

SCREENWRITING 101

By Film Crit Hulk!



Introduction by Edgar Wright
Edited by Meredith Borders



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SCREENWRITING 101

BY FILM CRIT HULK!

INTRODUCTION BY EDGAR WRIGHT

EDITED BY MEREDITH BORDERS

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FILM CRIT HULK WAS CREATED IN A CHAOTIC LAB EXPERIMENT INVOLVING GAMMA RADIATION, THE GHOST OF PAULINE Kael, AND TELEPODS FOR SOME REASON. NOW HULK HAS A DEEP AND ABIDING LOVE OF CINEMA WHEREIN HULK RECOGNIZES THE INHERENT VALUES OF POPULAR, NARRATIVE, OR EXPERIMENTAL STYLES!

THROUGH A UNIQUE JOURNEY, HULK HAS ENDED UP WORKING IN HOLLYWOOD FOR OVER A DECADE AND NOW WRITES ABOUT CINEMA AND STORYTELLING IN THOROUGHLY HULK-SIZED FASHION.

AND NOW YOU HOLD IN YOUR HANDS / HAVE ON YOUR SCREEN / WHATEVER IN YOUR WHATEVER, THE FIRST EBOOK BY FILM CRIT HULK.

THE ONLY THING IT MEANS TO BE IS HELPFUL.

FOR MAMA-HULK

BECAUSE SHE WAS THE GIVING TREE.

INTRODUCTION.

HULK MUSE. HULK PONDER. HULK BEAUTIFULLY ARTICULATE THE JOY OF CINEMA.

You won't like him when he's angry, but you will love him when he's passionate.

Film Crit Hulk makes all other cinematic commentary look very puny indeed. Marvel as he pounds the CAPS LOCK button to properly expound his love for cinema. Imagine Pauline Kael caught in a gamma bomb blast and you will realise that in the desert of cinematic connoisseurs, Film Crit Hulk is the strongest one there is!

In 1962, there once was a puny scientist with no love of the movie or regard for critical theory of cinematic arts. Then one fateful day, this non-cineaste was hit with massive amounts of radiation and transformed into a lumbering beast with superhuman strength, great invulnerability, but also with a newfound appreciation for classic storytelling, spatial awareness and genres of all form.

This writer of this book may only transform into the brutish green goliath in the dark of the movie theatre. His change into a passionate mass of movie loving can only be triggered by the release of adrenaline when intensely engaged or enraged by the images before him. The green goliath of the movie theatre possesses none of his human counterparts' snobbiness, making him the ideal creature to appreciate the highs and lows of cinema. Hulk will feast on the studio popcorn and arthouse carrot cake with the same voracious appetite. Just do not talk during the feature presentation or dare check your iPhone at any point, for you may be swatted into the parking lot.

Film Crit Hulk bats away other movie buffs with their endless lists they think constitute as articles, and brings the essay back to roaring life. Why would you want to read other literature about cinema with its simple use of uppercase and lowercase characters? Film Crit Hulk knows that a true love of cinema CAN ONLY BE FULLY EXPRESSED WHEN USING THE CAPS LOCK BUTTON.

WHY READ SMALL-MINDED FILM CRITICISM WHEN YOU CAN STAND IN AWE OF HULK'S GARGANTUAN LOVE OF THE MOVIES.

I give this book two Hulk Hands up. WAY UP.

Edgar Wright, 2013

- PREFACE -

SO YOU WANT TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY?

BEFORE YOU DO, KNOW THIS: IT REQUIRES A GREAT DEAL OF EFFORT AND DEDICATION. A LOT OF THESE SCREENWRITING BOOKS LIKE TO FILL YOUR HEAD WITH FALSE PROMISES AND EASY TRICKS. BUT IT'S SO DAMN FAR FROM THE OBVIOUS TRUTH: BECOMING A TALENTED WRITER TAKES A LONG TIME AND A LOT OF HARD WORK.

THEY ALSO CONVENIENTLY FORGET TO MENTION THAT THE ODDS ARE AGAINST YOU. THERE ARE OVER A MILLION SCRIPTS ALREADY FLOATING AROUND HOLLYWOOD. HULK HAS READ, OH... A COUPLE THOUSAND OF THEM. AND NEARLY EVERY SINGLE PERSON HULK MEETS IN THE FILM INDUSTRY ALREADY HAS A SCRIPT OF SOME SORT. NOT ONLY DOES THE SHEER VOLUME OF SCRIPTS MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH ONESELF IN THIS CLIMATE, BUT SO DOES THE FACT THAT THERE ARE ALREADY A VAST NUMBER OF TALENTED, PROFESSIONAL WRITERS IN NEED OF WORK.

SO GIVEN ALL THESE CRIPPLING ODDS, WE SHOULD ALL JUST GIVE UP, RIGHT? WELL, NO. YOU'RE NOT HERE READING THIS BECAUSE THAT REALITY BOTHERS YOU. AND THAT'S THE THING ABOUT THE MOVIES: THEY'RE WONDERFUL. THEY'RE THE IMAGINATION OF STORYTELLING MADE TANGIBLE. THEY'RE OUR DREAMS MADE REAL. WHO WOULDN'T WANT TO BE A PART OF ALL THAT?

BUT WITH CINEMA BEING SO POPULAR AND WITH THE OMNIPRESENCE OF TALENTED WRITERS, YOU WOULD THINK HOLLYWOOD WOULD BE KNEE-DEEP IN GREAT SCRIPTS, RIGHT? WELL, THE OBVIOUS PROBLEM IS THEY MOST DEFINITELY ARE NOT. THUS, HULK WILL AUGMENT THE PHRASING OF THAT PROBLEM AND ASK A DIFFERENT QUESTION OF YOU:

WHY DO MOST MOVIES HAVE *MAJOR SCRIPT PROBLEMS*?

QUITE FRANKLY, THE ANSWER LIES IN A LOT OF INDUSTRY BULLSHIT. NOW, HULK ISN'T HERE TO PARSE OUT AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE STUDIO SYSTEM, BUT JUST UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS A GOOD DEAL OF PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE SO TO SPEAK. SO MANY MOVIES PRESS ON BEFORE THEY EVEN REALLY HAVE A STORY, JUST HOPING THEY'LL FIGURE IT OUT LATER... BUT LIKE HULK SAID, THIS BOOK IS NOT ACTUALLY ABOUT SUSSING OUT INDUSTRY PROBLEMS. NOR IS THIS BOOK ABOUT WRITING SCREENPLAYS THAT SELL, OR POP, OR TELL YOU HOW TO PITCH TO A STUDIO. HULK WOULD NEVER FALSELY ADVERTISE TO YOU IN SUCH A MANNER. WHILE THESE ELEMENTS ARE CERTAINLY IMPORTANT TO BEING A "SUCCESS" IN HOLLYWOOD, THEY ARE NOT AN IMPORTANT PART OF BECOMING A GOOD WRITER, SO THEY WILL ONLY BE A TANGENTIAL PART OF WHAT WE SHALL DISCUSS HERE. IN FACT, HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT IF YOU *ONLY* POSSESS THE ABILITY TO SELL, POP AND PITCH, THEN YOU CAN ONLY HAVE THE KIND OF SUCCESS THAT DOES NOT LAST.

MEANWHILE, *KNOWING HOW TO WRITE LASTS*.

SO THE FOLLOWING GARGANTUAN SEVEN-PART BOOK IS HULK'S HUMBLE ATTEMPT TO TRY AND SHED SOME LIGHT ON HOW TO BECOME A BETTER WRITER AND STORYTELLER. THE FIRST HALF OF THE BOOK DEALS WITH IMPORTANT CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND TAKES A GREAT DEAL OF (NEEDED) TIME TO WAX PHILOSOPHICAL ON THE STATE OF MIND AND PURPOSE ONE NEEDS TO APPROACH STORYTELLING. THERE'S JUST TOO MANY CONCEPTS TO BOTH LEARN AND UNLEARN BEFORE YOU ARE READY TO REALLY START. BUT THE LAST HALF OF THE BOOK IS (THANKFULLY) RATHER PRACTICAL IN TERMS OF HOW TO APPLY THOSE CONCEPTS TO CREATE A METHODOLOGY FOR YOURSELF AND HONE THE CRAFT.

STILL, HULK HAS TRIED TO MAKE THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK AS EASILY DIGESTIBLE AND SIMPLE TO NAVIGATE AS POSSIBLE. MOST OF THE SUBJECTS ARE LISTED BY CHAPTER NUMBER, WITH EITHER LETTER OR ROMAN NUMERAL SUB-HEADINGS. IT MAY ALL SEEM LIKE A LOT. IT MAY EVEN SEEM TO DIVE HEADLONG INTO NUANCE AT THE COST OF DIRECT CLARITY, BUT THAT IS VERY

MUCH THE POINT: TOO MANY SCREENWRITING BOOKS PARSE OUT OVER-SIMPLICITIES THAT DO NOTHING BUT MAKE YOUR WORK FEEL MORE RESTRICTED AND MORE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE'S. THIS BOOK IS ABOUT LEARNING THE WAYS TO CREATE ANY KIND OF STORY YOU WANT BY USING STORY MECHANISMS AND CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING.

AND WHATEVER SHORTCOMINGS THIS APPROACH HAS IN TERMS OF PONTIFICATION, THE BOOK WILL CERTAINLY NOT HAVE SUFFERED FROM A LACK OF EFFORT. AND LIKE MOST HULK PIECES, THE BOOK'S HULK-SIZED-NESS IS INFORMED BY THE SHEER MASS OF THE SUBJECT ITSELF; FOR THE ART OF STORYTELLING, WHETHER WE DISTILL IT IN TERMS OF THE IDEAS, THE KNOW-HOW, OR ITS EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE, IS AN ART THAT IS AS VARIED AS OUR OWN LIVES, AND AS EXPANSIVE AS OUR OWN UNIVERSE.

BUT PLEASE KNOW THIS BOOK IS NOT MEANT TO BE SOME AUTHORITARIAN RANT ON HULK'S PART. HULK IS NOT AN IDEOLOGUE AND THIS IS NOT ABOUT "HOW THINGS SHOULD BE DONE." IT IS MEANT TO BE HELPFUL TO YOU. NOTHING MORE. NOTHING LESS. THE MOTIVES FOR WRITING IT ARE BORN FROM A GENUINE SENSE OF CAMARADERIE, FROM KNOWING THE SAME STRUGGLE THAT ALL WRITERS GO THROUGH. AND IF YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH THAT STRUGGLE, THEN YOU KNOW THAT IT IS A SHAM FOR ANY WRITER TO REPRESENT THEMSELVES AS AN AUTHORITY. THERE IS ONLY THE SAME LONESOME STRUGGLE TO EXECUTE ONE'S IDEAS.

IT IS TRUE OF ALL OF US. AND IT IS CONSTANT, PERVASIVE, AND EVER-LASTING. HULK BELIEVES THIS STRUGGLE IS TOUGH ON WRITERS BECAUSE IT MAKES FOR A SOLITARY LIFE AND TRYING BATTLES WITH ONE'S OWN MIND. IT FOSTERS A SOLIPSISTIC SENSE OF INDEPENDENCE, WHICH CAN ALSO BREED A SENSE OF CONTEMPT. SO AS MUCH AS ANYTHING, HULK WRITES A BOOK LIKE THIS IN AN ATTEMPT TO CONNECT. TO SHARE. TO NOT FEEL LIKE WE ARE SO ALONE IN THE PURSUIT.

AS SUCH, THIS BOOK IS MEANT FOR WRITERS FOR EVERY SINGLE LEVEL: INTRODUCTORY, INTERMEDIATE, AND WORKING PROS WHO PERHAPS KNOW MOST OF THESE THINGS ALREADY IN EITHER A CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS MANNER, BUT COULD ALWAYS BENEFIT FROM SEEING THE IDEAS MADE PLAIN. EVEN CERTIFIED GENIUSES CAN SOMETIMES OVERLOOK SOME MISSING ELEMENT A SCRIPT MAY NEED IN ORDER TO FULLY ELEVATE THEIR STORY. AND YES, THIS BOOK IS ALSO MEANT FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NO INTEREST IN SCREENWRITING WHATSOEVER, BUT ARE JUST CURIOUS ABOUT THE WRITING PROCESS AND HOW IT AFFECTS WHAT THEY SEE ONSCREEN.

BECAUSE ULTIMATELY THIS ISN'T ABOUT THE PATH TO SUCCESS, OR INDUSTRY SECRETS, OR SOME ETHEREAL CONCEPT OF IMPORT...

THIS IS ABOUT LEARNING HOW TO WRITE SCREENPLAYS THAT WORK.

<3 HULK

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YOU INSTINCTIVELY KNOW WHAT HULK MEANS WHEN HULK SAYS THE WORD *STORY*, BUT LET'S TRY AN EXPERIMENT: DEFINE "A STORY" IN A SINGLE SENTENCE.

... YEAH, IT'S HARDER THAN IT SEEMS.

LIFE IS FULL OF THESE OBVIOUS WORDS THAT WE CAN DEFINE SO EASILY, CONCEPTS LIKE LOVE, ANGER, HAPPINESS, JEALOUSY, AND LUST (CAN'T FORGET LUST!). WE USE THOSE WORDS EVERY SINGLE DAY OF OUR LIVES, BUT RARELY DO WE TRY TO ACTUALLY DEFINE THEM IN A SINGULAR, CLEAR WAY. PERHAPS BECAUSE THESE WORDS TEND TO CAPTURE ENORMOUS EMOTIONS; FEELINGS SO BIG THEY CAN TAKE OVER OUR ENTIRE BODIES. THESE WORDS CONTAIN MULTITUDES, AND IT'S PROBLEMATIC WHEN WE TRY TO SIMPLIFY THE SHEER TOTALITY AND RANGE OF MOST OF THESE CONCEPTS. TO EMBRACE THAT RANGE MEANS NOT CATERING TO A SIMPLE ONE-OFF LINE LIKE "LOVE MEANS NEVER HAVING TO SAY YOU'RE SORRY," BUT INSTEAD CONSIDERING EVERYTHING THAT THE CONCEPT TRULY MEANS. AND COME ON, "NEVER HAVING TO SAY YOU'RE SORRY?" A GOOD DEAL OF US SHOULD BE APOLOGIZING FOR, LIKE, 60% OF THE THINGS WE SAY AND DO, ESPECIALLY TO THE PEOPLE WE LOVE.

BUT HULK WANTS TO DO A SILLY THING WITH YOU HERE AND TRY TO DEFINE THE WORD *STORY*.

WE COULD JUST CALL A STORY "ONE OF THOSE THINGS PEOPLE TELL" AND BE DONE WITH IT, BUT THAT'S NOT VERY HELPFUL, IS IT? AND THAT'S WHAT MATTERS. YOU SEE, HULK BELIEVES THAT SOMETIMES DEFINITIONS SHOULDN'T BE ONLY ABOUT ACCURACY OR CONCISION, BUT INSTEAD ABOUT APPLICATION (TAKE NOTE AS THIS WILL BE A RUNNING THEME WITH HALF THE TERMINOLOGY USED IN THIS BOOK). AND THAT MEANS GIVING YOU A DEFINITION THAT HELPS YOU BEST APPLY THE IDEA IN A CONCRETE, SUBSTANTIAL WAY. HULK CALLS THESE KINDS OF DEFINITIONS "WORKING DEFINITIONS" AND THEY ARE A TRULY LOVELY THING.

SO IMAGINE IF ALIENS LANDED ON THE PLANET AND THE FATE OF THE HUMAN RACE DEPENDED ON YOUR CLEAR EXPLANATION OF WHAT A STORY IS. THINK ABOUT HOW THAT OUTRIGHT *CLARITY* MATTERS. IF THE ALIENS WERE ASKING FOR A DEFINITION OF LOVE, YOU COULDN'T TELL THEM "LOVE MEANS NEVER HAVING TO SAY YOU'RE SORRY," BECAUSE THEY'D BE SUPER CONFUSED AND PROBABLY ENSLAVE US OR WHATEVER. AND DEFINING "A STORY" IS SO HARD BECAUSE STORIES CAN HAVE SO MANY DIFFERENT PURPOSES. THEY CAN BE ACCOUNTS OF FACTS. FULL-ON NARRATIVES. RUMORS. LEGENDS. NEWS ARTICLES. BACKGROUND INFORMATION. THE WORD ITSELF IS SO UNBELIEVABLY DEXTEROUS, SO HOW DO WE NARROW IT DOWN?

FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS BOOK, HULK WILL MOSTLY BE NARROWING OUR FOCUS TO THE KIND OF STORYTELLING WE CALL *NARRATIVE*. AND NARRATIVES ARE ONLY SOMETHING THAT HUMANS HAVE BEEN CREATING SINCE THE FREAKIN' DAWN OF CULTURE. THEY ARE BORN FROM THE NEED TO COMMUNICATE THE MOST RUDIMENTARY CONCEPTS OF SURVIVAL. OUT OF OUR NEED TO TELL AND INFORM, WE BUILT LANGUAGE. OUT OF OUR NEED TO USE LANGUAGE TO BEST COMMUNICATE IDEAS, WE CREATED NARRATIVES, WHICH FIRST SPRANG UP AS PART OF THE ORAL TRADITION, BUILT AROUND CAMPFIRE AND COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE. AGAIN, THIS WAS SOMETHING THAT WAS *NECESSARY* FOR US TO OPERATE. FROM THERE WE MADE SYMBOLS. WROTE. PAINTED. AND THE MEDIA, FORMATS, AND SHAPES OF AUDIENCES HAVE CHANGED MANY TIMES OVER THE COURSE OF HISTORY, BUT THE STUNNING IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE HAS ALWAYS REMAINED. THE UNIVERSAL TROPES AND DEVICES INVOLVED IN THESE NARRATIVES HAVE STAYED INTACT AND REMAIN WHOLLY RELEVANT FOR GOOD REASON: NARRATIVES ALLOW US TO COME TO A SENSE OF UNDERSTANDING ABOUT LIFE AND OUR FUNCTION WITHIN IT.

WHY IS THIS HISTORY IMPORTANT?

BECAUSE IT TELLS US WHY *WE STILL DO IT*.

THINK ABOUT IT. EVERY DAY, PARENTS TRY TO TEACH THEIR CHILDREN HOW TO LIVE. TEACHERS

INSTRUCT THEIR PUPILS. ELDERS SPEAK TO YOUNGIN'S. AND THEY COULD JUST BE LIKE "DO THIS!" OR "DO THAT!" BUT THAT TENDS NOT TO WORK VERY WELL, DOES IT? BUT BY TAKING THE SAME POINTS AND ENVELOPING THEM WITHIN A STORY, THEY CAN CONVEY SO MUCH MORE THAN MERE INSTRUCTION. IT DOESN'T EXPRESSLY NEED TO BE SOME LONG-WINDED TALE; IT'S MORE OF A CONDITIONAL WAY TO CONVEY MEANING. CONSEQUENCE. ACTION. INACTION. *PURPOSE*. IT'S ALL THERE. NARRATIVES MEAN SO MUCH TO OUR CULTURE, NOT JUST BECAUSE THEY INVOKE A BASIC SENSE OF MORALITY, BUT BECAUSE THEY MAKE OUR VERY HUMANITY SOMETHING UNDERSTANDABLE. THEY MAKE OUR HUMANITY SOMETHING TANGIBLE. THEY MAKE IT SOMETHING *FELT*.

