Inside Screenwriting: Script Gurus in 21st Century Hollywood

With popular seminars, astronomical book sales, and even software, Screenwriting Gurus like Syd Field, Chris Vogler, and John Truby are bringing script-writing systems to the fore. More than ever before, Hollywood is listening.

By Daniel Goldin

In Hollywood, taking off your shoes in a meeting signifies power. It means you are the one person in the room exempt from that fundamental Western custom of covering a part of the body known to spread odors.

On a recent afternoon, script consultant David S. Freeman visited the sleek offices of a prolific production company which would rather not be named, as they do not want it known that they seek outside help developing their stories. But in fact Freeman was being paid thousands of dollars to offer his insights at that story meeting, during which he wasted no time slipping off his Italian loafers, placing his bare-feet on the producer's cherry-wood desk and launching into his analysis. Utilizing his "twenty techniques for giving a character depth," he effortlessly took the story apart and began to plug in the gaps, almost as though he were filling in a book of Mad Libs. Freeman's impact was palpable: The producers were left awe-struck by Freeman's almost magical laying of hands on a very sick script.

Freeman isn't the only one peddling a just-add-water approach to screenwriting. In fact, he is a latecomer to a new breed of charismatic script doctors, who count studio heavyweights, producers, directors, and screenwriters (both successful and aspiring) as their devotees. In a town eager to embrace the latest Kabbala instructor or Aikido master, the gurus have no trouble gathering a flock of the wealthy and powerful. Executives from Disney and Pixar have taken notes from these savants, as have high-powered directors such as Peter Jackson. For better or worse, screenwriting self-helpers have changed the process and product of Hollywood moviemaking.

For some filmmakers, the systems offered by these gurus provide a point of departure that makes the blank page just a little less stark. "I think for people who have never had a story analyzed and broken down like it is in [McKee's] course, it's an epiphany," says writer-director Andrew Stanton (*Finding Nemo*) of his experience with top script guru Robert McKee. "Regardless of whether you ultimately always adhere to it or agree with it." Others smell snake oil. "It's a racket, isn't it?" suggests producer Lynda Obst (*Sleepless in Seattle, Contact*). "It's people on the outside telling other people on the outside how to get inside."

But recently the studios have opened their gates to the gurus and routinely use their ideas to shape product. There's an old Hollywood adage: Give the audience what they want in a way they don't expect. What the gurus seem to offer is an efficient way to do just this, by providing a familiar mold the studios can endlessly refill with surprising content.

With big bucks to be made in the guru business, the field has become crowded with disappointed writers trying to turn a dime by switching to the left side of their brain. However the top tier of analysts — Syd Field, Bob McKee, Chris Vogler, John Truby and David S. Freeman — have distinguished themselves from the pack not by the number of hit screenplays they've written (collectively: none); but by creating unique and convincing

arguments for having discovered the secret to a happy marriage between art and commerce. Between them, they have sold millions of books — required reading in many film schools — consulted on thousands of movies, and provided a defacto training program for creative executives.

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"Studios have a very specific need for genre scripts that have to fulfill certain expectations," says Peter Heller who has worked as an executive for Universal and as an independent producer (*Like Mike, Brown Sugar*). "I think in a lot of ways McKee and the other story analysts have shaped what the studios think works. And since those genre films make a lot of money, there's a kind of a feedback loop going back and forth. Audiences have come to expect certain things from these movies, and clearly they enjoy them when they get them."

The Crosslegged Guru

The terms"three-act structure" and "plot-point" have become part of the industry lexicon. Few realize that Syd Fields came up with the vocabulary and perpetuated it in his 1979 book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting.* A mild-mannered devotee of EST and Siddha Yoga meditation, Fields dove into Aristotle's *Poetics* and emerged with what he termed "The Three Act Paradigm." In other words, movies have a beginning, a middle and an end.

The first act is the "setup," the second is the "conflict" and the third is the "resolution." Each act is separated by a "plot point" — a more businessy word for "plot twist" — which "hooks into the action and turns the story in a new direction." The setup goes from approximately page 1-30 with plot point one occurring between page 25-27. The confrontation spans pages 30-90 with plot point two occurring between page 85-90. By correlating terms to page-numbers, Field offered up the first system for manufacturing screenplays, and he found a ready audience. His book has sold over 600,000 copies and has been translated into twenty languages.

Having written only a few documentaries and features with very limited success, Field suddenly found himself working as a story-structure analyst on projects for Michael Apted, Roland JoffŽ and Alfonso Cuaron. At one point, Mike Medavoy even gave Fields a three-picture deal at Tristar.

