and relatively layered' (Quart 2005: 27). The father Bernard, in *The Squid and the Whale*, is egotistical and skews the mind of the eldest son, Walt. Though Bernard is flawed he is also sympathetic due to is his many faults. Exploring his characters by writing their dialogues first allowed Baumbach to not judge them. And unlike Baumbach's experience with writing *Kicking and Screaming*, where jokes were at times put into the mouths of his characters, in *The Squid and the Whale* 'the humour comes out of the character's nature' (2005: 28). Writing dialogue to explore character, scenes and story asks you to stay with the character and within the moment without judgment – a practice arguably more allied with 'writing inside out' than 'outside-in'.

Conclusion

Writing dialogue in search of story is an extremely creative method, enhancing character voice, developing three-dimensional characters, and allows the structure and

core idea of a story to develop as the writer discovers the characters by what they say and do. This method does not choke creativity, it liberates it. The information from screenwriting manuals to articulate the subject in a few sentences at the very beginning of the process is not a method all screenwriters share but with their popularity in the industry and education, few other approaches are known. Beginning to form a structure based on a story concept could limit the choices as the writer discovers the character through writing, decisions and actions could appear unrealistic if they are servicing a concept rather than the characters, and dialogue could be ill-fitting as he or she conveys the story point of the scene or exposition without sounding realistic. Perhaps then, novice writers will learn and grow more by studying screenwriters than script guru's.

　　　　To enhance one's writing, one should also be learning from one's own work. Writing dialogue in search of a story relies on the writer reflecting on what they have created. The writer begins by being creative and then applies the ideas and forms to the work. By servicing the voices of the characters could result in more original and entertaining screenplays. Beginning with a concept over character imposing preconceived ideas of a clever or funny premise that the characters and structure is indebted to. Thus, Higher Education should reconsider the role screenwriting manuals play in the teaching of the art and craft of screenwriting. The value of students learning in Higher Education is that with the right exercises students can learn creativity and not just the analytical tools to mould their stories. Ideas and tasks that progress creativity should be as equally taught as principles and ideas on structure. Therefore the novice writer can grow to the experienced writer who learns from their own writing, makes connections to the ideas and principles they have learnt, and apply these new developments and knowledge in their next script.

Words: 4,650

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[i] Baumbach remarks that when he was writing *The Squid and the Whale* he avoided watching films with similar subject matter, wanting to make the script to be 'as personal an expression as possible' (Quart 2005: 29), which may have also helped him to keep an open view about the type of film he was writing.