AND THIS SHOULD BE YOUR PURPOSE IN STORYTELLING. IDEALLY, WHATEVER IT IS THAT YOU WANT TO COMMUNICATE TO BOTH THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU AND FUTURE GENERATIONS SHOULD NOT JUST BE WHAT EXISTS IN YOUR STORY. IT SHOULD BE THE VERY POINT OF YOUR STORY. IT SHOULD BE YOUR PURPOSE. BUT IT IS STUNNING HOW OFTEN WE FORGET THIS. OR HOW OFTEN OUR MODERN SENSIBILITIES THUMB OUR NOSES AT ANYTHING THAT TRIES TO SAY SOMETHING MEANINGFUL OR EARNEST. AND THAT SUCKS BECAUSE THAT'S NOT THE PURPOSE OF STORIES.

AFTER ALL, THE VERY FIRST STORIES WERE FABLES: A HYPOTHETICAL, ABSTRACT SITUATION DESIGNED TO IMPART LESSONS UPON YOUTH. FROM THERE, FABLES GREW INTO MYTHS AND HERO STORIES AND FAIRY AND FOLK TALES. FROM THERE, THEY SPREAD TO EPICS AND NOVELS AND POEMS AND PLAYS AND NOW WE FIND OURSELVES ROOTED IN THE GLORY OF CINEMA. THE PLATFORMS MAY HAVE CHANGED, BUT THE PURPOSE HAS REMAINED THE SAME SINCE THE ORIGINAL FABLE: TO DEMONSTRATE CAUSE AND EFFECT IN THE FORM OF ABSTRACTION IN ORDER TO PROVE SOMETHING TRUE ABOUT OUR HUMAN EXPERIENCE. AND HULK HONESTLY THINKS IT'S ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS WE CAN DO.

"Okay, we get it Hulk! Narratives are important! We know that! That's why we are here reading!!!"

OKAY, SORRY, SORRY! HULK JUST HAD TO MAKE IT CLEAR IN CASE IT WASN'T. SOME FOLKS JUST THINK A STORY IS SOMETHING TO PASS THE TIME. AND THAT'S NOT TO SAY THAT IT CAN'T ULTIMATELY BE A LIGHTEARTED THING, JUST THAT WE STILL NEED TO BE REMINDED WHY WE ACTUALLY DO THIS STORYTELLING STUFF IN THE FIRST PLACE. AS WE GET OLDER IT BECOMES EASY TO FORGET THAT. WE TEND TO LOSE SIGHT OF JUST HOW AMAZING THE SIMPLE LESSONS IN A STORY CAN FEEL. BUT IF YOU ASK A DOZEN ENGLISH TEACHERS ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF STORIES, THEY'LL SPEAK TO THAT POWER. THEY GET TO SEE THE ONGOING CYCLE OF HIGH SCHOOL KIDS ACROSS THE COUNTRY DISCOVERING THE SAME BIG IDEAS THAT YOU DID IN HIGH SCHOOL AND THEY HAPPEN TO FEEL JUST AS REVOLUTIONARY AS THEY DID FOR YOU. THESE ARE MOMENTS THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES AND CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD AROUND US. AND WHILE THE JOY OF INTELLECTUAL DISCOVERY TENDS TO HAPPEN LESS AND LESS FREQUENTLY IN ADULTHOOD, IT BECOMES OUR DUTY TO INSTEAD PASS ON THAT MEANING. THE CYCLE IS NOT ONLY CONSTANT, BUT CRITICAL TO OUR FUNCTION. LIKE PLATO DESCRIBING THE CAVE, WE USE OUR CONSIDERATE AND THOUGHTFUL MINDS TO PASS THE TORCH OF UNIVERSAL TRUTHS AND DO OUR BEST TO DISTINGUISH THEM FROM THE SHADOWS.

AND IF WE CAN FUNDAMENTALLY AGREE THAT STORIES ARE BOTH IMPORTANT AND HAVE A PURPOSE...

THE REAL QUESTION BECOMES: WHAT MAKES A *GOOD* NARRATIVE?

IS IT SOMETHING THAT INVOLVES YOU? IS IT SOMETHING THAT IS WELL-REALIZED? THAT FEELS HONEST AND REAL? THAT IS CRAFTED WITHOUT EXTRANEIOUS EXCESS? THAT GETS YOU TO LEARN SOMETHING YOU NEVER KNEW BEFORE? OR IS IT SOMETHING THAT SPEAKS TO SOME BASIC TRUTH THAT YOU NOW RECOGNIZE IN YOURSELF?

THE CORRECT ANSWER IS "YES."

WHY YES, GOOD FRIEND, A GOOD STORY DOES ALL OF THOSE THINGS. THERE IS, OF COURSE, SOME AMOUNT OF WIGGLE ROOM WHEN IT COMES TO *HOW* SUCCESSFUL EACH OF THESE ELEMENTS

NEEDS TO BE IN RELATION TO EACH OTHER. FOR INSTANCE, IF YOUR STORY IS REALLY CONCERNED WITH THE THEMATIC MEANING OF A GIVEN SCENE IT CAN INDULGE IN SOME ASPECTS THAT ARE NOT WHOLLY CRUCIAL FOR STORY ECONOMY. THERE'S A NEGOTIATION TO ALL OF THIS. YOU CAN'T LOSE SIGHT OF *ALL THE THINGS* A GOOD STORY NEEDS, BUT WHEN YOU DO GO OUT OF BOUNDS IT HAS TO BE FOR A *REALLY GOOD REASON*. SURE THAT GOOD REASON MOSTLY DEPENDS ON WHAT MATTERS TO YOU, THE PROVERBIAL AUTHOR, OR YOU, THE PROVERBIAL AUDIENCE MEMBER, BUT HULK THINKS IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT EVERY GREAT FILM DOES CAPTURE ALL OF THESE ELEMENTS IN SOME WAY.

SO LET'S JUST GO FOR IT! HERE HULK PRESENTS A WORKING DEFINITION OF IDEAL STORYTELLING: **A GOOD NARRATIVE IS COMPELLING TO THE AUDIENCE, ECONOMICALLY TOLD, FEELS REAL EITHER IN TERMS OF EMOTION, DETAIL, OR TEXTURE, AND SPEAKS TO SOME THEMATIC TRUTH THAT YOU RECOGNIZE IN YOURSELF OR THE WORLD AT LARGE.**

TA-DA! AND ALL HULK HAD TO DO WAS CHEAT WITH A LONG, SILLY SENTENCE THAT WAS JUST A LIST OF THE STUFF HULK SAID EARLIER.

YES, THIS DEFINITION SETS A HIGH STANDARD FOR EXECUTION, BUT PLEASE REMEMBER IT IS NOT MEANT TO BE EXCLUSIVE OR LIMITING OR INFLEXIBLE. IT'S INSTEAD AN IDEAL MODEL FOR HOW TO TELL *THE BEST POSSIBLE STORIES*. MEANING THE DEFINITION IS MEANT TO BE BOTH PRACTICAL AND AN INSPIRATION, NOT RESTRICTIVE. HULK WON'T INHERENTLY EXCLUDE ANYTHING FOR LACKING A COMPONENT. IT'S JUST THAT HULK TENDS TO RECOGNIZE THAT ALL THE BEST STORIES ARE MULTIFACETED, COMPLEX, INTERESTING, AND RESONANT. NO MATTER HOW TECHNICALLY "UNTRUE" A STORY MAY BE, A WELL-TOLD, COMPELLING ONE WILL STILL FEEL *REAL*. AND THE BEST STORIES SPEAK TO YOUR MIND (THEMATICALLY), BODY (VISCERALLY), AND SOUL (WITH RESONANCE). SO WHY WOULDN'T YOU WANT YOUR OWN STORIES TO DO THE SAME?

HULK IS ALL ABOUT EMBRACING THE HIGH STANDARD, REGARDLESS OF OUR ABILITY TO ACTUALLY LIVE UP TO IT. JUST SIT DOWN AND LOOK AT THAT DEFINITION AGAIN, THEN LOOK AT YOUR OWN STORIES. ASK YOURSELF, ARE YOU TRYING TO BE COOL INSTEAD OF COMPELLING? ARE YOU TRYING TO BE DISAFFECTED AND EDGY INSTEAD OF AUTHENTIC? ARE YOU BEING DISINGENUOUS TO THE WORLD YOU'VE CREATED IN THE NAME OF A QUICK FIX? HECK, ARE YOU EVEN THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOUR STORY SAYS ON A LARGER THEMATIC LEVEL AT ALL? IN TOTAL, ARE YOU AT LEAST TRYING TO DO ALL THE THINGS YOU NEED TO FIT OUR WORKING DEFINITION OF A GOOD NARRATIVE?

AND THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS WILL TELL YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW.

"Okay, gee. Thanks Hulk for the big definition there, but I don't even know where to begin... I mean... what kind of stories do I even tell?"

WELL, PROVERBIAL READER WHO LIVES IN HULK'S BOOK, HULK WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST THAT YOU IMPLICITLY *KNOW STORIES*. YOU KNOW THEM IN YOUR BONES. YOU'VE SEEN / READ / HEARD THOUSANDS OF THEM. YOU, NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE, INSTINCTIVELY KNOW WHAT MAKES STORIES GOOD AND HOW THEY WORK.

THE KEY IS SIMPLY TO BECOME *AWARE* OF WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW.

PART TWO - WHERE TO FIND INSPIRATION

FOR SOME PEOPLE, THE HARDEST PART OF WRITING IS FINDING INSPIRATION.

THE PROBLEM WITH HULK TRYING TO HELP YOU FIND INSPIRATION IS THAT INSPIRATION SORT OF HAS TO BE... UM... NATURAL. IT CERTAINLY CANNOT BE FORCED. INSPIRATION IS LARGELY A MYSTERIOUS PROCESS THAT IS, BY ITS NATURE, ORGANIC AND RATHER PERSONAL. AND TO UNDERSTAND HOW YOU, AS AN INDIVIDUAL, FIND THAT INSPIRATION TAKES PRACTICE, PATIENCE, AND A LOT OF HARD WORK. SURE, HULK COULD GIVE YOU THE THOROUGHLY BAD (AND RATHER POPULAR) ANSWER OF SAYING "STORIES ARE ALL AROUND YOU! YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK FOR THEM!" BUT THAT DOESN'T REALLY HELP NOW, DOES IT? EVEN IF THE STATEMENT IS WEIRDLY TRUE. STORIES AND INSPIRATION ACTUALLY ARE EVERYWHERE. BUT THE REAL KEY IS TRAINING YOUR BRAIN HOW TO RECOGNIZE THIS INSPIRATION AND APPLY IT READILY. AND IN DOING SO IT WILL BECOME CONSTANT, PERVASIVE, AND EVEN DOWNRIGHT SUFFOCATING TO THE POINT WHERE YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO KEEP UP.

FOR FAR TOO LONG, HULK THOUGHT THE KEY TO INSPIRATION WAS HAVING THE ABILITY TO DECIPHER A STORY THAT WAS WORTH TELLING VERSUS ONE THAT ISN'T WORTH TELLING... BUT THAT WAS WRONG. ANYTHING IN THIS UNIVERSE CAN BE A STORY WORTH TELLING, AS LONG AS YOU KNOW HOW TO BEST TELL IT. SO THAT MEANS THE REAL KEY IS UNDERSTANDING HOW TO TAKE THAT INSPIRATION AND MAKE IT MANIFEST AS "STORY."

SO THE FIRST THING WE HAVE TO DO IS DECIPHER WHY THE MOMENT OF INSPIRATION ITSELF REALLY MATTERS. IT'S NOT JUST THE STARTING POINT, BUT SOMETHING THAT CAN WORK AS A BACKBONE *FOR THE ENTIRE PROCESS* OF WRITING. CONSIDER THE FACT THAT HULK HAS TONS OF IDEAS AT THE MOMENT AND THEY EXIST IN VARIOUS FORMS: BRAIN STORMS, OUTLINES, HALF-WRITTEN SCREENPLAYS, FULLY-WRITTEN SCREENPLAYS, SHORT STORIES, TELEPLAYS, NOVELS. EVEN A LITANY OF SMALL IDEAS WRITTEN ON NAPKINS AND SCRAPS OF PAPER. WHAT THIS PERSONAL INFORMATION IS MEANT TO IMPLY IS THAT THE RELATIVE "DONE-NESS" OR FORM OF THE PROPERTY HAS *ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH THE IDEA AND CONCEPT ITSELF*. A FINISHED FILM IS AS CLOSE TO THE INSPIRATION THAT SPAWNED IT AS THAT ORIGINAL SCRIBBLED NOTE ON A NAPKIN. TO THE CREATOR, THEY ARE *CONCEPTUALLY* THE SAME THING, NO MATTER HOW MUCH THEY MIGHT HAVE CHANGED. NEVER FORGET THAT. BECAUSE THE GERM OF YOUR IDEA CAN BE THE THING THAT MUST CONSTANTLY LIGHT THE FIRE UNDERNEATH YOU AS YOU GO FORTH. WHEN YOU ARE IN THE SLOG OF WORKING OUT THE LOGISTICS, YOU MUST FIND THAT SAME INSPIRATION. EVEN IF THE PROJECT RADICALLY CHANGES, THE IDEA ITSELF SHOULD BE A THROUGH-LINE THAT SAVES YOUR SCRIPT THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS. THE MOMENT OF INSPIRATION IS BOTH YOUR MOTIVE AND MOTIVATION.

BUT EVEN THEN, WHERE TO GET THAT IDEA WRITTEN ON A NAPKIN? THE GERM OF THE IDEA? THE VERY FIRST THING THAT YOU WRITE DOWN? THE ANSWERS TO THOSE QUESTIONS ARE SO ETHEREAL AND VAGUE THAT IT IS ALMOST FOOLISH TO REALLY TRY AND ANSWER IT. BUT, FOOLISH AS IT MAY BE, HULK WANTS TO HELP YOU. SO HULK'S GOING TO DO HULK'S BEST HERE AND TRY TO GIVE YOU SOME PRODUCTIVE WAYS OF FINDING STORIES YOU WANT TO TELL.

TO DO THAT, HULK WILL START WITH A QUESTION: WHY DOES IT SEEM LIKE SO MANY MOVIES AREN'T TRYING TO SAY ANYTHING THESE DAYS?

... PROBABLY BECAUSE A LOT OF MOVIES AREN'T TRYING TO SAY ANYTHING THESE DAYS. IT'S A BIT OF A FORGOTTEN ELEMENT IN ALL THIS. OFTEN WE VIEW A FILM TRYING TO "SAY SOMETHING" AS AN OBSTACLE TO ENTERTAINMENT, A CHALLENGING NOTION THAT PREVENTS US FROM PLACATING AUDIENCES WITH THE DUMB, MINDLESS ENTERTAINMENT WE THINK THEY CRAVE. BUT AS HULK ALLUDED TO IN PART ONE, HULK DISAGREES WITH THIS IDEA. HUMANITY CREATES NARRATIVES. WE GIVE THINGS MEANING AND VALUE AND IMPORT. YOU CAN BEMOAN THE RISE OF REALITY TV AND SAY THAT IT'S NOT SAYING ANYTHING BECAUSE IT'S CLEARLY FULL OF FALSE AND MANUFACTURED STORYLINES, ALL OF WHICH IS LIKELY TRUE, BUT AS A CULTURE WHO WATCHES IT, WE STILL ASSIGN SOCIALIZATION AND NARRATIVE TO REALITY TV ALL THE SAME.

PEOPLE TALK OF THE MOTIVES OF THE KARDASHIANS THE SAME WAY WE DO THE MOTIVES OF THE HIGHEST FICTION. THE KARDASHIAN SHOW MAY NOT BE INTENTIONALLY TRYING TO “SAY ANYTHING,” AND THERE MAY BE AN INTELLECTUAL CHASM BETWEEN THE SUBTLITIES OF THAT KIND OF SHOW AND THE PINNACLE OF ART, BUT IT IS RATHER EASY TO FORGET THAT WE’RE EFFECTIVELY DOING THE SAME THING WITH BOTH PROPERTIES. BOTH ARE NARRATIVES THAT SERVE THE SAME PURPOSE OF INFORMING LIFE. MEANING BOTH LOW-FICTION AND HIGH-FICTION SAY SOMETHING. OF COURSE, HULK IMAGINES THERE ARE THOSE OF YOU OUT THERE WHO THINK THAT A FILM TRYING TO “SAY SOMETHING” IS ANNOYING, WHO FEEL IT IS DIDACTIC. PRETENTIOUS. ESOTERIC... HULK ALSO REJECTS THIS NOTION, FOR SAYING SOMETHING, *ANYTHING* IS THE VERY PURPOSE OF ART. AND NARRATIVE IS THE BEST VEHICLE IN THE WORLD FOR CONVEYING MEANING. IT’S SO GOOD IT CAN DO IT INCIDENTALLY.

SO WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY? WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WANT TO TELL THE WORLD? THAT’S WHAT INSPIRATION IS. IT IS SOMETHING THAT IS INSPIRATIONAL TO YOU.

SO HULK WILL NOW ASK YOU A BETTER QUESTION: *WHAT COMPELS YOU?*

THERE ARE A LOT OF DIFFERENT AVENUES YOU CAN GO DOWN WHILE TRYING TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION, BUT LET’S TRY THE MOST LITERAL AND CONCRETE FIRST. FIRST LET US TRY TO ANSWER IT ON A MACRO, ISSUE-BASED LEVEL: ARE YOU CONCERNED WITH PROBLEMS FACING OUR NATION’S YOUTH? THE CONDITIONS OF FARM ANIMALS? CROOKED POLITICIANS? THE UNSUNG PLIGHT OF NURSES AND OTHER PEOPLE TRYING TO DO GOOD IN A BUREAUCRACY? CORRUPT PRACTICES OF CORPORATE BUSINESS? MUNDANE HEROISMS? GENDER INEQUALITY? SEXUAL POLITICS? REALLY, YOU ARE JUST ASKING YOURSELF, *WHAT DO I HAVE A STRONG OPINION ABOUT?*

THE FUNNY THING IS THAT PEOPLE USE THESE TOPICS IN MAKING DOCUMENTARIES ALL THE TIME, BUT HULK WANTS TO CONVEY TO YOU THAT THIS IS ALSO A GREAT WAY TO FIND INSPIRATION FOR FICTION. OF COURSE, THE PRIME WORRY OF DOING SO IS THAT YOU’LL JUST END UP MAKING A POLITICAL ESSAY IN THE FORM OF A MOVIE. OR THAT YOU WILL RETROACTIVELY CREATE A NARRATIVE THAT ONLY FITS WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY, AND THUS IT WILL FEEL LIKE A MOUTHPIECE AND NOT AN ORGANIC STORY. BUT THE POINT OF EMBRACING THESE KINDS OF BROAD ISSUES FROM THE GET-GO IS THAT THEY ALWAYS SEEM TO HAVE SOME SORT OF PERSONAL RELEVANCE, ONE THAT WILL HELP DRIVE THE CREATIVE VOICE OF YOUR WORK. PLUS IT SPEAKS TO THE OLD ADAGE “WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW.” THE ONE PROBLEM WITH THAT OLD ADAGE, HOWEVER, IS THAT THE PHRASING STINKS BECAUSE IT TENDS TO BREED A LACK OF COURAGEOUS THINKING AND RESEARCH. IT BREEDS THE IDEA THAT WE CAN *ONLY* TELL THE UBER-PERSONAL. THUS, HULK THINKS *WRITE WHAT COMPELS YOU* IS A MUCH MORE FUNCTIONAL WAY TO DISCOVER YOUR OWN IDEAS.