Field's paradigm is most evident in simple fare like *The Haunted Mansion.* The movie starts with a clear Syd Fieldian "setup": a dope of a real-estate agent, played by Eddie Murphy, is invited by a ghost to help sell his haunted house. The plot point at the end of act one comes, according to formula, about a quarter of the way through the movie, when a rain storm forces the family to spend the night. As specified in Field's book, the second act is marked by confrontation, in this case Eddie Murphy and family going up against supernatural antagonists in the haunted house. The plot point at the end of the second act comes about two thirds of the way through the movie when we learn that the Lord of the manor intends to marry Eddie Murphy's wife. This leads to a "climax" in which Eddie Murphy fights for his wife, followed by a "resolution," a bit of cinematic mumbo-jumbo in which Eddie Murphy's wife splits in two, the ghost part going off with the ghost lord, and the human part sticking it out with Eddie Murphy. Amid all the ghosts of this movie, there is one who is invisible but present in almost every scene: Syd Field.

Field remains an enduring presence even as he loses market share to newer gurus, such as Robert McKee and John Truby. An experience at USC last year really drove home the impact. "I did my usual explanation of structure in a screenplay and after I finished, one of the kids in the class looked at me and said, 'yeah, but that's old hat,'" Field recalls. "At that moment I realized that people had absorbed this so much into their psyche that I didn't have to do much anymore."

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The Myth Maker

In 1977, George Lucas invited the students of USC Film School to attend a screening of his new movie *Star Wars.* "It was a big event for me," says Chris Vogler, "I had never been on a studio lot before. But I wasn't expecting a chapter by chapter explication of a text-book I had just read." The book was Joseph Cambell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,*" a Jungian interpretation of how mythical archetypes persist from culture to culture.

Ten years later, Chris Vogler found himself working as a story analyst for Disney. "Eisner and Katzenberg had

systematic ways of making movies. It was more like an old-fashioned assembly line," recalls Vogler, who noticed that the team communicated its most important ideas in memos. Eventually Vogler jumped in with one of his his own: a twelve-step method for manufacturing myths based on Joseph Cambell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* which formed the basis of his book *The Writer's Journey.* "The memo got its own steam and was like a virus that spread through the group consciousness of Hollywood," Vogler explains. "And it got into very wide use."

Hollywood studios have always looked for big mythic stories that transcend ethnic and language boundaries to reach the largest possible markets. Vogler's memo offered a formula for synthesizing myths. He identified twelve steps in the hero's journey: "Ordinary World" (you can roll credits over it"); "Call to Adventure" (McKee's "Inciting Incident"); "Refusal of the call" (Bogart: "The only person I'm lookin' out for is myself"); "Mentor" (Yoda bathed in white light and speaking like a fortune cookie); "Crossing the First Threshold" (Dorothy skipping along the yellow brick road); "Tests, Allies and Enemies" (The Witch, the Tin Man, the Lion, the Scarecrow); "Approach to the Innermost Cave" (Dr. Evil's underwater lair in Austin Powers); "The Ordeal" (E.T. dies on the operating table), "Reward" (Luke captures the plans of the death star); "The Road Back" (the bicycle flight of Elliott in E.T.); "Resurrection" (Axel Foley rescued by the Beverly Hills Cops); and "Return with the Elixir" (Richard Gere lifts Julia Roberts in his arms at the end of *Pretty Woman*).

Lucas's formula as laid out by Vogler meshed well with the Disney machine, and Vogler soon found himself working on Disney's big animated features like *Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin* and *The Lion King.* After Disney, he parlayed his reputation as the myth guy into a five-year stint as a creative executive at Twentieth Century Fox, where he worked for Laura Ziskin overseeing such projects as *Anna and the King, Fight Club* and *The Thin Red Line.* Laura Ziskin, who later went on to produce *Spider-Man,* explains Vogler's contributions, "There were certain things, like *Courage Under Fire,* that we developed, to which his rules applied more than others, and those were the things we tended to ask him to work on."

The Angry Guru

In a dark gray polo shirt (success) and worn jeans (working-class roots), Bob McKee paces the stage, growls, pounds the air: He's a guru from central casting. "Hollywood is already dead." says McKee, florid of face and black of eye-brow, letting a silence fall over the 200 strong audience, which includes a group from Mattel, the director Tony Kaye and other industry people. "What we are watching is the last death rattles of a corpse twitching out movies like *The Hulk.*"

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Ironically many of the movies held up by McKee for derision are heavily influenced by McKee. Despite all his contempt for present-day Hollywood McKee is the closest thing Hollywood has to a court guru. McKee's seminar is a mainstay of the ABC Fellowship program. McKee says that ABC, Disney, PBS, Nickelodeon and Paramount regularly send their creative and writing staffs to his lectures.

Screenwriter Akiva Goldsman (*A Beautiful Mind*) swears by McKee. According to Costa Boates, a friend and colleague of Peter Jackson, "If any single event marks Jackson's transition from flash-in-the-pan local hero to internationally capable competitor, the McKee seminar is it." But it's the CGI feathers in McKee's cap that make him most proud. McKee claims a profound influence on Pixar, the cutting edge animation house that made both *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo.* "John Lasseter and his whole crew came to me years ago," McKee says. "They said, 'look, we're a bunch of computer nerds who can't tell a story worth shit and we're scared.' And they showed me a short so talented, I said, 'look, you guys are gonna be fine, just sit down and take notes.'"