THE MAIN REASON THIS ISSUE-CENTRIC APPROACH WORKS IS THAT IT TENDS TO NATURALLY IMBUE YOUR FILM WITH THE THEMATIC BACKBONE A STRONG NARRATIVE REQUIRES. AND BECAUSE, COME ON, YOU SHOULD FREAKING CARE ABOUT THE STORY YOU ARE TELLING. OTHERWISE, WHY EVEN DO IT? WHEN A WRITER/ FILMMAKER GENUINELY CARES, IT RADIATES OFF THE PAGE OR SCREEN. THE AUDIENCE REALLY CAN TELL. AND IF YOU DON’T CARE? THAT COMES ACROSS PLAIN AS DAY, TOO (LOOK AT THE CAREER ARC OF BRETT RATNER, FOR INSTANCE. AESTHETICALLY EVERYTHING IS PLEASING ENOUGH - OR AT LEAST A CARBON COPY OF WHAT HE INTENDS TO MIMIC, BUT THE FILMS ARE SOULLESS. AND THE ONE FILM OF HIS HE WAS EXCITED ABOUT WAS **RUSH HOUR**, WHICH ACTUALLY CONNECTED WITH PEOPLE IN A VALID POPCORN WAY.) MOST WRITERS AND FILMMAKERS CARE FOR SOMETHING WITHIN THE FILM’S IDENTITY, WHETHER IT IS THE GENRE, AUDIENCE EFFECT, OR CRAFT IMPLEMENTATION. ARE YOU TELLING A SCARY STORY? YOU SHOULD DELIGHT IN SCARING YOUR AUDIENCE. GOING BACK TO OUR DEFINITION OF “WHAT IS A STORY?”, YOU SHOULD TREAT THE SCREEN THE SAME WAY YOU WOULD IF YOU WERE TELLING THE STORY AT THE PROVERBIAL CAMPFIRE. YOU SHOULD ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE. AND IN ORDER TO DO THAT:

YOU HAVE TO HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY, EVEN IF THAT SOMETHING IS AMBIVALENT OR ESOTERIC.

BUT REMEMBER, THIS LARGE-SCALE, ISSUE-FIRST APPROACH IS JUST ONE HALF OF THE DEAL. EVEN

IF YOU HAVE A STRONG, INTERESTING OPINION ON A SUBJECT, THE IDEA STILL HAS TO BE EXPLORED THROUGH THE CONTEXT OF STORYTELLING, WHICH IS 100% MORE IMPORTANT TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR MESSAGE.

SO YOU ESSENTIALLY NEED A SECOND INSPIRATION TO GO ALONG WITH YOUR ISSUE. YOU NEED TO CRAFT A STORY THAT IS ACHINGLY HUMAN AS A PARTNER TO YOUR THEMES. AND THAT MEANS YOU HAVE TO CRAFT ORGANIC CHARACTERS, CHARACTERS THAT ARE NOT MERE PROPS TO LARGER IDEAS, MAKING THE STORY REEK OF BEING HOLLOW AND MANUFACTURED. YOU CAN'T JUST REVERSE ENGINEER SOME CHARACTERS THAT FIT YOUR IDEAL SITUATION AND HAVE THEM ACT OUT WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY AND DO. EVERYTHING IS GROUNDED IN CHARACTER. THEY MAKE IT ALL FEEL HUMAN. HULK WILL EXPLAIN IN THE UPCOMING SECTIONS ON EMPATHY, BUT IT'S JUST HOW THE BEST STORIES RESONATE WITH US. SO FOR THE SAME QUESTION OF MAKING A HUMAN FILM...

WHAT COMPELS YOU?

THIS TIME LET US ANSWER IT ON A MICRO LEVEL AND THINK OF SPECIFIC LIFE DETAILS THAT REVEAL LARGER IDEAS. FOR INSTANCE: "My friend so-and-so is amazing. She volunteers at a hospital and...", OR, "I read this great article about so and so." HECK, IT DOESN'T EVEN HAVE TO BE PEOPLE-CENTRIC. YOU CAN BE LIKE "I thought of this great scenario where..." OR "Here's this really neat sci-fi world where so-and-so is possible." OR HECK, YOU CAN JUST HAVE A SINGLE LINE OR IMAGE THAT YOU FIND COMPELLING. THESE MICRO-LEVEL DETAILS ARE A *MUCH MORE COMMON* FORM OF INSPIRATION. THEY ARE WONDERFUL, TINY LITTLE NUGGETS OF INSPIRATION THAT INVITE YOU AND EXCITE YOU TO LARGER POSSIBILITIES OF STORYTELLING.

... BUT THEY ALONE ARE NOT NARRATIVES.

THAT IS SO IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND. IN FACT, IT IS THE REASON HULK PUT THE TWO HALVES OF INSPIRATION IN THAT ORDER. SO OFTEN PEOPLE THINK TO START WITH THE TINY NUGGETS AND THEN FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY LATER, BUT IT IS HULK'S EXPERIENCE THAT PEOPLE DON'T REALLY KNOW HOW TO DO THAT. AGAIN, SO MANY FILMS ARE VOICELESS. SO MANY FILMS SIMPLY SAY "I want to write about this textured, interesting person," AND THINK THAT IT WILL SOMEHOW MAGICALLY PRODUCE A TEXTURED, INTERESTING STORY. A GOOD NARRATIVE HAS TO BE CREATED. CRAFTED. SLAVED OVER. WORKED THROUGH TIME AND TIME AGAIN BEFORE IT IS SOMETHING SO MUCH MORE. WHAT THIS DYNAMIC ACTUALLY SPEAKS TO IS THE GREAT LESSON THAT SINGULAR DETAILS ARE NOT STAND-INS FOR CHARACTERIZATION. FOR EXAMPLE, THERE HAVE BEEN A LOT OF RECENT MOVIES THAT HAVE GOTTEN INTO TROUBLE FOR ASSUMING TEXTURE AND CHARACTER DETAIL SOMEHOW IS THE SAME THING AS CHARACTER MOTIVE. WE DON'T NEED DETAILS TO TELL US WHO CHARACTERS ARE AND WHAT THEY LIKE, WE NEED DETAILS TO SHOW US WHAT CHARACTERS *WANT AND NEED* AND WHAT THEY WILL LIKELY *DO*. THIS IS THE HEART OF DRAMA (WELL... HULK WILL USE THIS PHRASE A LOT, SO IT'S ONE OF THEM).

AND THUS ALLOW HULK TO ARGUE THAT THE WHOLE POPULAR HATRED FOR QUIRKY INDIE MOVIES HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THEIR BEING QUIRKY, OR MAUDLIN, OR SACCHARINE. IT'S BECAUSE THEY'RE OFTEN *EMPTY*. PEOPLE LATCH ONTO HATING THE QUIRK, INSISTING THAT IT DOES NOT "FEEL REAL," BUT IN HULK'S OPINION THAT IS A MISDIAGNOSIS. IT'S THAT SO OFTEN THESE OBLIQUE CHARACTERISTICS TRY TO HIDE A LACK OF NARRATIVE OR THEMATIC PURPOSE. EXTRAVAGANT CHARACTER DETAILS ARE WELCOME IF THERE'S PURPOSE, IN FACT THOSE QUIRKY MOVIES WITH REAL MEAT TO THEM TEND TO WORK LIKE GANGBUSTERS, BUT SO OFTEN WE GET CHARACTER DETAIL APROPOS OF NOTHING. WE GET HEAVY GRIT APROPOS OF NOTHING. YOU HAVE TO GO FURTHER THAN THAT. EVERYTHING NEEDS A PURPOSE. AND SO WITH REAL LIFE STORIES YOU HAVE TO ALSO REALIZE THAT SOMETIMES THE "FACTS" GET IN THE WAY OF GOOD STORYTELLING. HULK WILL GET BALLS-DEEP INTO WHY THAT IS SO TRUE LATER, BUT HULK JUST WANTS YOU TO UNDERSTAND THAT WHEN WE'RE DEALING WITH THE MOMENT OF INSPIRATION WE HAVE TO ALSO UNDERSTAND HOW THAT MOMENT WILL TRANSLATE INTO A GOOD STORY FROM THE GET-GO. AND THE MORE UNDERSTANDING OF THAT PROCESS WE HAVE, THE MORE CAPABLE YOU WILL BECOME IN FINDING INSPIRATION.

BECAUSE ULTIMATELY, A TRULY GOOD NARRATIVE IS BORN FROM THE COMBINING OF THE MACRO AND MICRO INTO ONE SINGULAR, COHERENT APPROACH. YOUR CHARACTERS AND THE STORY THEY INHABIT SHOULD BE IN COMPLETE ALIGNMENT WITH THE INTENTION OF YOUR THEMES. IT IS THE SUBLIME COMBINATION OF TEXT AND SUBTEXT, WHICH MEANS YOUR NARRATIVE TOO BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE SAYING. AND WHEN YOU THINK ALL THE WAY BACK TO THAT GERM OF AN IDEA THAT COMPELS YOU, WHETHER IT'S A DETAIL, A PERSON, A CONCEPT, OR A THEME, YOU MUST THEN ZERO IN AND FIGURE OUT HOW THAT GERM THEN BECOMES A STORY.

IT WOULD BE EASY FOR HULK TO SIT HERE AND TALK ABOUT THIS ON AND ON IN THE ABSTRACT, SO LET'S GET SPECIFIC WITH AN EXAMPLE. WHEN ALAN BALL CREATED **SIX FEET UNDER**, HE HAD A PASSING THOUGHT ABOUT A FAMILY WHO WORKED AS UNDERTAKERS AND HOW THAT MUST BE A WEIRD LIFE WHEREIN THEY ARE CONFRONTING MORTALITY EVERY DAY OF THEIR LIVES. THAT WAS THE GERM OF THE IDEA. IT WASN'T *JUST* THAT IT WAS "WEIRD" OR "DIFFERENT," BUT THAT THE CHARACTERS ENGAGED AN INTERESTING IDEA SO PLAINLY AND TANGIBLY. THEY BATTLE A CONCEPT THAT IS SO DAMN PERTINENT TO OUR CULTURE, PARTICULARLY ONE THAT LARGELY AVOIDS THE TOPIC OF DEATH ALTOGETHER. AND WITH THIS IDEA HE FIGURED OUT A WAY TO IMMEDIATELY BLEND TEXT AND SUBTEXT.

BUT THAT WAS JUST THE CONCEIT. HE HAD SO MUCH FURTHER TO GO BEFORE IT BECAME A STORY FILLED WITH PURPOSE. HE FILLED IT OUT WITH RICH, TEXTURED CHARACTERS THAT ALSO COMPELLED HIM. PRIM Matriarchs, 35 YEAR OLD GRANOLA TRANSIENTS, CLOSETED GAY ADULTS, AND DISAFFECTED TEENS. BUT AGAIN. THAT DOESN'T MAKE A STORY, EITHER. SO HE THEN CAME UP WITH TWO DEVICES THAT HELPED PROPEL EVERYTHING. FIRST, THEIR FATHER DIES IN THE OPENING MOMENTS OF THE SHOW SO THAT THIS SHOW ABOUT "CONFRONTING MORTALITY" DIDN'T JUST DO SO ON THE ABSTRACT OR TANGENTIAL LEVEL, BUT ON A DEEPLY PERSONAL LEVEL TOO. AND THE SECOND DEVICE WAS THAT EVERY SINGLE EPISODE WOULD OPEN WITH A DIFFERENT FUNERAL CLIENT'S DEATH, WHICH ALLOWED HIM TO COLOR THE SHOW WITH DIFFERENT MEANINGS AND THEMES TIME AND TIME AGAIN. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY BOTH STORY DECISIONS HELPED REINFORCE THE CENTRAL THEME OF THE SHOW. EVERY DETAIL HELPED CONFRONT MORTALITY IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY, DRAMATICALLY AND PHILOSOPHICALLY, HELPING TO MARRY THE TEXT AND SUBTEXT.

BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY TO OUR SUBJECT AT HAND, DO YOU SEE THE ROLE THAT THE GERM OF THE IDEA PLAYS IN THE STORY CONSTRUCTION? WE THINK ABOUT WHAT COMPELS US, AND IN THIS CASE IT WAS THE IMAGE OF A FAMILY AND THE IDEA OF "CONFRONTING MORTALITY," AND HE USED THAT AS THE THROUGH-LINE FOR THE ENTIRE SERIES, RIGHT UP UNTIL THE SERIES' FINAL EPISODE, "THE END." THE MOMENT OF INSPIRATION CAN BE YOUR GUIDE, YOUR PROVERBIAL NORTH STAR IN THE INCREDIBLE JOURNEY OF WRITING.

NOTICE HOW HULK BROUGHT UP A TV SHOW AS THE PRIME EXAMPLE? HULK DID THAT ON PURPOSE. THE FIRST REASON IS TO UNDERSTAND THAT A GERM OF AN IDEA CAN CARRY YOU ACROSS FIVE YEARS AND COUNTLESS HOURS OF STORY IF YOU'LL LET IT. AND THE SECOND REASON IS THAT IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND FROM THE GET-GO THAT NOT EVERY IDEA IS A GREAT FIT FOR THE MEDIUM OF SCREENWRITING. SOME IDEAS MAKE THE MOST SENSE FOR TV. SOME MAKE SENSE FOR A NOVEL. SOME MAKE SENSE FOR VIDEO GAMES. SOME MAKE SENSE FOR A COMEDY SKETCH. THIS IS IMPORTANT TO REALIZE BECAUSE HULK READS THINGS EVERY DAY THAT WOULD REALLY BEST BE SUITED AS OTHER MEDIA. IT'S SYMPTOMATIC OF THE FACT THAT PEOPLE LIKE TO BOX THEMSELVES IN AS A "SCREENWRITER," "TV WRITER," ETC. AND IT ONLY HAS THE ENDING EFFECT OF LIMITING THE BEST POSSIBLE ARTICULATION OF YOUR IDEA. AND WORSE THAN THAT, THE SHAPE OF EACH MEDIUM IS RAPIDLY CHANGING INTO ONE SINGULAR, IDENTICAL FORM OF "MEDIA CONSUMPTION." SO GET READY TO EMBRACE ALL OF IT. FOR WE ARE WRITERS, NO MATTER WHAT THE FORM.

"But Hulk, how do I know what medium is best for my story?"

... OKAY IT'S ACTUALLY PRETTY DIFFICULT TO DISCERN AND USUALLY TAKES A LITTLE BIT OF TINKERING AND TRIAL & ERROR TO SEE THE PROBLEMS, BUT THE IDEA IS TO REALLY ZOOM IN ON WHAT MAKES THE STORY WORK FOR ITS OWN PURPOSES. THUS HULK'S ADVICE IS TO NOT THINK OF WHAT YOU ARE DOING AT FIRST AS A MOVIE; JUST THINK OF IT AS A STORY. LITTLE STORY, BIG

STORY, WHATEVER. BUT ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THE STORY IS ON ITS OWN MERITS, YOU CAN PLAY WITH IT TO FIGURE OUT HOW THAT STORY BEST WORKS AS A MOVIE, A TV SHOW, COMIC, ETC. AND MAYBE YOU CAN FIND A SMALL PIECE OF THAT STORY THAT WORKS AS A MOVIE. OR MAYBE YOU FIND A WAY TO BROADEN THAT STORY INTO A RUNNING SERIALIZED TV SHOW. THE IMPORTANT PART IS TO JUST BE AWARE THAT YOU ARE NOT CRAMMING ONE INTO THE OTHER. LET YOUR IDEAS GO WHERE THEY NEED TO GO. DON'T WORRY ABOUT SHAPING YOUR INSPIRATION INTO WHAT YOU DEMAND IT TO BE. YOU WILL HAVE PLENTY MORE INSPIRATION, HULK ASSURES YOU.

HULK ALSO REALIZES THAT ALL THESE PIECES OF ADVICE MAY SEEM LIKE WE ARE GETTING AHEAD OF OURSELVES, AS THEY APPLY MORE TO THE PROCESS OF WRITING WE WILL EXPLORE IN LATER PARTS OF THE BOOK, BUT HULK THINKS THEY ARE VITAL LITTLE BITS YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND FROM THE ONSET OF INSPIRATION. AFTER ALL, INSPIRATION IS THE MOST ETHEREAL AND LEAST-EXPLAINABLE PART OF THE PROCESS, SO HAVING SOME IDEA OF THE LATER APPLICATION IS CRITICAL.

BUT WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND IS THAT IT TAKES BOTH AWARENESS AND LOTS OF PRACTICE TO EFFECTIVELY FIND INSPIRATION. THERE ARE NO PEOPLE ON THIS PLANET WHO ARE NATURALLY GIFTED IN DOING SO. NOR IS THERE ANYONE NATURALLY UNGIFTED IN DOING SO. YOU HAVE NO EXCUSE EITHER WAY. IT JUST TAKES DEDICATION AND GOING THROUGH THE PROCESS TIME AND TIME AGAIN. LIKE ALL CRAFTS, OUR EXPERTISE IS A FUNCTION OF TIME INVESTED, SO WE MUST PRACTICE THE PROCESS OF SEEKING INSPIRATION THE SAME WAY WE WOULD BUILD ANY MUSCLE.

SO START NOW. COME UP WITH TWO STORY IDEAS THIS WEEK. WHO CARES IF YOU USE THEM. JUST FLESH THEM OUT. PRETEND SOME HOLLYWOOD BIGWIG SAID, "Hey! Stop by the office on Friday and pitch us a couple things!" PRACTICE THE PROCESS. THE NEXT WEEK COME UP WITH THREE IDEAS. AGAIN, IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU USE THEM. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF THEY ARE EVEN GOOD. THE IDEA IS TO SIMPLY BUILD THE MUSCLE. BUILD YOUR ABILITY TO LOOK FOR INSPIRATION AND FORM A STORY AROUND IT. KEEP DOING IT. GET BETTER.

LUCKILY, THE PLACE TO START IS ALWAYS THE SAME. ASK YOURSELF:

WHAT COMPELS YOU?

PART THREE - 6 THINGS HULK WISHES HULK KNEW OVER A DECADE AGO

Ugh. More definitions and treading water before the actual advice?!?! Come on, HULK! Get to the good stuff!!!

HULK SORRY, BUT THIS IS IMPORTANT.

1. GET YOUR LEARN ON!

YES, SCREENPLAYS ARE JUST STORIES AND ALL STORYTELLING HAS A COMMONALITY.

BUT AS HULK MENTIONED IN THE INSPIRATION SECTION, THERE IS A WAY THAT FORM AND INTENT REALLY MATTERS. AND NOT JUST IN THE SENSE THAT A STORY CAN MAKE FOR A GOOD MOVIE OR A GOOD TV SHOW, ETC. BUT IN THAT THERE IS ALWAYS A WAY THAT YOUR SPECIFIC STORY WILL WORK BEST. AND TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO BEST DO THAT, YOU REALLY HAVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW MOVIES, FROM BIG TO SMALL AND HIGH TO LOW, *ACTUALLY WORK*.

ON THE SIMPLEST LEVEL, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT "CINEMATIC EFFECT," WHICH IS THE PROCESS OF UNDERSTANDING HOW A SPECIFIC ACTION, MOMENT, CAMERA ANGLE, OR SOUND CUE WILL MAKE AN AUDIENCE MEMBER HAVE A VERY SPECIFIC REACTION. AND THE EVOLUTION OF THOSE ACTIONS OVER THE COURSE OF A FILM COMBINES INTO THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE. IT ALL SOUNDS NICE, BUT OBVIOUSLY IT'S NOT SIMPLE AT ALL.

IN FACT, THE REAL PROBLEM WITH HULK TELLING YOU THIS IS THAT UNDERSTANDING HOW MOVIES WORK IS REALLY A WHOLE LIFETIME OF COLUMNS AND EXPERIENCES. TRULY UNDERSTANDING FILM IS A PERCEPTIVE ART THAT TAKES YEARS TO GET A GOOD GRASP ON, BUT THE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU IS THAT THIS KNOW-HOW IS SOMETHING THAT IS ALREADY LOCKED INSIDE YOUR MIND IF YOU'VE SEEN ENOUGH OF THEM. INSTINCTIVELY, YOU JUST KNOW MOVIES. YOU'VE BEEN WATCHING THEM YOUR WHOLE LIFE. SO YOU JUST NEED TO WATCH AS MANY AS POSSIBLE FROM HERE ON IN AND THEN IT IS JUST ABOUT OPENING UP YOUR BRAIN TO BEST UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS. IT'S ABOUT MAKING THE UNIVERSAL SUBCONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE OF WATCHING A MOVIE INTO A CONSCIOUS ONE. YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY AFFECT YOUR BODY AND HOW YOUR SYNAPSES RESPOND WHILE WATCHING THEM. AND IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT BEING ABLE TO ARTICULATE WHAT YOU KNOW IN YOUR BONES, IT'S ABOUT ADOPTING A CONSTANTLY EVOLVING PROCESS OF LEARNING. AND FROM THERE YOU CAN COME TO CRITICALLY UNDERSTAND THE ONGOING PROCESS OF CINEMATIC EFFECT.

SO WHY IS THIS PROCESS SO IMPORTANT TO WRITING?

BECAUSE IF *YOU* INTRINSICALLY UNDERSTAND MOVIES (EVEN IF YOU'RE TOTALLY UNAWARE), THEN THAT MEANS *THE AUDIENCE* INTRINSICALLY UNDERSTANDS MOVIES TOO. WHICH MEANS YOU CAN'T DO THAT THING THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE LOVE TO DO IN THIS TOWN AND THAT'S JUST SLING CRAP UP ONSCREEN AND EXPECT THE LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR TO LOVE IT. BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THE GENERAL AUDIENCE INSTINCTIVELY KNOWS GOOD STUFF WHEN THEY SEE IT. IGNORING OBVIOUS BARRIERS SUCH AS A SLOWER PACE AND ARTISTIC ABSTRACTION, MOVIES CAN STILL WORK VISCERALLY FOR EVERYONE IN THE THEATER. EVEN THE MOST GENERAL AUDIENCES WALKED OUT OF THE FIRST **PIRATES** FILM, **RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES**, AND **BOURNE SUPREMACY** AND "GOT IT," SO TO SPEAK. AND WHILE THERE WILL ALWAYS BE ERRANT CASES OF SOMEONE ACTING OUTSIDE THE BAROMETER, WE MUST UNDERSTAND THAT WELL-TOLD, TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES USUALLY WORK VERY WELL ON A GENERAL AUDIENCE. GOOD MOVIES RESONATE THROUGH TIME.

NOW YOU MAY POINT TO THE SUCCESS OF THE **TRANSFORMERS** SERIES AS EVIDENCE THAT SHITTY STUFF SUCCEEDS TOO, BUT HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT THAT IS A RARE AND SPECIAL CASE OF AN AUDIENCE *KNOWING* THE BRAINLESS FODDER THEY ARE ABOUT TO RECEIVE AND GOING *FOR IT*, BASED ON A HEAP OF PREEXISTING FACTORS. PLUS, HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT THE TINY BIT OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTIVE TISSUE IN THE FIRST FILM (*NO, DON'T TORTURE BUMBLEBEE!*) ACTUALLY EARNED THE SERIES A GREAT DEAL OF PUBLIC GOODWILL GOING FORWARD. DOUBLE-PLUS, JUST

BECAUSE A POPCORN MOVIE IS LIGHT AND FUN DOESN'T MEAN THAT IT DOESN'T TAKE A HECK OF A LOT OF KNOW-HOW AND CRAFT TO MAKE THAT FUN MOVIE WORK. TRIPLE-PLUS, YOU CANNOT CONFUSE MARKETING AND ECONOMIC SUCCESS WITH SOMETHING BEING SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE IT WAS "A GOOD STORY." JUST BECAUSE IT GETS BUTTS IN SEATS DOES NOT MAKE IT A GOOD MOVIE. HULK CANNOT IMPRESS THIS ON YOU ENOUGH: HULK REALLY BELIEVES THAT PEOPLE KNOW GOOD TRADITIONAL MOVIES BY INSTINCT (AGAIN, FOR THE MOST PART) AND THAT IS BECAUSE EVERY PERSON ON THE PLANET IS IMPLICITLY AFFECTED BY THE FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVE. QUITE SIMPLY: *GOOD STORIES CAN REACH THEM.*

SO THE QUESTION YOU HAVE TO ASK WHEN EVALUATING A FILM IS SIMPLE: DID MOST PEOPLE WALK OUT OF THE FILM FEELING LIKE IT "WORKED?"

IT REALLY IS A DIFFERENT QUESTION THAN "IS IT GOOD OR BAD?" IT REMOVES THE OPAQUE EVALUATION OF WORTH AND INSTEAD GETS CLOSER TO THE "WHAT WAS THE FILM INTENDING?" AND "DID IT WORK ON ITS OWN MERIT?" WHICH ARE QUESTIONS THAT BETTER GET TO THE HEART AND PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING.

REMEMBER THIS BOOK'S MISSION STATEMENT? HULK HAS A CONDENSED VERSION FOR YOU HERE:

THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT SCREENPLAYS THAT SELL, OR POP, OR HOW TO PITCH. THESE ARE ALL ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS, BUT HULK ARGUES IT IS THE KIND OF SUCCESS THAT DOESN'T LAST. MEANWHILE, KNOWING HOW TO WRITE LASTS. SO THIS COLUMN IS ABOUT BECOMING A BETTER WRITER AND STORYTELLER. IT IS ABOUT WRITING SCREENPLAYS THAT WORK.

AND THAT IS SO DAMN IMPORTANT BECAUSE AUDIENCES INSTINCTIVELY KNOW HOW THEY *SHOULD* WORK, EVEN IF THEY CANNOT ARTICULATE IT. THEY INSTINCTIVELY KNOW IF THEY FELT CONNECTED, OR INTERESTED, OR IF THEY LAUGHED OR SCREAMED. THEY KNOW IF THEY HAD FUN. THEY KNOW IF THEY WERE *COMPELLED*. SO KNOWING HOW AN AUDIENCE WILL RESPOND TO WHAT IS ONSCREEN IS EVERYTHING. YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND CINEMA AT EVERY LEVEL. YOU HAVE TO USE THAT UNDERSTANDING TO BE EFFECTIVE. AND WHILE HULK WILL DELVE INTO A WHOLE BUNCH OF TOOLS AND SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE, YOU JUST HAVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW MUCH WORK IT TAKES. YOU NEED TO WATCH A TON OF MOVIES. YOU NEED TO READ A TON OF BOOKS AND CRITICS.

YOU NEED TO GET YOUR LEARN ON!

2. NO, SERIOUSLY. GET YOUR LEARN ON...

SAME POINT ONLY A DIFFERENT MANIFESTATION! THIS TIME HULK MEANS IT IN THE SENSE THAT HULK WANTS YOU TO START BECOMING AN ARMCHAIR EXPERT IN STUFF THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MOVIES. WHY? BECAUSE OTHERWISE YOU WON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO TALK ABOUT.

DO YOU REALIZE HOW SMART MOST WRITERS AND FILMMAKERS REALLY ARE? THEY ARE VERY, VERY SMART. GO AHEAD. SIT DOWN FOR ANY CONVERSATION. YOUR MIND WILL BE BLOWN. EVEN THE ONES WHO MAKE 'DUMB MOVIES' WILL STRIKE YOU AS BEING INCREDIBLY AWARE AND ARTICULATE. ALL OF THESE FILMMAKERS WILL NOT ONLY BE ABLE TO TALK AT LENGTH ABOUT THE THEMES AND CHARACTERIZATION OF THEIR OWN FILMS, OR THE ABSOLUTE INTENTION OF EACH SCENE, BUT THEY WILL SHOW THAT THEY ARE COMPLETELY AWARE OF THEIR FILM'S RELATIVE SHORTCOMINGS AND CAN EVALUATE WHY THIS OR THAT OCCURRED BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE ON THE PLANET. BUT IT DOESN'T STOP THERE. THEY WILL BE ABLE TO TALK ABOUT THE ENTIRE LANDSCAPE OF FILM HISTORY. THEY WILL HAVE SEEN MOST EVERYTHING. THEY WILL COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND THE AUDIENCE PSYCHOLOGY HULK MENTIONED IN POINT #1.

BUT MORE THAN THAT, WRITERS AND FILMMAKERS ARE AT THEIR BEST WHEN THEY ARE INTERESTED IN THE WORLD *OUTSIDE OF FILM*. STANLEY KUBRICK WAS FAMOUSLY INTERESTED IN SO MANY FIELDS OF STUDY: MATHEMATICS. ENGINEERING. HISTORY. LITERATURE. GREAT STORYTELLERS TEND TO BE MARKED BY AN INSATIABLE CURIOSITY ABOUT LIFE ITSELF. YES,

STUDYING FILM AS A MEDIUM IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THE FILMMAKING TOOLS, EDITORIAL CADENCE, AND WRITING PROCESS, BUT IT IS A WORTHLESS PURSUIT UNLESS YOU CAN CONVEY SOMETHING ABOUT THE ACTUAL WORLD.

SO LOOK TO YOUR LIFE. LOOK TO OTHER PEOPLE. TO POLITICS. TO ART. CULTURE. PSYCHOLOGY. SOCIOLOGY. YOU SHOULD HAVE SOMETHING INTERESTING TO SAY ABOUT THE WORLD AROUND YOU, BECAUSE THE WORLD AROUND YOU IS WHAT IS ACTUALLY COMPELLING TO AN AUDIENCE. YOU MAY THINK THAT PLAYING AROUND WITH FILM CONVENTIONS IS NEAT, BUT IT ONLY WORKS FOR A MUCH SMALLER GROUP OF PEOPLE. BECAUSE THE WORLD OUTSIDE DOESN'T LIVE IN CINEMAS LIKE WE DO. THEY HAVE THEIR JOBS, AND EXPERIENCES, AND UNIQUE SETS OF DISPOSITIONS. SO IF YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER OR FILMMAKER, THEN BE PREPARED TO BE A PART OF THAT WORLD TOO. BE PREPARED TO BE AN EXPERT IN SOMETHING BESIDES FILMMAKING.

EMBRACE THE HIGH STANDARD!

NOTE: HULK IS NOT SAYING THAT YOU CAN'T EVER GO META WITH YOUR STORY. JUST UNDERSTAND THAT THE META-NESS NEEDS TO HAVE A CONCURRENT FACE-VALUE NARRATIVE LEVEL IF YOU STILL WANT TO KEEP FOLKS INTERESTED. THAT'S ALL. WORK THE LAYERS!

DOUBLE NOTE: SOME PEOPLE SAY TARANTINO ONLY MAKES MOVIES ABOUT MOVIES. THIS IS A FALSEHOOD. HE MAY HAVE A HOST OF REFERENCES AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT, BUT HIS STORY-CRAFT AND COMMITMENT TO HIS OWN WORLD-BUILDING ARE BEYOND SOLID.

3. WHAT YOUR EXPERIENCE MEANS FOR THE STATE OF YOUR OWN WORK

OKAY... SO AT THIS POINT YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHY HULK FEELS LIKE HULK CAN EVEN TALK ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR SCREENWRITING SUBJECT WITH ANY KIND OF AUTHORITY. IN THE INTRODUCTION, HULK BRIEFLY DISCUSSED HULK'S HUMBLE FEELINGS ON THE NATURE OF ADVICE AND THE NEEDS TO SHARE IN THE STRUGGLE OF WRITING. BUT WHAT IS IT ABOUT SCREENWRITING SPECIFICALLY THAT MAKES HULK ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE?

KNOW THIS: HULK IS MORE FAMILIAR WITH THE CRAFT OF SCREENWRITING THAN PROBABLY ANY OTHER ELEMENT OF FILMMAKING. SPECIFICALLY, HULK HAS A SOLID FOOT IN ALL THE NEEDED WORLDS THAT COMBINE TO FIVE ELEMENTS THAT MAKE HULK THINK THAT HULK CAN HELP YOU.

I) ON THE WRITING SIDE, HULK HAS NOT ONLY WRITTEN A DELUGE OF SCREENPLAYS, BUT YES, HAS GONE DOWN THE CONCRETE PATH OF SELLING THEM AND KNOWS HOW THEY MANIFEST IN THIS BUSINESS AND ALL THAT JAZZ. BUT AGAIN, THAT'S NOT WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT. IT'S ABOUT THE WRITING PROCESS ITSELF. IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING, HOWEVER, THAT THERE ARE A LITANY OF VASTLY MORE ACCOMPLISHED SCREENWRITERS OUT THERE WHOM HULK CONSIDERS HEROES, BUT A BOOK LIKE THIS ISN'T ABOUT HULK'S ABILITIES IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE. IT'S ABOUT HULK'S ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE WHAT IS VITAL TO YOUR LEARNING. AND THAT'S IMPORTANT BECAUSE THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF SCRIPTS OUT THERE THAT HAVE NO REAL UNDERSTANDING OF STORYTELLING.

II) WHAT HULK THINKS IS FAR MORE IMPORTANT TO HELPING YOU IS THAT HULK HAS READ A *METRIC FUCK TON* OF SCRIPTS. NOT FOR HULK'S OWN CASUAL LEARNING EITHER, BUT FOR REAL-DEAL PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES OF DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION CENTERING AROUND A PLETHORA OF A-GRADE MATERIAL HULK CAN PRETTY MUCH GUARANTEE YOU'VE SEEN AND PROBABLY LIKED, BIG BUDGET MATERIAL, INDEPENDENT MATERIAL, TELEVISION MATERIAL, YOU NAME IT. AND HULK WASN'T JUST THERE TO READ AND EVALUATE, BUT HONE INTO IT AND DEEPTISSUE ANALYZE AND THEN COMMUNICATE ABOUT IT. MEANING HULK'S ABILITY TO LOOK AT A SCREENPLAY AND IDENTIFY WHY IT WORKS AND WHY IT DOESN'T IS QUITE LITERALLY *HULK'S TRADE*. HULK'S DONE THIS FOR YEARS AND YEARS. AND HULK SWEARS THAT THIS EXPERIENCE HAS GIVEN HULK A UNIQUE WINDOW THAT MANY OTHER SCREENWRITERS MAY NOT HAVE. AFTER ALL, WOULD YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT WORKS FOR ONE PERSON DEALING WITH SOMETHING IN A VERY LIMITED SET OF PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES? OR WOULD YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT WORKS FROM SOMEONE INGRAINED WITH HUNDREDS OF EXPERIENCED WRITERS, OVERSEEING THOUSANDS

OF HOURS OF TOP TIER CONTENT, DEALING WITH EVERY POSSIBLE KIND OF STORYTELLING, AND DOING SO AT A TREMENDOUSLY FREQUENT RATE? THIS IS SIMPLY WHAT HULK CAN OFFER. AND PLEASE KNOW:

III) THE INTENTION OF THIS BOOK IS... WELL... PURE. HULK IS NOT USING ANY OF THIS EXPERIENCE AS AN EXCUSE TO POSE HULK-SELF AS SOME KIND OF AUTHORITY (BEYOND SIMPLY QUALIFYING HULK-SELF), BUT MERELY USING IT TO OFFER UP SOME HELP BASED ON WHAT HULK HAS KNOWN AND EXPERIENCED. AND THAT JUST MAY BE OF SOME USE TO YOU. THIS IS THE JOY OF SHARING. NOT THE JOY OF TELLING.

IV) BECAUSE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT ANY OF THIS BACKGROUND IS THAT HULK BELIEVES HULK CAN OFFER YOU SOMETHING SO MUCH MORE AND THAT IS *CLARITY OF EXPRESSION*. WHICH IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE HULK LISTENS TO SO MANY TRULY GREAT WRITERS OUT THERE WHO TRY TO EXPLAIN THEIR PROCESS AND IMPART ADVICE AND... WELL... HULK FINDS THAT SO MUCH OF THEIR ADVICE COMES OFF AS ESOTERIC, VAGUE, AND UTTERLY UNHELPFUL. THEY MAY BE GREAT WRITERS. THEY MAY HAVE ALL THE QUALIFICATIONS IN THE WORLD AND SOME DEEPLY PERSONAL PROCESS OF THEIR OWN. *BUT THEY HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO TEACH*. AND THAT MATTERS MORE THAN ANYTHING. SO PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT HULK EFFECTIVELY VIEWS THIS BOOK AS A PRACTICAL TEACHING PLATFORM. SURE, IT'S FROM SOME HULK WITH A REALLY SOLID BACKGROUND, BUT IT IS ALSO FROM SOME HULK WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING AND THE WILL AND DETERMINATION TO TRY AND TELL YOU NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH.

V) AND THAT MEANS YOU WILL FIND NO BLINDLY REDUCTIVE HOW-TO'S IN THIS BOOK. HECK, AT THIS POINT YOU PROBABLY NOTICED THAT HULK IS STILL TALKING ABOUT WRITING PHILOSOPHY AND BACKGROUND WITHOUT A HINT OF PRACTICALITY YET. AND WHILE THIS BOOK WILL GET RATHER SPECIFIC AND PRACTICAL, YOU MUST UNDERSTAND THAT HULK WILL NEVER LIE TO YOU. HULK IS NOT WILLING TO GIVE YOU OVERLY PAT SYD FIELD-ESQUE "SOLUTIONS." WRITING IS SOMETHING SO MUCH MORE EXPANSIVE THAN THAT.

STILL, YOU MAY BE CURIOUS AS TO WHY WOULD HULK GO ON AND ON ABOUT QUALIFICATIONS AND BACKGROUND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE THIRD PART OF THIS BOOK? SURELY, THIS WOULD MAKE MORE SENSE IN AN INTRODUCTION? YOU'RE RIGHT, OF COURSE, BUT HULK HAS DONE THIS FOR A REASON...

IT MAY SOUND CRITICAL, BUT ONE OF THE BEST THINGS YOU CAN DO AS A WRITER IS COME TO AN UNDERSTANDING ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE CURRENTLY FALLING IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS.

THIS ISN'T ABOUT NOT HAVING CONFIDENCE IN YOUR ABILITY. IT IS BECAUSE THERE ARE THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE IN LOS ANGELES WHO HAVE CLAIMED TO HAVE WRITTEN A SCREENPLAY AND ARE NOW TRYING TO SELL IT. AND IN COMPLETE HONESTY, WHAT THEY HAVE WRITTEN IS MORE THAN LIKELY NOT UP-TO-SNUFF. THEY MAY HAVE A GOOD IDEA. THEY MAY HAVE A GOOD SENSE OF MOVIES. THEY MAY HAVE GOOD INTENTIONS. THEY MAY HAVE EVEN DONE A DECENT JOB. BUT THEY HAVE NOT EVEN PUT IN CLOSE TO 1/100TH THE WORK THAT SO MANY WORKING PROFESSIONALS IN THIS INDUSTRY ACTUALLY HAVE. AND SORRY, BUT HULK RESPECTS THOSE WORKING PROFESSIONALS TOO MUCH TO NOT ACKNOWLEDGE THE STUNNING GAP IN QUALITY AND (MUCH MORE IMPORTANTLY) HARD WORK AND HOURS PUT INTO THE WORK. YOU REALLY HAVE NO IDEA HOW HARD MOST OF THEIR PATHS WERE IN GETTING TO WHERE THEY ARE NOW. THEY WORK AT THE CRAFT OF WRITING THE SAME WAY ONE WORKS AT ANY TRULY DEMANDING JOB. AND THEY ARE REALLY GOOD AT IT.