"When we set out to make *Toy Story* we didn't know squat about anything," admits Pixar's Andrew Stanton. "We didn't know how to make a movie let alone write one and I think it was John Lasseter and Pete Docter went down to his course in L.A and they came back just raving. I mean we really really followed McKee almost to the letter of the law when we worked on *Toy Story. Toy Story*'s very much a product of McKee's system." McKee's fortunes have risen along with Pixar's. "He's made the choice. To be number one," says Vogler. "Studios need to train people and will say, 'let's send them to the number one.'"

McKee stresses that he offers principles culled from a millennia of storytelling, a classical formula meant to empower writers, rather than imprison them. McKee grafts five "parts" to Syd Field's three acts: "inciting incident" (that's the spider biting Peter Parker in *Spider-Man*), progressive complications" (those are the increasingly troublesome obstacles the hero confronts on his way to a goal), leading to a "crisis" (Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* in love with a girl who thinks he's a woman), closing with a climax (Maximus fighting Commodus in *Gladiator*) and then settling into a "resolution" (the cowboy rides off into the sunset). And the

lights go on in the theatre if not in the minds of the audience.

The formula has become so closely associated with the big studio movie that the makers of *Adaptation* chose to spoof Hollywood by targeting McKee directly. Played by Brain Cox, McKee appears in the movie to help Charlie Kaufman, played by Nicholas Cage, finish the screenplay for the very movie we are watching. Suddenly the tortured, contemplative comedy dissolves into a series of McKee-like "progressive complications," culminating in a gunfight through a swamp and an alligator attack. Savvy marketer that he is, McKee embraces the joke as an endorsement. McKee's Web site even features a still of Brian Cox lecturing a nebishy Nicholas Cage.

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The Barefoot Guru

David S. Freeman may very well be the anti-McKee. Rather than offering a set of empowering principles with pithy curmudgeonly instructions, Freeman provides a kind of do-it-yourself kit to writing. His Lincoln Logs approach to screenwriting has proved immensely popular, and David Freeman-at least according to David Freeman — runs the most popular workshops in L.A..

Freeman calls his approach "Beyond Structure," meaning he has no core ideology: An attractive concept in a city without natural boundaries. Rather he offers a bag of tricks with punchy names like "character diamond" and "slam. The first concept describes a way to "dimensionalize" a character by giving him/her four distinct qualities; the second describes how a story incident might force a character to confront his greatest weakness, as when snake-fearing Indiana Jones gets stuck in the snake pit. What Freeman lacks in theory, he makes up for in quantity of techniques. He's devised ten strategies "for crafting unique, psychologically complex characters," "thirty-five types of eccentricities for a character," "twenty-eight kinds of character growth for your hero," "twenty techniques for giving a character depth," "fourteen techniques to capture the sounds of speech," and so on. He has also trademarked the term "emotioneering," in case you were planning on using it.

The Digital Guru

John Truby studied philosophy at Princeton and it shows. He has that lean but not hungry look Ivy-League schools seem to produce in profusion. Truby came up with a seven-step system for making stories, reminiscent of Vogler's *Hero's Journey,* but his true contribution is more medium than message. In 1997, John Truby designed a software program called Blockbuster. With it, the user builds a story by filling out a series of forms based on Truby's approach. For example, clicking on the "Character: World" tab brings up a screen where you can fill in boxes for your hero's need, social stage, context, etc. Blockbuster also features a pop-up story coach who answers anticipated questions. "The entire course that I teach is in the program," Truby explains. "It's a place where they write their story from premise all the way through the rewrite."

By selling his screenwriting formulas as software, Truby has taken the first step towards automating the creative process. By appealing to anybody with a story to tell, he hopes to democratize the process and become the world's reigning guru while he's at it. Truby's Blockbuster is a popular item that is beginning to face stiff competition from other similar programs like Story Line, Character Pro, Dramatica Pro and Power Structure. Even Syd Field has jumped into the digital game: taking part in "Ask the Expert," a problem-solving feature of Final Draft; and working with venture capital money to produce his own story-structure software.

For all the gurus' growing power and influence, Hollywood remains far from bomb-proof. Their impact is felt most directly by the writers, directors, and producers whose projects have been developed according to the gospel of homogenized storytelling. "I end up hearing the same catch-phrase story notes from everyone," says Producer Lynda Obst. "'Characters need to be more sympathetic' and 'Where's the inciting incident?' Makes me want to shoot myself with a gun." The effect has been a sea-change in how movies are conceived, yielding increasingly predictable plots, some spectacular successes (Pixar's movies), and an industry determined to side-step the mysteries of the creative process. "[The Gurus] do something to the mapping of the brain structures of writers we meet," Obst adds. "I guess that's good to the extent that some of these brains need mapping and bad to the extent that some of these brains would be better off unmapped."

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