SO IMAGINE IF YOU SUDDENLY HOPPED ON A MAJOR LEAGUE FIELD AND JUST WENT UP TO BAT SAYING "I can do this too!" HULK REALIZES THAT MAY SOUND LIKE A RIDICULOUS ANALOGY, BUT THAT'S REALLY WHAT THIS IS LIKE. ONLY THIS HAPPENS ALL THE TIME IN LOS ANGELES AND NOBODY THINKS TWICE ABOUT IT. THERE IS THIS WEIRD ASSUMPTION THAT JUST BECAUSE ANYONE CAN WRITE A SCREENPLAY IT MEANS *ANYONE CAN WRITE A SCREENPLAY DESERVING OF CONSIDERATION*. NOW, HULK KNOWS THIS IS NOT LIKE OTHER FIELDS AND IS INSTEAD MORE OF A

DEMOCRATIC MERITOCRACY AND THAT IS ACTUALLY ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS ABOUT THE INDUSTRY. ANYONE WITH THE RIGHT CONNECTION OR THE MEANS TO THEIR OWN PRODUCTION CAN HAVE A SHOT AT BEING A SCREENWRITER.

BUT HULK'S OBVIOUS PROBLEM IS WITH THE LACK OF AWARENESS. THE BLIND ASSUMPTION THAT SOMEBODY'S *LITERAL FIRST ATTEMPT* TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY COULD SOMEHOW BE WHOLLY WORTHY IS DOWNRIGHT STRANGE (NOTE: IT DOESN'T FULLY APPLY TO WRITERS OF OTHER NARRATIVE FORMS, BUT STILL MIGHT MORE THAN YOU'D THINK). SO MANY PEOPLE JUST HAVE NO AWARENESS OF WHERE THEY STAND. HENCE: DELUSION. AND IT'S A KIND OF DELUSION THAT SUFFOCATES THE INDUSTRY AND MAKES IT HARDER FOR FOLKS WHO CAN ACTUALLY WRITE. THE DELUSION HELPS FOSTER A CULTURE WHERE IT'S MORE DIFFICULT FOR QUALIFIED PEOPLE TO HAVE CONFIDENCE TO SELL THEMSELVES BECAUSE THEY DON'T WANT TO BE LIKE THE REST OF THE DELUSIONAL, UBER-PRESSURING JERKS WHO ARE UNAWARE JUST HOW FAR AWAY THEY REALLY ARE.

HULK DOESN'T WANT TO SOUND LIKE HULK IS STIFLING YOUR AMBITION. BUT KNOWING WHERE YOU REALLY STAND, AND HOW FAR YOU HAVE TO GO, IS ACTUALLY A CRITICAL ELEMENT TO UNDERSTANDING HOW TO PROCEED IN YOUR WRITING DEVELOPMENT. THIS ISN'T ACCUSATORY. HULK TOTALLY INCLUDES HULK-SELF IN THIS ONE TOO. REALLY, HULK TOTALLY SEES HOW THIS ENTIRE SECTION COULD REEK OF ELITISM, BUT THAT'S NOT HOW IT'S MEANT. THE STATEMENT IS MEANT TO SHOW YOU THAT YOU HAVE TO REALLY WORK FOR IT. YOU HAVE TO RESPECT THE CRAFT AND THE EFFORT THE SAME WAY THE PROFESSIONALS DO.

HULK REALLY WISHES YOUNGER-HULK UNDERSTOOD THIS. LIKE MANY, HULK EMERGED ON THE SUNNY SHORES OF LOS ANGELES CERTAIN THAT HULK'S SMARTS AND GUMPTION WOULD DO MOST OF THE WORK. HULK COULDN'T HAVE BEEN FURTHER FROM BEING RIGHT. DESPITE HAVING SO MANY THINGS GO HULK'S WAY AND YEARS OF GENUINE FILM SCHOOL EXPERIENCE, HULK SIMPLY DID NOT REALIZE THE STUNNING GAP BETWEEN WHAT HULK COULD DO AT THE TIME AND WHAT HULK WOULD BE ABLE TO DO ALL THESE YEARS LATER. IT'S JUST NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT A TRUE-BLUE WORKING PROFESSIONAL WITH A GENUINE ADULT DISPOSITION CAN OFFER. SO YOUNGINS? YOU HAVE TO BE PREPARED FOR THAT. YOU HAVE TO BE PATIENT. YOU HAVE TO WORK ON YOUR CRAFT.

BECAUSE THE THING IS THAT HULK REALLY, REALLY WANTS YOU TO BE A BETTER SCREENWRITER. HULK WOULDN'T WRITE ANY OF THIS IF THAT WEREN'T TRUE. AND THE NUMBER ONE THING YOU CAN DO TO ACHIEVE THAT IS TO TAKE THE ENTERPRISE TRULY SERIOUSLY AND APPROACH IT THE WAY YOU WOULD ANY OTHER TECHNICAL FIELD THAT TAKES A GREAT DEAL OF LEARNING.

EVEN AS AN INDUSTRY, WE NEED TO TAKE IT MORE SERIOUSLY.

BECAUSE IN THE END...

4. THE SCRIPT MATTERS!

AND DON'T LET ANYONE EVER TELL YOU DIFFERENT.

WHICH MAY PROVE DIFFICULT BECAUSE HOLLYWOOD HAS THE PESKY AND UNFORTUNATELY ACCURATE REPUTATION OF BEING RATHER UNKIND TO SCREENWRITERS. AND NOT JUST IN THE GOSSIPY WAY WHERE STUDIO PERSON A DOES SOMETHING SORDID TO WRITER PERSON B, BUT UNKIND IN THE BROADER PHILOSOPHICAL SENSE. SURE, SOME STUDIO FOLK WILL PUT THE TIME IN, BUT OFTEN THEY ARE WORKING TOWARD SOMETHING THEY DON'T QUITE UNDERSTAND IN THE WAY OF *PROCESS*. WHY, HULK CAN COUNT ON HUNDREDS OF HANDS THE MANY TIMES THAT HULK HAS HEARD SOMEONE IN THAT SETTING REFER TO A SCRIPT AS A "BLUEPRINT," AND THAT PHRASE... IT JUST.... IT ... GAAAAAHHHHHHH... OKAY. LISTEN TO HULK VERY, VERY CAREFULLY ON THIS ONE...

CALLING A SCRIPT "A BLUEPRINT" IS TOTAL BALLS.

SURE, A LITERAL BLUEPRINT IS EXACTING, BUT OFTENTIMES THE PHRASE IS USED IN THIS WAY TO INDICATE THE LACK OF NEED FOR BEING EXACTING. MEANING “THIS IS JUST THE GENERAL GUIDE AND WE WILL MAKE IT GOOD LATER.” IT’S TERRIBLE. IDEALLY, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO TAKE THE SCREENPLAY AS CONSTRUCTED AND MAKE A SOLID MOVIE. WRITING A GOOD SCREENPLAY IS EFFECTIVELY IDIOT-PROOFING. OR AT LEAST DISASTER-PROOFING.

MORE IMPORTANT IS THE FACT THAT 95% OF GOOD MOVIES HAVE GOOD SCREENPLAYS. THAT IS NOT AN ACCIDENT. SO IF YOU EVER CALL A SCRIPT A BLUEPRINT CHANCES ARE YOU ARE GOING TO MAKE A BAD MOVIE. SORRY, BUT HULK FEELS QUITE STRONGLY ABOUT THIS. ALMOST EVERY SINGLE BAD MOVIE CAN BE TRACED BACK TO A BAD SCRIPT. OR MAYBE EVEN *NO SCRIPT* AT ALL. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MANY SUMMER TENT-POLES ARE GREEN-LIT AND SENT INTO HEAVY PRE-PRODUCTION WITH AN INCOMPLETE TO NON-EXISTENT SCRIPT? LOADS OF THEM. AND IT IS ALL BUILT ON THE BLIND ASSUMPTION THAT SCRIPTS AREN'T REALLY THAT IMPORTANT AND YOU CAN MAKE DUE IF YOU HAVE THE BARE BONES OF THE STORY IN PLACE, THEN YOU CAN JUST FLESH IT OUT DURING PRODUCTION. AND IN REALITY, ACCOMPLISHING THAT IS A MIRACLE.

AND THUS HULK WOULD LIKE TO SUBMIT THE IDEA THAT THIS IS THE SINGLE GREATEST FAULT OF MODERN HOLLYWOOD FILMMAKING.

THE ASSUMPTION THAT A FILM'S STORY CAN BE SIMPLY "FLESHED OUT" IN HEAVY PRE-PRODUCTION, PRODUCTION, OR EVEN THE EDITING ROOM IS AN INCREASINGLY LAUGHABLE IDEA. EVEN IN PRE-PRODUCTION, YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND *WHAT YOU NEED* IN ORDER TO EVEN HAVE IT IN PLACE. DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY TIMES PRODUCTIONS GET LOCKED INTO A TERRIBLE SCENE, BECAUSE THEY HAVE ALREADY STARTED BUILDING SETS?! HULK HAS SEEN SO MUCH MONEY WASTED IN PRE-PRODUCTION AS A BUNCH OF RELATIVE OVERT-TINKERERS REARRANGE THE STORY ON THE FLY. THEY'LL EVEN HIRE AND FIRE WRITERS WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCE THIS HAS ON THEIR PRODUCTION CONTINUITY. AGAIN, HULK DOES NOT MEAN TO MAKE THIS SOUND LIKE A CHASTISING ACCUSATION AGAINST ALL OF STUDIO-DOM, AS THERE ARE SO MANY GREAT PEOPLE WHO REALLY DO KNOW THEIR STUFF. THE PROBLEM IS SYSTEMIC. AND THE “SCRIPT IS A BLUEPRINT” ATTITUDE TENDS TO SWEEP UP EVEN THE BEST OF THEM.

CONCERNING SCRIPT VALUE YOU MAY SAY: “But Hulk, Improv is so hot right now and there’s a bunch of great actors who can make it happen!”

FIRST OFF, HOW OFTEN DO YOU HEAR ABOUT IMPROVISED DRAMAS?

[CRICKET CRICKET]

YEAH, HULK THOUGHT SO. THERE HASN'T BEEN A SINGLE GOOD ONE BECAUSE IT PROVES YOU LARGELY NEED THE WRITTEN CONSTRUCTS TO EXECUTE CINEMATICALLY. BUT HULK'S “THE SCRIPT MATTERS” PHILOSOPHY IS EVEN TRUE FOR ALL THE POPULAR IMPROV COMEDIES YOU SEE THESE DAYS. BECAUSE GUESS WHAT? ALL THOSE HEAVILY IMPROVISED ADAM MCKAY MOVIES, FOR INSTANCE? HAVE YOU EVER READ THOSE SCRIPTS? THEY'RE PRETTY FREAKING GOOD. AND THEY'RE A LOT CLOSER TO THE FINAL PRODUCT THAN YOU MAY HAVE REALIZED. THE CHARACTER ARCS, THE CONFLICTS, THE RELATIVE POINTS, THE TONE. IT'S ALL THERE. SO THE REAL FUNCTION OF IMPROV IS NOT TO *FIND THE STORY* OR THE *WORLD OF THE MOVIE*, IT'S JUST TO FIND THE *BEST POSSIBLE JOKES TO PUNCH IT UP*. AND THE ONLY MOVIES THAT MANAGE TO ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING SUBSTANTIAL WITH IMPROV DO SO BY GETTING SOME OF THE BEST COMEDIC MINDS IN A ROOM TOGETHER AND GOING AT IT. BUT IT'S JUST A DIALOGUE RE-WRITE, NOT AN IMPROVISED NARRATIVE. SO TO ALL YOU BUDDING IMPROV-BASED WRITERS, YOU NEED TO WRITE A SCRIPT YOU'RE PROUD OF FIRST. IMPROV TRULY IS A GREAT PERFORMANCE TOOL (AND CAN EVEN HELP TRAIN YOUR MIND FOR CONSTRUCTING BETTER WRITTEN STORIES), BUT IT IS NOT A CRUTCH FOR A MISSING STORY. YOU NEED THE FOCUS THAT REAL NARRATIVE BRINGS. THE SCRIPT HAS TO BE THE SOUL OF YOUR PROJECT AND SOMETHING YOU'D BE PROUD OF, THEN YOU CAN TRY TO USE IMPROV TO IMPROVE THE SURFACE LEVEL.

YOU KNOW WHO AGREES WITH THIS PHILOSOPHY? TINA FEY. AND SHE WAS WHOLLY BORN FROM

THE SECOND CITY IMPROV MODEL, YET SHE BASES ALL HER WRITING ON THE WORK OF GOLDEN AGE TV AND **THE SIMPSONS**.

TO REITERATE: WHEN YOU'RE ACTUALLY FILMING A MOVIE YOU CAN INDEED CHANGE A SCRIPT IN THE RIGHT WAYS TO ENHANCE, REFINE, AND COMPLEMENT WHAT IS ACTUALLY BEING FILMED. YOU CAN SEE THE WAY CERTAIN ACTORS ARE BRINGING THE CHARACTERS TO LIFE AND CALL THE NECESSARY AUDIBLES. BUT REALLY THIS IS JUST THE SURFACE-LEVEL EXECUTION STUFF THAT COMES FAR ALONG IN THE PROCESS. IT COMES WHEN EVERYTHING IS ALREADY SET IN PLACE AND YOU HAVE ALREADY MADE ALL YOUR MOST CRITICAL DECISIONS. YOU CANNOT REDEFINE YOUR NARRATIVE. YOU'RE NOT EVEN REALLY RE-CONSTRUCTING IT. *YOU'RE REFINING*. AND WHILE YOU ARE IN PRODUCTION YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE WORKING ON AND HOW IT FITS WITH THE CONTEXT, INTENTION, AND LOGIC OF THE REST OF THE STORY, WHICH AUTOMATICALLY MEANS THE STORY IS SOMETHING THAT HAS TO BE CAREFULLY SET AND ACCOUNTED FOR ON A SCRIPT LEVEL. MEANING HAVING A COMPLETELY SET SCRIPT THAT YOU KNOW FRONTWARDS AND BACKWARDS ACTUALLY ALLOWS YOU TO MAKE MORE INFORMED DECISIONS ON HOW TO CHANGE IT DURING PRODUCTION. THIS FACT SHOULD BE OBVIOUS. ESPECIALLY BECAUSE IT'S HOW PEOPLE MADE MOVIES FOR NEARLY 80 YEARS.

BUT QUITE HONESTLY THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF SCREENWRITING DRAMATICALLY SHIFTED THE MOMENT THE CORPORATIONS MOVED IN. THIS ISN'T A KNEE-JERK OPINION ABOUT BIG BUSINESS BEING BAD OR ANYTHING AS SILLY AS THAT. THIS IS ABOUT THAT "SYSTEMIC PROBLEM" HULK MENTIONED BEFORE: IT WAS JUST A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN THE KINDS OF PEOPLE WHO HAD OVERSIGHT. THE CORPORATIONS APPROACHED THE STORY THE WAY... WELL... THE WAY ANY CORPORATE BUSINESS WOULD. IT WAS ALL ABOUT THE PROCESS OF SAFE CHOICES AND MINIMIZING RISK AND FOCUSING ON FACTORS THAT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH DRAMA, UNIVERSAL TRUTHS, OR THE IMPORTANCE OF STORIES. IT BECAME BIG BUSINESS, WHERE THE BOTTOM LINE IS GETTING BUTTS IN SEATS AT ANY COST. AND WHILE EXPLORING HOW TO ACCOMPLISH THAT, THE STUDIOS DISCOVERED THAT THROUGH MARKETING, TONE APPEAL, STAR POWER, AND PROPERTY RECOGNITION THEY COULD STILL GET BUTTS IN THE SEATS FOR OPENING WEEKEND. IT WAS A SUREFIRE WAY TO GET OVER BAD STORYTELLING, WHICH IS SUPER-GREAT FOR THEM AND STUFF BECAUSE MOST DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HOW SCRIPTS WORKED IN THE FIRST PLACE.

TO BE FAIR, HULK IS BEING HARSH HERE. BUT HULK ISN'T ADMONISHING A SYSTEM FROM THE WRITER'S PERSPECTIVE; NO, THIS COMES FROM HULK'S PERSPECTIVE OF BEING ON THE STUDIO SIDE.

AND A LOT OF THOSE EXECUTIVES TRULY LOVED MOVIES, BUT THE MARKETING-BASED SYSTEM THEY CREATED WAS CRIPPLING TO THE IMPORT OF STORY. EVEN WITH THE GOOD DEAL OF EXECUTIVES WHO ARE STUNNINGLY BRILLIANT, IT IS THE SYSTEM AND THE SET OF PRESSURES THAT ARE THE PROBLEM. ON THE STUDIO SIDE, KEEPING ONE'S JOB ISN'T DEPENDENT ON YOUR CAPABILITY TO UNDERSTAND STORYTELLING AND ITS PURPOSE. IT'S BASED ON THE FINANCIAL SUCCESS OF THE PACKAGES YOU PUT TOGETHER. AND WHEN THEY HAVE TO JUSTIFY THEIR FAILURES THEY HAVE TO BACK UP THEIR DECISIONS WITH "I attached this star! And used this recent successful formula!" AND WHEN THEIR BACKS ARE AGAINST THE WALL THEY CAN'T GO TO THEIR BOSSES WITH "My script expressed the heart of drama!" THEY'RE JUST TRYING TO KEEP THEIR JOBS.

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM WITH THIS IS THAT MAKING A FILM THAT GETS TO THE HEART OF DRAMA WOULD ACTUALLY BE THE BEST WAY TO MAKE A FILM A FINANCIAL SUCCESS.

RAISE AN EYEBROW OR TWO, BUT IT'S TRUE. HECK, IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD EVERYONE USED TO UNDERSTAND THAT STORYTELLING MATTERED FINANCIALLY TO YOUR FILM. THE BUSINESS OF MOVIES WAS ACTUALLY BASED ON A LONG-PLAY SELL FOR WEEKS AND WEEKS WHERE WORD OF MOUTH WAS WHAT MANAGED TO GET AUDIENCES IN THEATERS OVER TIME AS MOVIES SPREAD AROUND THE COUNTRY. AND IT DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TO DO WITH OPENING WEEKEND BOX OFFICE. WRITING A GOOD STORY, WELL TOLD, WAS *YOUR FREAKING BUSINESS MODEL*.

NOW? IT'S A NEAT LITTLE BONUS.

WHICH IS YET ANOTHER IDEA THAT HULK WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST IS SHORT-SIGHTED BALLS.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING THREE ARGUMENTS:

FIRST, THAT THE REAL-DEAL FINANCIAL GAIN OF A FILM IS NOT ACTUALLY BASED ON OPENING WEEKEND, BUT STILL THE *REALLY* LONG PLAY. WHILE THE OPENING WEEKEND IS CERTAINLY A GREAT STARTING POINT, THE REAL HITS (AKA GOOD MOVIES WITH GOOD SCRIPTS) ARE THE ONES THAT HAVE STAYING POWER IN THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOW. LOOK AT THE NUMBER ONE AND TWO FILMS OF ALL TIME IN **TITANIC** AND **AVATAR**. BOTH HAD SOLID BUT NOT JAW-DROPPING OPENINGS AND YET BOTH EVENTUALLY WENT ON TO HAVE INCREDIBLE LONG PLAYS. JAMES CAMERON GETS A LOT OF FLAK FOR HIS STORYTELLING SIMPLICITY AND YET, TO HULK, HE IS SOMEONE WHO UNDERSTANDS THE VALUE OF STORY SIMPLICITY BETTER THAN ANYONE. HE IS JUST DOING THE BASICS, BUT THOSE BASICS RESONATE SO DEEPLY WITH PEOPLE. ANACHRONISTIC? MAYBE. BUT LOOK AT THE WAY HIS FILMS RESONATE ACROSS THE BOARD. HE'S SHOWING US THE VALUE OF BASICS AND TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING.

SECOND, THE BUSINESS MODEL DOESN'T JUST END WITH THEATRICAL RUNS. IN HULK'S WORKING ADVENTURES, HULK'S GOTTEN TO TAKE A FEW PEEKS AT THE STUDIO BOOKS FROM TIME TO TIME AND MOVIES MAKE A HUGE DEAL IF NOT MOST OF THEIR MONEY ON ANCILLARY INCOMES. NOT JUST IN BLU/DVD SALES, BUT TV AIRINGS, RENTALS, VOD WINDOWS, NETFLIX. AND THE GREAT THING ABOUT THESE MODELS IS THAT THEY FINANCIALLY REWARD THE VERY BEST STORIES WE HAVE TO OFFER. **JAWS** ISN'T JUST A GREAT MOVIE THAT WE CAN ENJOY TO THIS VERY DAY, IT'S STILL *FINANCIALLY REWARDING THE STUDIO*. WITH A LOT OF MONEY TOO, FOLKS. THE MEGA-HITS LAST!

THIRD, IF THE MOST VALUABLE THING A MOVIE STUDIO CAN GET THEIR HANDS ON THIS DAY AND AGE IS A FRANCHISE, THEN DOESN'T THAT MEAN YOUR CENTRAL INTEREST SHOULD BE GETTING YOUR AUDIENCE TO COME BACK A SECOND TIME? WHAT WOULD BE THE KEY TO DOING SUCH A THING? OH YEAH, YOU MAKE A *GOOD FIRST MOVIE*. AND THAT MEANS YOU NEED, LIKE, A GOOD STORY. NOT TO GET TOO SMASHY, BUT SERIOUSLY PEOPLE, HOW IS THIS NOT OBVIOUS? AFTER ALL, THERE IS THE COMMON BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE THAT THE BOX OFFICE OF SEQUELS HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH THE QUALITY OF *THE ACTUAL SEQUEL*, BUT INSTEAD IS A DIRECT REACTION TO *THE LAST ONE*. HOW OFTEN DO WE HEAR " ____ WAS SO GOOD THAT I CAN'T WAIT FOR ____2!" APROPOS OF NOT HAVING A SINGLE OTHER DETAIL? SO ISN'T THIS SIMPLE IDEA OF GETTING PEOPLE TO LOVE THE STORY THE WAY YOU BUILD THE FRANCHISE MODEL?

LOOK. THE THING ABOUT THESE THREE ARGUMENTS IS THAT HULK UNDERSTANDS THE HUMAN ELEMENT AT PLAY. HULK KNOWS THAT EVERYONE IS REALLY TRYING TO MAKE A GOOD MOVIE AND ALL THAT, BUT HULK'S ENTIRE POINT IS THAT THE ERRORS OF DEVELOPMENT ARE NOT COMING FROM A LACK OF EFFORT, BUT LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT. WE SET RELEASE DATES BEFORE WE EVEN HAVE FILMS ON THE PAGE. AND THE PROBLEM IS THAT WHATEVER THE ADVANTAGE OF A GOOD RELEASE DATE IS, HULK CAN GUARANTEE IT'S NOTHING COMPARED TO THE BOON YOU GET FROM LOCKING DOWN A GREAT SCRIPT. IF THE LONG PLAY, ANCILLARY INCOMES, AND FRANCHISING IS THE BEST WAY TO MAKE LONG-TERM MONEY, THEN A GOOD STORY TOLD WELL IS SECRETLY *STILL* THE BUSINESS MODEL - WE'RE JUST NOT SEEING IT.

AND BECAUSE WE DON'T SEE IT, BECAUSE WE'RE LOOKING AT ALL THE WRONG THINGS, WE HAVE ONE OF THE GUYS RUNNING DISNEY TELLING THE PRESS THAT AUDIENCES DON'T CARE ABOUT STORY AND THAT "ONLY SET-PIECES MATTER." AND THEN HE CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHY NOBODY REALLY LIKED **TRON**. HULK WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST THAT THIS IS THE VERY PINNACLE OF "NOT GETTING IT."

THE SCRIPT MATTERS.

AND DON'T LET ANYONE TELL YOU DIFFERENT.

5. WHY YOU STILL NEED TO BE ABLE TO TELL AN ORIGINAL STORY

WITH ALL THIS "FRANCHISE" TALK, YOU MAY HAVE ALSO NOTICED THAT ORIGINAL SCRIPTS AND STORIES AREN'T BEING MADE BY HOLLYWOOD ALL THAT MUCH ANYMORE. DREW MCWEENY EVEN WROTE [A GREAT PIECE](#) ABOUT HOW WE ARE NOW IN THE AGE OF FAN-FIC. HE DELVES INTO HOW WE NO LONGER HAVE TO LOOK AT OUR INFLUENCES AND APPROPRIATE THEM INTO OUR OWN ORIGINAL STORY, BUT ACTUALLY GET TO WORK WITH THOSE VERY PROPERTIES THAT INSPIRED US IN THE FIRST PLACE. AS SUCH, IT SEEMS LIKE EVERY SINGLE THING WE PRODUCE IS EITHER A SEQUEL, A REMAKE, OR BASED ON ANOTHER THING.

THE MAIN REASON THIS HAPPENS IS MORE INDUSTRY B.S. THEY DO IT FOR VALID MARKETING REASONS (MEANING IT SPIKES THE AWARENESS NUMBERS BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE ALREADY FAMILIAR WITH "THE THING" ITSELF). THE OTHER ASPECT GOES BACK TO THAT INSIDIOUS REASON OF HOW THE SYSTEM CREATES A CONDITION WHERE EXECUTIVES NEED TO JUSTIFY THEIR FAILURES AND DECISION BY SAYING "*I picked something popular I swear! Economically it made sense!*" AND AGAIN, THE HUMAN ANGLE ON THAT IS UNDERSTANDABLE. NO ONE WANTS TO BE FIRED FOR CRAP REASONS. BUT THE COMPLETE SYSTEM-WIDE MISUNDERSTANDING OF DECIDING WHAT KINDS OF STORYTELLING TO EMBRACE IS NOT UNDERSTANDABLE. STORYTELLING NEEDS ROOM TO EMBRACE NARRATIVE. IT CANNOT BE A CHECKLIST OF MARKETING POINTS. AND DOING SO WILL LIKELY EXTINGUISH THE VERY THING YOU NEED FOR YOUR FILM TO SUCCEED. BUT ALAS, WORKING WITH EXISTING PROPERTIES IS THE NEW REALITY OF CORPORATE FILMMAKING CULTURE.

AND HERE'S THE THING ABOUT THAT... YOU STILL NEED TO KNOW HOW TO TELL AN ORIGINAL STORY.

BECAUSE IF YOU WANT TO BE A WORKING SCREENWRITER THIS DAY AND AGE, THEN THAT COOL ORIGINAL SCRIPT YOU WROTE IS NOT NECESSARILY ABOUT TRYING TO "GET IT MADE" (THOUGH THAT WOULD OBVIOUSLY BE AWESOME), IT'S ABOUT PROVING THAT YOU ARE A *GOOD WRITER*. AND IN ORDER TO PROVE THAT YOU ARE A GOOD WRITER YOU NEED TO PROVE THAT YOU CAN WRITE AN ORIGINAL, COMPELLING STORY. IT MATTERS MORE THAN ANYTHING.

EVEN WITH THE FILMS THAT ARE BASED ON OTHER PROPERTIES OR CHARACTERS, THE QUESTION THEN BECOMES: CAN YOU MAKE IT INTERESTING? CAN YOU MAKE IT ENGAGING TO AN AUDIENCE? CAN YOU MAKE THE WORLD COME TO LIFE IN A FULLY REALIZED WAY? CAN YOU MAKE IT COME ALIVE EVEN FOR THE PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW THE PROPERTY? CAN YOU MAKE IT UNIVERSAL? AND YOU JUST DON'T APPROPRIATE STORY BY WAY OF POINT-BY-POINT ADAPTATION. YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND EXACTLY HOW AN ORIGINAL STORY WORKS AND HOW TO INTEGRATE FILM STRUCTURE INTO YOUR WORK. AND YOU LEARN HOW TO DO THAT BY LEARNING TO WRITE AN ORIGINAL STORY FIRST.

SO BELIEVE IT OR NOT, IT GOES BACK TO THE INSPIRATION ANGLE ALL THE SAME: WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE PROPERTY THAT DRAWS YOU? AND FROM THERE YOU TELL THE STORY THAT INTERESTS YOU WITH THE DETAILS AND ICONOGRAPHY OF THE KNOWN PROPERTY. YOU MAKE IT YOUR OWN. IT IS YOUR JOB TO MAKE THE UNORIGINAL *SEEM* ORIGINAL AND FRESH. AND YOUR SUCCESS UTTERLY DEPENDS ON IT.

AFTER ALL, NOLAN DIDN'T MAKE BATMAN FOR ADULTS BECAUSE IT WAS MERELY "GRITTY." HE MADE IT FOR ADULTS BY MAKING A BATMAN MOVIE THAT WAS ABOUT INTERESTING ADULT-MINDED CONCEPTS. CITY POLITICS. SYMBOLS. ANARCHISM. HE TOOK THE BATMAN ICONOGRAPHY AND MARRIED IT TO IDEAS AND CHARACTERIZATIONS THAT *INTERESTED HIM*. AND BY DOING THAT HE TRANSCENDED THE PROPERTY THROUGH THE POWER AND KNOW-HOW OF ORIGINAL STORYTELLING.

6. BUT REMEMBER, IT'S STILL NOT ABOUT "GETTING THINGS MADE"

HULK'S TALKED A LOT ABOUT THE INDUSTRY IN THIS SECTION AND THAT WAS LARGELY TO GET IT OUT OF THE WAY. HULK WISHES HULK COULD PROMISE YOU ALL THE FRUITS OF SUCCESS, ALL THE ACCOLADES YOUR CREATIVE SOUL DESERVES, BUT THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS THAT GO INTO

GETTING SOMETHING MADE THAT HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH WRITING. IT'S A SEPARATE TOPIC. SO THIS BOOK IS REALLY JUST ABOUT WHAT *YOU CAN CONTROL*. AND FROM THE VERY START, HULK SAID THAT THIS BOOK WAS ABOUT WRITING ITSELF AND TRYING TO BECOME A BETTER WRITER.

SO ALL HULK CAN PROMISE YOU IS THIS: IF YOU UNDERSTAND STORIES AND SCREENPLAYS, AND IF YOU WANT TO PURSUE SCREENWRITING OR SOME KIND OF CAREER IN FILM, TELEVISION, NOVELIZATION, OR MEDIA, THEN NO MATTER WHAT PATH YOU END UP FOLLOWING THE INFORMATION CONTAINED WITHIN THIS PIECE WILL STILL BE OF VALUE TO YOU. AND IF YOU CAN COME TO A PLACE OF EXPERTISE, IT WILL BE TREMENDOUSLY VALUABLE TO EVERYONE AROUND YOU, TOO.

... OR AT LEAST IT CAN'T HURT.

SO THOSE ARE 6 THINGS HULK WISHES HULK KNEW OVER A DECADE AGO.

NOW, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU DO WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO WRITE THE DAMN THING?

PART FOUR - - HOW TO APPROACH A SCREENPLAY - CONCEPTUALLY

SO LET'S GET AWAY FROM THE BROADEST POSSIBLE IDEOLOGY ONE NEEDS TO WRITE AND ZERO IN ON SOME MORE SPECIFIC IDEAS / GUIDELINES / RULES / WHATEVERS THAT WILL HELP YOU DEVELOP YOUR STORY/SCREENPLAY.

AFTER PART FOUR, HULK WILL FOLLOW UP WITH STRUCTURAL ADVICE, THEN SCREENPLAY FORMATTING ADVICE, AND FINALLY HULK WILL GIVE THE KEY TO PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER.

THE ONLY THING THAT HULK CAN IMPRESS UPON YOU AT THIS TIME IS THAT WHILE THESE ARE LARGELY GUIDELINES OF NARRATIVE CONVENTION... THEY MATTER. HULK JUST TALKED ABOUT JAMES CAMERON'S LAST TWO FILMS AND HULK ISN'T SURE HOW YOU MIGHT FEEL ABOUT THEM, BUT HULK CAN ASSURE YOU THAT THE RELATIVE SUCCESS OF BOTH **TITANIC** AND **AVATAR** IS A TESTAMENT TO THE POWER OF CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE. HE BLAZES RIGHT PAST NUANCE AND UTILIZES EVERY SINGLE VALID ARCHETYPE, TROPE, AND DEVICE, BUT NOT IN A HOLLOW WAY, INSTEAD WITH THE NAKEDLY PRECISE WAY OF HOW *THEY ARE MEANT TO BE USED*. AND WHAT THEY LACK IN SUBTLETY, THEY MAKE UP FOR IN 100% FUNCTIONALITY. MEANING JAMES CAMERON ESSENTIALLY PRINTS YOU A GUIDE FOR MAKING ENTIRELY FUNCTIONAL MOVIES. AND WHILE THEY DO NOT REACH THE HIGHS OF OUR BEST CINEMATIC ART, IT'S NO SURPRISE THEY ARE ROUSING SUCCESSES. AND BETTER YET, THEY ARE ANYTHING BUT CYNICALLY MADE. THE MAN IS A TESTAMENT TO FUNCTIONALITY.

YOUR INSTINCT WILL EITHER BE TO ADHERE TO THIS FUNCTIONALITY OR TO SHAKE IT OFF. BUT HULK ARGUES THAT YOU MUST UNDERSTAND IT EITHER WAY. TOO MANY SCREENWRITING BOOKS GIVE YOU A "SET WAY" ON HOW TO DO THINGS AND SAY "ALL GOOD SCRIPTS DO THIS!" HULK IS GOING TO GIVE YOU MORE POWER THAN THAT. A STORY CAN BE SO MUCH MORE THAN A LIST OF SET PLOT POINTS. BUT HULK ASSURES YOU THE KEY TO TRANSCENDING MERE FUNCTIONALITY IS UNDERSTANDING HOW TO TURN THAT SIMPLICITY INTO SOMETHING FAR MORE NUANCED.

YOU CAN'T JUST REJECT CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE. *YOU HAVE TO TRANSCEND IT*. AND THAT MEANS KNOWING IT INSIDE AND OUT.

AND SO WHILE HULK WILL DISCUSS EACH OF THE FOLLOWING CONCEPTS IN DEPTH, PLEASE UNDERSTAND THERE IS VERY MUCH A PURPOSE TO ALL OF THIS. IT'S ABOUT UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF EACH OF THESE IDEAS SO THAT YOU CAN BEST APPLY THEM TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL. SOMETIMES THEY ARE LARGE-SCALE IDEAS, SOMETIMES THEY ARE SMALL DEVICES, SOMETIMES THEY ARE BACKGROUND WORK NEEDED TO GET YOU IN THE RIGHT PLACE. BUT EVERY TIME, HULK WANTS YOU THINK OF THESE IDEAS AS "MECHANISMS," BECAUSE THE WORD IMPLIES A CERTAIN PURPOSEFUL FUNCTION. SO HULK WANTS YOU TO UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISMS OF WRITING SO THAT YOU CAN BEST APPLY THEM IN ANY WAY YOU WISH.

THIS IS NOT ABOUT HULK TELLING YOU HOW A STORY MUST BE. THIS IS ABOUT UNLOCKING YOUR OWN STORYTELLING POWER.

SO LET'S GET STARTED!

7.1 THE LAW OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT A STORY IT'S AMAZING HOW MUCH WE DON'T THINK ABOUT HOW IT *FUNCTIONS*.

HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT A LOT OF OUR CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF STORIES DEALS MORE WITH WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE, BUT FINDS THAT TO BE A MISGUIDED APPROACH. BELIEVE IT OR NOT, STORIES DON'T FUNCTION IN TERMS OF BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES AND ENDS, THEY

SIMPLY *HAVE* BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES, AND ENDS. NOR ARE THEY ABOUT HITTING FAMILIAR BEATS AND DOING CERTAIN THINGS BY CERTAIN PAGE COUNTS AND FILLING IN CERTAIN COMMONALITIES.

IN FACT, HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT MOST PROBLEMS IN MOVIES COME FROM THE FACT THAT PEOPLE MISTAKE FORM FOR FUNCTION.

THEY THINK IF IT LOOKS LIKE THE THING, IF IT ACTS LIKE THE THING, IF IT FEELS LIKE THE THING, THEN IT MUST *BE* THE THING... THEY ARE WRONG. AND IT'S WHY WE GET SO MANY MOVIES THAT TRY TO PUT THEIR VALUE IN THE TEXTURE OF THE FILM WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OR EFFECT OF ANY OF IT. IT'S WHY WE GET PLOT TURNS THAT DON'T FIT THE KIND OF MOVIE THE FILMMAKERS WANT TO MAKE. IT'S WHY STUDIOS MANUFACTURE EXCITEMENT IN FILMMAKING STYLE INSTEAD OF MANUFACTURING IT FROM STORY. HECK, IT'S WHY WE GET SO MANY MOVIES THAT ARE NOTHING MORE THAN BLIND COPYCATS OF ANOTHER. PEOPLE ASSUME THESE SURFACE THINGS ARE THE REASON THESE FILMS WORK, THE KIND OF THINKING AKIN TO "VAMPIRES ARE SO HOT RIGHT NOW!" WHEN THAT'S SO NOT THE MECHANISM THAT IS MAKING ANY OF THOSE FILMS WORK. THEY ARE SIMPLY MISTAKING FORM FOR FUNCTION. AND IT MEANS THEY DON'T ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND STORYTELLING.

OTHER SCREENWRITING BOOKS WILL TELL YOU WHERE TO PUT ACT BREAKS, OR GIVE YOU METHODS ON WRITING ENDEARING CHARACTERS, OR TELL YOU HOW TO WOW A POTENTIAL BUYER, BUT ALMOST NONE OF THEM GIVES YOU ANY INSIGHT TO HOW THOSE THINGS ACTUALLY WORK OR WHY. NO ONE ASKS: HOW DOES AN ACT BREAK AFFECT AN AUDIENCE? WHAT IS AN ACT BREAK ANYWAY? WHAT IS THE READER EXPERIENCING ON A DRAMATIC LEVEL? WHY CAN SOME MOVIES BREAK ESTABLISHED "RULES" WHEREAS OTHERS CAN'T? THESE QUESTIONS ARE NOT CONCERNED WITH TEXTURE, THEY ARE CONCERNED WITH HOW THE MECHANISMS FUNCTION. THIS IS CRITICAL.

BECAUSE IT'S TIME TO TAKE FUNCTION BACK FROM FORM.

STORIES ARE DRIVEN BY CERTAIN CORE MECHANISMS THAT CAUSE PERCEPTIBLE CHANGES, WHICH DIRECTLY AFFECT US, THE PROVERBIAL VIEWER. THAT IS CINEMATIC FUNCTION AND NO SINGLE CONCEPT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT.

STORIES ARE DEFINED BY CAUSE AND EFFECT.

PERPETUALLY. CONSTANTLY. VIVIDLY. STORIES ARE BUILT ON THAT SIMPLEST OF MECHANISMS. THIS CAUSES THAT AND THAT CAUSES THIS AND SO ON AND SO FORTH. IT'S ABOUT SET-UPS AND PAY-OFFS. IT'S ABOUT ACTION AND REACTION. IT'S ABOUT INFORMATION FOLLOWED BY DRAMATIC CONSEQUENCE. CAUSE AND EFFECT LEND MEANING TO EVENTS. THEY LINK SCENES TOGETHER. THEY GIVE WHOLENESS TO SEEMINGLY SEPARATED IDEAS. CAUSE AND EFFECT ARE THE LINKING OF YOUR CHAIN. THEY MAKE A STORY A STORY.

7.2 EMPATHY IS YOUR NEW BEST FRIEND.

WHEN YOU START CRAFTING A STORY AND CHARACTERS, THERE IS SOMETHING SO CRAZY IMPORTANT THAT YOU MUST ALWAYS KEEP IT IN THE BACK OF YOUR MIND: THERE IS NO SINGLE FORCE ON THIS PLANET MORE POWERFUL THAN THAT OF EMPATHY...

HULK KNOWS YOUR LIKELY COUNTER ALREADY: "Oh yeah, Hulk? Well what about Galactus! Galactus is totally the most powerful!!!!!"

PSSSSH. HOW DOES GALACTUS GET DEFEATED? IT'S BECAUSE ALICIA MASTERS APPEALS TO THE SILVER SURFER'S SENSE OF EMPATHY, WHICH CAUSES HIM TO JOIN THE FANTASTIC FOUR AND DEFEAT HIS FORMER MASTER!

EMPATHY, BITCHES. *EMPATHY.*

BUT WAY MORE SERIOUSLY, EMPATHY IS THE MOST SINGLE POWERFUL TOOL AT A WRITER'S DISPOSAL. EVEN THIS SILLY GALACTUS EXAMPLE ILLUSTRATES THAT PRETTY DAMN WELL (IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT IT'S ONE OF THE GREAT COMIC BOOK SAGAS). AND THAT IS BECAUSE THE FAR-REACHING VALUE OF HUMAN EMPATHY IS WHAT HULK CONSIDERS NOT JUST A GREAT UNIVERSAL TRUTH, BUT *THE* SINGLE UNIVERSAL TRUTH OF HUMANITY'S SURVIVAL.

... *WHOA*.

THAT STATEMENT MAY REEK OF HYPERBOLE, BUT GIVE HULK A CHANCE TO EXPLAIN HERE. YOU'LL HAVE TO EXCUSE THE NAIVE-SOUNDING LOFTINESS OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT, BUT HERE GOES:

IN AN EFFORT TO BE ATTUNED AND GROUNDED HUMAN BEINGS, WE SOMETIMES DIG SO DEEPLY INTO THE MINUTIAE AND RELATIVITY OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE THAT WE SOMETIMES MISS OR FORGET THE SIMPLE, LOFTY, KINDERGARTEN-LEVEL TRUTHS THAT STARE US RIGHT IN THE FACE. AND PART OF THAT GROUPING IS WHAT HULK WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST IS THE OBVIOUS YET CRITICAL TRUTH THAT **EMPATHY IS WHAT ALLOWS HUMAN BEINGS TO BIND TOGETHER IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY**. NOT JUST WITH STRANGERS, BUT WITH THE IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN OUR LIVES. IT'S WHAT ALLOWS US TO LOVE OUR PARTNERS, FAMILIES, AND FRIENDS. AND UNLESS WE'RE DIPPING INTO SOME SCHADENFREUDE OR SOMETHING, IT IS EVEN WHAT GIVES US OUR CAPACITY FOR JOY AND LAUGHTER. MEANING EMPATHY ISN'T JUST A NICE THING TO HAVE IN LIFE, BUT A WHOLLY NECESSARY FUNCTION. TO PARAPHRASE DAVID FOSTER WALLACE: THE BASIC EXISTENCE OF EMPATHY IS WHY MOST OF US DON'T SPEND EVERY SECOND OF THE DAY CLUBBING EACH OTHER OVER THE HEAD AND STEALING EACH OTHER'S GROCERIES. EVEN IN A WORLD CONTAINING CRIME, DEPRAVITY, AND WAR, IT IS EMPATHY THAT ALLOWS US TO SOMETIMES REFRAIN FROM THOSE VERY THINGS. WHICH MEANS IT'S WHY WE SURVIVE AS A SPECIES.

SERIOUSLY, DO YOU EVER THINK ABOUT THE FACT THAT WITH ALL THE MADNESS IN THE WORLD, THAT IT IS DOWNRIGHT REMARKABLE WE HAVEN'T BLOWN OURSELVES UP IN NUCLEAR WAR? IT CAN'T JUST BE SOME SIMPLE MATTER OF LOGIC. TO HULK, IT IS THE INTRINSIC REALITY OF EMPATHY. IT'S OUR TRUE NATURE, AS IS THE FACT THAT WE REALIZED IT WAS EASIER TO KILL A MAMMOTH AS GROUP, FARM AS A GROUP, IRRIGATE AS A GROUP, AND BUILD GREAT BIG THINGS AS A GROUP. IT IS OUR EMPATHY THAT ALLOWED OUR SOCIETY TO BEST SURVIVE AND DECLARING ANYTHING ELSE IS A COMPLETE OBFUSCATION OF TRUTH.

AND YET IT'S STUNNING HOW OFTEN THIS REALIZATION PASSES US BY. EMPATHY IS THE FOUNDATION OF CULTURE AND IT IS WHOLLY EMBODIED BY THE NOTION OF STORYTELLING ITSELF.

SO IT SHOULD BE NO SURPRISE THAT WHEN IT COMES TO OUR MOVIES, EMPATHY IS ALSO THE VERY THING THAT INVOLVES AN AUDIENCE AND KEEPS THEIR ATTENTION. IT HOOKS INTO THEIR BONES ON A VISCERAL LEVEL. IT GIVES THE AUDIENCE ROOTING INTEREST AND PERSPECTIVE. IT IS THE REASON A MOVIE IS *EXPERIENCED* INSTEAD OF *WATCHED*. MOVIES ARE UNIQUE IN THAT THEY ALLOW A PERSON TO ACTUALLY PARTICIPATE IN THE OLD CLICHÉ OF WALKING A MILE IN ANOTHER MAN'S SHOES. WE TAKE IT FOR GRANTED, BUT ISN'T THAT KIND OF AMAZING? A GREAT FILMMAKER USES EMPATHY AS THEIR FUEL. THEY USE IT TO ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE. AND HULK TRULY LOVES THAT THE THING THAT ENABLES HUMANITY TO FUNCTION IS THE SAME EXACT THING THAT ENABLES MOVIES TO WORK! NOTHING COULD BE MORE APPROPRIATE FOR HULK'S FAVORITE MEDIUM.

BUT NOW THAT WE KNOW EMPATHY IS IMPORTANT, THE QUESTION THEN BECOMES: HOW THE HECK DO WE USE IT?

FOR THAT, HULK IS GOING TO TURN YOUR ATTENTION TO AN OLD ADAGE THAT YOU CAN MAKE AN AUDIENCE CARE JUST BY THREATENING TO "KILL THE KITTEN."

NOTE: THIS IS JUST A SAYING. YOU DON'T ACTUALLY NEED TO THREATEN TO KILL A KITTEN IN THE FILM (UNLESS YOU WROTE **THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO** OR SOMETHING).

THE FUNNY THING IS THIS OLD SAYING WAS TURNED INTO A POPULAR SCREENWRITING BOOK CALLED **SAVE THE CAT** IN WHICH THE AUTHOR CREATED A PHILOSOPHY OF “SAVING THE CAT” FOLLOWED BY CREATING A STORY AROUND 15 CENTRAL BEATS AMIDST ABOUT 40 SMALLER BEATS. THE ISSUE IS THAT IT ACTUALLY BUTCHERED WHAT THE “KILL THE KITTEN” ADAGE WAS ACTUALLY ABOUT. ALL IT MEANT WAS THAT YOU TAKE SOME OBVIOUS THING FOR YOUR AUDIENCE TO EMPATHIZE WITH (CUTE KITTEN!) AND YOU PUT IT IN SOME KIND OF HORRIBLE DANGER AND INSTANTLY THE AUDIENCE IS INVOLVED IN YOUR MOVIE. IT’S A MOMENTARY DRAMATIC TACTIC. THAT’S IT.

BUT THE AUTHOR USED THE DANGER CREATED BY THE PHILOSOPHY AND TRANSLATED IT INTO A WAY TO INTRODUCE THE MAIN CHARACTER. MEANING YOU HAVE THE MAIN CHARACTER “SAVE THE CAT” - SIMPLY DO SOMETHING NICE - AND INSTANTLY THE AUDIENCE IS ON THEIR SIDE. THIS IS WRONG-HEADED. WORSE, THE BOOK GOES ON TO IMPLY ALL MOVIES WORK ON THIS SAME STRUCTURAL LEVEL. IT’S SUCH A MASSIVE, EVEN-HANDED REDUCTION OF STORY THAT HULK... HULK JUST CAN’T EVEN. AT THIS POINT, HULK SHOULD ADMIT THAT HULK CLEARLY DOESN’T THINK A WHOLE LOT OF THE BOOK. WHICH ISN’T TO SAY THERE AREN’T USEFUL IDEAS TO BE GLEANED, BUT AS AN ACROSS-THE-BOARD APPROACH IT MISUNDERSTANDS SOME CORE CONCEPTS OF NARRATIVE AND DRAMATIC FUNCTION AND THEN IS HOPELESSLY REDUCTIVE WITH OTHERS.

SO LET’S START THIS DISCUSSION OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT: EMPATHY IS NOT ABOUT HAVING YOUR CHARACTERS DO NICE THINGS.

IT IS NOT ABOUT SYMPATHY OR LIKEABILITY, EITHER. EMPATHY IS ABOUT THE TRANSLATION OF FEELING. AND EMPATHY CAN ACTUALLY BE ESTABLISHED THROUGH *STRUGGLE* MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE. WHICH IS DONE THROUGH ANY OF THESE RATHER HUMAN, OFT-EXPERIENCED SORTS OF THINGS: LIKE SPILLING COFFEE ON YOURSELF, OR HAVING PARENTS THAT “JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND!” OR, THE FOIL OF THAT ISSUE, TRYING TO RAISE BRATTY KIDS. BASICALLY, YOU WANT TO ENGAGE ON AN EMOTIONAL, CONFLICT-BASED LEVEL. YOU DON’T NECESSARILY WANT TO PUT A CHARACTER ON A PEDESTAL. YOU DON’T WANT THEM TO BE FLAWLESS. YOU DON’T WANT THEM TO BE UNFLINCHINGLY COOL. INSTEAD, YOU WANT THEM TO HAVE THIS VERY RELATABLE TEXTURE OR CONTEXT WHICH LETS THE AUDIENCE SAY “I totally recognize and sympathize with that inclination!”

NOTICE HULK SAID INCLINATION AND NOT “SITUATION,” BECAUSE PEOPLE MAKE THAT MISTAKE TOO. IT’S THE EMOTIONS WE IDENTIFY WITH, NOT THE SPECIFICS OF THE PREDICAMENT. WE IDENTIFY WITH LUKE SKYWALKER BECAUSE HE DREAMS OF SOMETHING BIGGER AND HIS GUARDIANS WON’T LET HIM DO WHAT HE WANTS TO DO, NOT BECAUSE WE ALL GREW UP AS MOISTURE FARMERS ON TATOOINE (FEEL FREE TO USE THIS EXAMPLE ANY TIME SOMEONE TELLS YOU THEY CAN’T GET INTO A MOVIE OR TELEVISION SHOW BECAUSE THE CHARACTERS COME FROM AN ECONOMIC OR REGIONAL SITUATION THAT IS DIFFERENT THAN THEIRS. ESPECIALLY BECAUSE FINDING EMOTIONAL BONDS FROM DIFFERING CULTURAL SITUATIONS IS THE PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING AND SHIT). BUT THIS EMPATHETIC CONNECTION IS THE HEART OF CRAFTING CHARACTERS THAT WE CALL THE “AUDIENCE SURROGATE,” WHICH DOESN’T HAVE TO BE AS READY-MADE AND SIMPLE AS IT WOULD SEEM.

NOTICE THAT NONE OF THESE PREDICAMENTS ARE QUITE AS EXTREME AS “KILLING A KITTEN” EVEN IF THE SENTIMENT AND INTENTION IS THE EXACT SAME. AND THAT’S BECAUSE A DEVICE AS EXTREME AS KILLING A KITTEN CAN COME OFF AS TOTALLY MANIPULATIVE TO AN AUDIENCE. THE DEVICE MAY STILL WORK, BUT A LOT OF AUDIENCES WILL FEEL LIKE THE NARRATIVE IS BOXING THEM IN, TELLING THEM HOW TO FEEL AND THINK. IT CAN BE INSINCERE. IT CAN BE CLOYING. AND THUS SOME PEOPLE WILL RESENT IT WHEN A MOVIE DOES THAT. IN HIS REVIEW OF STEVEN SPIELBERG’S **WARHORSE**, DEVIN FARACI WROTE:

Manipulation is the essential center of cinematic art. Every choice made in a good film - from story to casting to music to editing - is based on eliciting some sort of reaction or feeling from the audience. Every good filmmaker is aware of what they are trying to express through the manipulations of editing or score or performance.

Manipulation becomes a problem when it becomes too obvious, when the fingers pulling your strings become too

insistent. Everyone has a different threshold for this; some recoil at the slightest hint of overt manipulation, while others openly get emotional about Volkswagen commercials featuring children. It's a wide spectrum.

AND GIVEN THAT OUR COLLECTIVE AUDIENCE HAS A HUGE RANGE OF RESPONSES TO MANIPULATION, THE MAIN TAKEAWAY FOR YOU, THE WRITER, SHOULD BE TO FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE OF HOW TO USE IT. AND HULK FEELS LIKE THE BIGGEST KEY IN DOING THAT IS TO BE SURE THAT THERE ARE REAL CHARACTER MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE MANIPULATIVE DEVICES. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN, EXACTLY? WELL, HULK WILL GET INTO IT MORE SPECIFICALLY IN THE SECTIONS TO COME, BUT BASICALLY YOU SHOULD TRY TO CREATE CONFLICTS AND DIRE SITUATIONS THAT *DIRECTLY IMPACT OR COMMENT ON* THE CHARACTER AND STORY AT HAND AND ARE NOT CONFLICTS SHOVED IN CHEAPLY THERE JUST TO GET THE AUDIENCE ON THE HERO'S SIDE.

THERE WILL BE OBSTACLES IN TRYING TO DO SO. SADLY, THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE IN THE FILMMAKING INDUSTRY WHO CONFUSE "EMPATHY" WITH THE AFOREMENTIONED "LIKEABILITY." THIS MISTAKE IS CERTAINLY UNDERSTANDABLE (EVEN **SAVE THE CAT** ENDORSES THIS KIND OF THINKING), BUT PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT THE TWO IDEAS ARE NOT THE SAME THING IN THE SLIGHTEST. EMPATHY IS ABOUT RELATION AND UNDERSTANDING. AND MEANWHILE THEY THINK LIKEABILITY AMOUNTS TO NOT HAVING YOUR CHARACTERS DO BAD THINGS. THIS ASSUMPTION IS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE BECAUSE WITHOUT HAVING A CHARACTER EVER DO A WRONG OR FALLIBLE THING, YOU WILL END UP CREATING SOME REAL SHITTY DRAMA. IN FACT, THIS GRAVE MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT EMPATHY AND LIKEABILITY IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LEGIONS OF DOORMAT MAIN CHARACTERS THAT MOVIE AUDIENCES ARE TREATED TO TIME AND TIME AGAIN.

SERIOUSLY! FALLIBILITY IS EMPATHETIC.

DON'T BELIEVE HULK? WELL, THEN LET'S TALK ABOUT INDIANA JONES.

INDIANA JONES IS ONE OF HULK'S FAVORITE TOPICS OF DISCUSSION BECAUSE BOTH THE CHARACTER AND THE MOVIES HIGHLIGHT SO MANY GREAT THINGS THAT MODERN FILMS FORGET TO DO. WE DON'T LOVE INDIANA JONES BECAUSE HE'S PERFECT OR AN UNSTOPPABLE HEROIC BADASS, WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE'S CONSTANTLY FUCKING UP AND BARELY MAKING HIS WAY OUT OF A CRISIS. HE'S AFRAID OF THINGS! HE HAS FALSE CONFIDENCE! HE FREQUENTLY SHOWS FEAR! AS A RESULT, WE DON'T JUST WATCH INDIANA JONES; WE EMPATHIZE WITH INDIANA JONES. AND IT'S THAT ACHINGLY HUMAN FALLIBILITY THAT MAKES HIM THE PERFECT ACTION HERO. HULK WILL SAY IT NOW AND SAY IT FOREVER, LOOK TO INDY FOR INSPIRATION!

THE OTHER MAIN OBSTACLE YOU MAY FIND IS THAT THERE IS A PECULIAR MODERN TENDENCY TO GO THE OTHER WAY WITH EMPATHY AND TEST THE AUDIENCE BY SEEING HOW MUCH OF A DICK A CHARACTER CAN BE. THESE SORT OF JERK-ASS ANTIHEROES LITTER THE SCREEN NOWADAYS (PARTICULARLY ON TV). ADMITTEDLY, FOR COMEDY AND DARK COMEDY PURPOSES THESE CHARACTERS CAN INDEED WORK PRETTY WELL. BUT THERE'S A WHOLE ART AND NUANCE TO IT. LIKE THE FACT THAT THE RUDENESS IS ACTUALLY MEANT TO DISTANCE THE AUDIENCE FROM THE CHARACTER IN ORDER TO ILLUMINATE SOME KIND OF LARGER POINT OR TRUTH ABOUT HUMAN BEHAVIOR. A TRUTH THE CHARACTER MAY LEARN, OR THEY MAY NOT. AND THIS POINT CAN BE BLACK-AS-NIGHT FUNNY AND DARKLY POETIC (THINK THE COEN BROTHERS), OR IT CAN BE GRATING AS ALL HELL (THE SOMETIMES UNSUCCESSFUL WORK OF NEIL LABUTE). BUT THE KEY IS JUST TO HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF THAT APPROACH AND WHAT IT IS ACCOMPLISHING IN TERMS OF NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC INTENT.

HULK BELIEVES YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THE "WHY" OF YOUR APPROACH BECAUSE THERE IS A REAL CONTRARIAN TENDENCY THESE DAYS TO GO THE AFOREMENTIONED JERK-ASS DIRECTION JUST BECAUSE IT SEEMS DIFFERENT OR REBELLIOUS. THE REBELLIOUS INCLINATION IS FINE IF IT'S WHAT DRIVES YOU, BUT HULK URGES YOU TO BE SURE THERE IS A POINT TO IT. DON'T JUST MAKE THE JERK-ASS MAIN CHARACTER A SHORTCUT TO BEING FUNNY OR EDGY WITHOUT ANY SORT OF REAL THEMATIC EXPLORATION. DO IT BECAUSE YOU'RE TRYING TO EXPOSE SOMETHING REAL WITH IT. GO BACK TO THAT INSPIRATION OF WHAT COMPELS YOU. HOW DOES THIS EDGE AND REBELLIOUSNESS FIT IN? WHAT IS THE POINT TO IT? HOW DOES IT WORK AS A DRAMATIC MECHANISM? ASKING THESE QUESTIONS WILL POINT YOU IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

WHETHER YOU GO EMPATHETIC IN THE TRADITIONAL WAY OR TAKE THE JERK-ASS DISTANCING ROUTE, A GOOD DEAL OF WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO IS MAKE IT ENGAGING BY *EXPLORING THE HUMAN CONDITION*.

ASK YOURSELF BOLD QUESTIONS: WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES THIS CHARACTER GOOD? WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES THEM TROUBLED? WAIT, BETTER YET, LET'S GET SPECIFIC WITH AN EXAMPLE! ASK YOURSELF: WHY DO WE LIKE TONY SOPRANO? WHY DO WE NOT LIKE TONY SOPRANO? WHAT DETAILS ABOUT THIS CHARACTER'S LIFE MAKE HIM SO INTERESTING? AND DOING THIS WILL SET YOU UP TO UNDERSTAND THE KINDS OF DILEMMAS, SITUATIONS, CONFLICTS, AND DRAMATIC IDEAS THAT WILL BREED THE EMPATHY OR DISSONANCE YOU SEEK.

NOW, HULK HAS SAT HERE AND WAXED PHILOSOPHICAL ABOUT EMPATHY FOR QUITE SOME TIME, BUT THAT'S BECAUSE THERE IS NO BASIC, TRUTHFUL SHORTCUT HULK CAN SAY TO MAKE YOU UNDERSTAND THE NUANCES OF THE CONCEPT. HULK TRULY BELIEVES THAT EMPATHY IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON AT YOUR DISPOSAL AND HOW YOU USE IT IS UP TO YOU. YOU CAN THREATEN TO KILL THE KITTEN AND BE QUITE SUCCESSFUL AT IT, OR YOU CAN BITE YOUR THUMB AT THE VERY CONCEPT OF EMPATHY ALL TOGETHER. THERE IS A WIDE SPECTRUM OF APPROACH AND ALL HULK WANTS YOU TO DO IS HAVE A REAL CONCRETE REASON FOR WHY YOU ARE GOING IN EITHER DIRECTION. THINK ABOUT IT. GROUND YOURSELF IN IT.

WHATEVER YOU DO, JUST DON'T LET IT BE BECAUSE IT'S EASY.

AND WITH THAT...

8. BEWARE THE LURE OF INDULGENCE

FROM THE ONSET OF CREATING YOUR STORY, HULK WANTS YOU TO ASK YOURSELF ONE SIMPLE QUESTION:

“Am I making art? Or am I making pornography?”

THIS MAY SOUND EXTREME, BUT HULK IS TALKING ABOUT THE GREAT SPECTRUM OF MEDIA EXPERIENCE. ON ONE END THERE IS PURE ART, WHICH REPRESENTS THE VALUES OF GIVING PEOPLE THE IDEAS THEY NEED OR CONFRONTING THEM WITH INALIENABLE TRUTHS. ON THE OTHER END IS PORNOGRAPHY, WHICH REPRESENTS THE INDIVIDUAL'S INDULGENCE OF STRICTLY BASE NEEDS, REGARDLESS OF IMPORT.

WHILE THE IDEA IS TO ALWAYS STRIKE SOME KIND OF BALANCE, ONE OF THE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN ALL OF WRITING IS TO GIVE INTO THE MOST INDULGENT ASPECTS OF STORYTELLING THROUGH THE VICARIOUS POWER OF CINEMA. SINCE EMPATHY IS WHAT CONNECTS US AND STORIES ARE THE MOST POWERFUL WAY OF ACHIEVING THAT, SOMETIMES THE EMPATHETIC EFFECT IS SO TRANSPORTIVE THAT IT EFFECTIVELY ALLOWS US TO ESCAPE. IN FACT, HULK IS POSITIVE THAT IF YOU ASK MOST PEOPLE WHY THEY LIKE ANY FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT IT'S BECAUSE OF THAT ESCAPE. THEY WORK LONG, HARD HOURS AND THEY NEED SOMETHING THAT MAKES THEM HAPPY OR ELATED OR SCARED OR THRILLED. AND THERE IS REAL VALUE TO PROVIDING THAT FOR PEOPLE. BUT AS A CREATOR, YOU HAVE TO BE CAUTIOUS AND THOUGHTFUL WITH THAT POWER.

AND THAT'S BECAUSE THERE IS A SERIOUS MASTURBATORY ELEMENT TO THAT ESCAPISM. YOU CAN EASILY GET AN AUDIENCE MEMBER TO THINK "I'm a hero saving the world!" OR "Yay! I get the girl!" AND THAT'S WONDERFUL AND ELATIVE, BUT THIS IS THE SORT OF INDULGENCE THAT CAN LEAD TO SOME REALLY UNSAVORY STUFF TOO. THE KIND OF STUFF THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH LARGER TRUTHS, OR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING, OR THE HUMAN CONDITION, OR WHY WE TELL STORIES IN THE FIRST PLACE. IT'S JUST ABOUT MASSAGING THE ID. IT IS ABOUT BLINDLY REWARDING. IT'S ABOUT REINFORCING STEREOTYPES AND FEELINGS THAT ARE UNDERSERVED. IT'S ABOUT PLACATING AND NOT COMMUNICATING. AND AT THAT POINT, YOUR "STORYTELLING" IS BASICALLY

THE FACILITATION OF MENTAL MASTURBATION.

SOME PEOPLE DON'T GET WHY THAT'S SUCH A BIG DEAL. THEY THINK THAT AS LONG AS IT MAKES PEOPLE HAPPY, THEN IT'S ALL WELL AND GOOD. ENTERTAINMENT'S PURPOSE HAS BEEN SERVED. EVEN IF THEY DON'T CARE IF THE MEDIA IS DOING THEM ANY FAVORS, THE PROBLEM IS THAT IT MIGHT NOT BE DOING HUMANITY ANY FAVORS, EITHER. IF STORYTELLING IS REALLY THE BEST WAY TO PASS ON TRUTHS THAT HELP PEOPLE, THEN WHAT DOES IT SAY IF WE'RE PASSING ON UNHELPFUL, EGO-MASSAGING GARBAGE?

THIS IS NOT TO OVERLY CRITICIZE THE DESIRE TO ENTERTAIN. IN FACT, IT'S ONE OF YOUR CHIEF RESPONSIBILITIES AS A STORYTELLER. BUT WHEN YOU ARE ENGAGING THE INDULGENT ASPECTS OF STORYTELLING, IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS REALLY HAPPENING WITH THE AUDIENCE AND TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY OF YOUR MESSAGE. IF YOU'RE BEING INDULGENT THEN YOU HAVE TO CONTEXTUALIZE IT. YOU HAVE TO DISPLAY SOME ELEMENTS THAT GO BEYOND THAT AND CONFIRM THE ARTISTIC PURPOSE AND HUMAN CONDITION. OTHERWISE YOU END UP WRITING LIFESTYLE-PORN LIKE **ENTOURAGE**.

ACTUALLY, LET'S TALK ABOUT **ENTOURAGE** IN DETAIL BECAUSE IT SORT OF HIGHLIGHTS THESE PROBLEMS PERFECTLY. IF YOU LIKE THE SHOW, THEN HULK IS SORRY IF HULK IS COMING OFF AS MEAN OR SOMETHING, AS IT IS NOT THE INTENTION. HULK READILY ADMITS THAT IT CAN BE REALLY FUNNY AT TIMES AND HAS A FEW GOOD PERFORMANCES AND ALL THAT STUFF THAT MAKES FOR GOOD TV SHOWS. THAT'S NOT THE PROBLEM. THE PROBLEMS WITH THE SERIES ARE ABOUT THE DEEP-TISSUE PURPOSE (WHICH HAPPENS TO BE THE SUBJECT AT HAND). AND THE SHOW IS PERHAPS THE MOST INDULGENT YET WELL-MADE PIECE OF ENTERTAINMENT THAT HULK HAS EVER SEEN. EVERY MOMENT IS ABOUT LIVING VICARIOUSLY THROUGH PEOPLE. WHICH IS NOT ONLY A LAZY APPROACH TO INDULGENCE, BUT SUPPORTED THROUGH A LAZY APPROACH TO STORYTELLING AND CONFLICT. THE DRAMAS ARE NON-DRAMAS AND THEY READILY RESOLVE PLOTS WITH PURPOSELESS DEUS EX MACHINA INSTEAD OF ACTIVE DECISIONS. IT IS A SHOW THAT ACTIVELY REWARDS AND ENFORCES INDULGENCE AND EGO-MASSAGING AT EVERY STEP.

AS AN AUDIENCE, WE EMPATHETICALLY PLACE OURSELVES INTO **ENTOURAGE**, LIE BACK, AND LET IT FEEL GOOD... HENCE: *LIFESTYLE PORN*.

LOOK. HULK IS NOT IMPLYING THAT ALL MOVIES HAVE TO HAVE SOME HALLMARK MESSAGE TIED INTO THEM BECAUSE THAT WOULD BE SUPER LAME. HULK JUST BELIEVES THAT GOOD ENTERTAINMENT TAKES INDULGENCE AND APPROPRIATES IT INTO SOME LARGER PURPOSE. IN FACT, SOME REALLY GOOD FILMS JUST GO BALLS OUT AND MAKE THE MOST *OBVIOUSLY* INDULGENT DECISIONS. NOT TO GET TOO SPECIFIC TOO SOON, BUT SOME MOVIES EMBRACE WHOLLY UNREAL NARRATIVES (THINK OF SOMETHING LIKE **CRANK**), BUT THE WAY THESE HYPER-STORIES WORK IS THAT THE ABSURDITY AND UN-REALITY OF THE PRESENTATION ACTUALLY *CREATES A SENSE OF DISTANCE*. IT'S LOOKING TO THE AUDIENCE AND SAYING "THIS IS RIDICULOUS, ISN'T IT?"

AND WITH THAT DISTANCE, THE AUDIENCE CAN IMPLICITLY UNDERSTAND THAT THE AUTHORS ARE CRITICIZING OR LAUGHING AT IT. IT ENABLES CINEMATIC SATIRE AND IRONY. YOU HAVE TO THINK OF THE PRESENTATION LIKE TAKING ON THE VIEW OF THE OMNISCIENT OBSERVER. EVEN IF SALINGER TECHNICALLY WROTE IN HOLDEN CAULFIELD'S VOICE, WE UNDERSTAND WHAT SALINGER THINKS ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT HOLDEN IS SAYING AND DOING. IT'S JUST A LENS. AND HULK'S PROBLEM IS THAT THE LENS OF SOMETHING LIKE **ENTOURAGE** IS NOT TRYING TO PROVIDE ANY DISTANCE. IN FACT, IT AIDS IN THE INDULGENCE. IT ADVOCATES THE MENTAL MASTURBATION.

THIS IS ALL GETTING A BIT COMPLICATED, HULK UNDERSTANDS, BUT IT'S IMPORTANT FOR HULK TO BE HONEST ABOUT ALL THE WAYS THAT EMPATHY CAN MANIFEST ONSCREEN. BECAUSE ULTIMATELY, AWARENESS OF WHAT EMPATHY ACTUALLY IS AND HOW IT WORKS WILL BE THE KEY TO MAKING ALL OF YOUR CREATIVE DECISIONS. IT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCK OF STORYTELLING, AND WILL INFORM EVERYTHING ABOUT HOW YOU WANT TO TELL YOUR STORY. YOU JUST HAVE TO BEWARE HOW IT CAN BE INDULGENT.

SO ASK YOURSELF A MORE SPECIFIC QUESTION: "IS THIS SCENE ACCOMPLISHING AN ARTISTIC

PURPOSE? OR A PORNOGRAPHIC PURPOSE?" AND JUST BE SURE THE ANSWER IS WHEREVER YOU WANT IT TO BE ON THE SPECTRUM OF MEDIA EXPERIENCE.

9. VALUE THE CONSISTENCY OF CHARACTER MOTIVE

THE ONE THING HULK HOPES TO IMPRESS ON YOU OVER THE COURSE OF THIS BOOK IS THAT, CONTRARY TO A GREAT DEAL OF SCREENWRITING BOOKS THAT GIVE YOU SET FORMULAS, YOU ACTUALLY HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF FLEXIBILITY DEPENDING ON THE KIND OF FILM YOU ARE MAKING. BUT THAT LEAVES A RATHER OBVIOUS QUESTION:

WITH THE LITANY OF STORY OPTIONS AVAILABLE, WHAT MAKES A STORY CHOICE A GOOD ONE OR A BAD ONE FOR YOUR PARTICULAR NARRATIVE?

HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT THE BEST WAY TO DECIDE IF THOSE STORY CHOICES ARE WORTH IT IS TO FIRST START WITH ANOTHER OBVIOUS QUESTION: "WOULD THE CHARACTER ACTUALLY DO THAT?"

THIS QUESTION MATTERS SO DAMN MUCH BECAUSE WHEN A CHARACTER ONSCREEN DOES SOMETHING THEY TOTALLY WOULDN'T DO, IT BECOMES THE ACTION THAT MOST ALIENATES THE AUDIENCE. THEY MAKE A SUBCONSCIOUS DECISION TO SAY "I'm no longer with you buddy! I'm just *watching* you do the wrong thing!" NOTICE HULK DIDN'T SAY "WHAT THE AUDIENCE WOULD DO" BECAUSE HULK IS NOT TALKING ABOUT LITERAL RIGHT OR WRONG HERE OR PERSONAL DISPOSITION. HULK IS TALKING ABOUT WHAT *THE CHARACTER* WOULD AND WOULDN'T DO. CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, THAT'S THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS.

THINK ABOUT IT LIKE THIS: WE WOULD "FOLLOW" TONY SOPRANO AS HE KILLED ONE OF HIS RIVAL MOBSTERS IN A GRUESOME FASHION. IT MAY NOT BE SOMETHING WE WOULD DO OURSELVES, BUT WE UNDERSTAND THIS IS SOMETHING THAT FITS WITHIN TONY'S PSYCHOLOGY AND WE ACCEPT IT. BUT THEN WE WOULD DEFINITELY NOT BE HAPPY WITH TONY IF HE KILLED SOME RANDOM TEENAGER IN A GRUESOME FASHION. WHILE BOTH KILLINGS ARE MORALLY WRONG TO US, THE AUDIENCE, ONLY ONE OF THEM IS INCONSISTENT IN TERMS OF WHAT THE CHARACTER WOULD DO. AND THAT WOULD MAKE US ANGRY WITH THE STORYTELLING, SPECIFICALLY THE INCONSISTENCY OF CHARACTER MOTIVE.

NOW, IT'S A GOOD THING HULK BROUGHT UP TONY SOPRANO BECAUSE IT ALSO HIGHLIGHTS HOW THESE DECISIONS ARE NOT SO CUT AND DRIED. THE SHOW'S CREATOR, DAVID CHASE, WAS A MASTER OF PLAYING WITH THIS MORAL LINE AND HAD ALL THESE AMAZING WAYS OF BRINGING TONY TO THE EDGE OF THAT ACCEPTANCE OF WHAT HE WOULD DO. BUT THE REASON IT WORKED WAS BECAUSE HE WAS ALWAYS WILLING TO DEAL WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF DOING SO. HE ALWAYS LOOKED FOR MEANING TO ERUPT FROM TONY'S CHOICES. HE ALWAYS BROUGHT THAT QUESTION OF THE CHARACTER'S MORALITY BEING SKEWED TO THE FOREFRONT. HULK ACTUALLY FEELS THAT CHASE WAS ONE OF THE MOST THEMATICALLY RESPONSIBLE STORYTELLERS TO GRACE OUR TELEVISIONS. THAT RESPONSIBILITY NEVER HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH SIMPLE MORALIZING, BUT THE FACT THAT EVERYTHING ABOUT HIS CHARACTERS HAD WEIGHT AND MEANING. IT WAS JUST INCREDIBLE. BUT THE LESSON FOR YOU SHOULD BE THE SAME (HULK IS GOING TO UNDERLINE FOR EFFECT):

IF YOU'RE HAVING A CHARACTER COMMIT AN INCONSISTENCY, YOU SHOULD BE BRINGING THAT INCONSISTENCY TO THE FOREFRONT OF THE CONFLICT. IT HAS TO ADD FUEL TO YOUR DRAMA AND MAKE YOUR CHARACTER MOTIVES CLEAR. THE INCONSISTENCY CAN'T BE A MINOR OCCURRENCE; IT HAS TO BE THE POINT! AND AS THE POINT IT HAS TO BE BUILT TO AND DEALT WITH EXTENSIVELY.

WHAT'S KIND OF FUNNY (AND RATHER TELLING) IS HOW THIS QUESTION OF "CHARACTER INCONSISTENCY" EVEN APPLIES TO HOW WE REGARD OUR REAL-LIFE FIGURES AS WELL. FOR EXAMPLE, TIGER WOODS WAS SOMEONE WHO WAS POPULARLY THOUGHT OF AS THE PARAGON OF HARD WORK, SUCCESS, AND GENERIC NICE-GUY-NESS. THEN HE WAS CAUGHT CHEATING WITH

MULTITUDES OF WOMEN AND THE PUBLIC WAS COLLECTIVELY APPALLED. WE SAW HIM AS A SHAM AND IT MADE US FURIOUS. BUT AS A COUNTERPOINT, WHEN CHARLES BARKLEY WAS CAUGHT DOING THE SAME EXACT THING (AND SUPER-DRUNK DRIVING TO BOOT!) WE JUST SHOOK IT OFF AND SAID "THAT'S JUST CHARLES BEING CHARLES!" THE TAKEAWAY CAN'T BE CLEARER: WE *BASICALLY ACCEPT PEOPLE AS LONG AS THEY ARE WHO WE THINK THEY ARE.* CHARACTER CONSISTENCY MATTERS SO MUCH TO OUR CULTURE AND THUS IT HAS TO MATTER TO OUR STORYTELLING TOO. THE NARRATIVE WE GIVE LIFE IS NOT FAR AWAY FROM THE NARRATIVE WE GIVE STORIES.

SO WHEN A CHARACTER DOES SOMETHING IN YOUR STORY, IT HAS TO MAKE SENSE. AND WHEN THEY ARE SUDDENLY PUSHING THEIR BOUNDARIES (BECAUSE ALL MAIN CHARACTERS SHOULD PUSH THEIR BOUNDARIES) IT HAS TO FEEL LIKE THAT GROWTH IS EARNED. WE WANT THESE CHARACTERS TO EXPAND, CHANGE, AND HAVE ARCS, BUT THE STORY NEEDS TO GIVE THEM WHOLLY VALID REASONS TO DO SO. IT COULD BE THE KIND OF PLOT-BASED REASONS THAT WOULD AWAKE SOMETHING ALREADY IN THE CHARACTER'S SOUL. AND IF YOU DON'T GIVE THE CHARACTERS GOOD REASONS TO CHANGE, THEN YOU ARE ESSENTIALLY MAKING YOUR CHARACTERS APPEAR INSINCERE. YOU ARE LYING. AND THE AUDIENCE WILL THINK OF THEM JUST LIKE THEY THINK OF TIGER WOODS. THE MANIPULATION WILL SHOW. WE WILL LOOK AT THE STORYTELLER LIKE THEY JUST WANTED THE CHARACTER TO FIT SOME POINT OF THE STORY THEY WANTED TO TELL... AND THE AUDIENCE CAN SMELL THAT MANIPULATION FROM A MILE AWAY.

HULK KNOWS THAT HULK IS MAKING THIS SINCERE CHARACTER THING SOUND LIKE IT'S AN EASY THING TO DO, BUT IT'S OBVIOUSLY PRETTY TRICKY. PARTICULARLY FOR A WRITER TO SEE IN HIS OR HER OWN WORK. NOT JUST BECAUSE IT IS DIFFICULT TO BALANCE ALL THE CONFLICTING ELEMENTS, BUT BECAUSE, AS THE CREATOR, IT IS OFTEN HARD TO SEPARATE ONESELF FROM THE POWER AND CONTROL OVER WHAT YOU ARE WRITING. YOU INSTINCTIVELY THINK "OF COURSE THE CHARACTER WOULD DO THAT! THAT'S WHAT I'M MAKING THEM DO AND I WANT TO DO IT! I HAVE IT ALL IN MY HEAD!" BUT TO THE AUDIENCE, WHO ONLY GETS TO LEARN ABOUT THE CHARACTER THROUGH THE VERY DIFFERENT LENS OF EXPERIENCING THE FILM, IT DOESN'T WORK LIKE THAT. THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT IS INSIDE YOUR HEAD. THEY ONLY SEE WHAT COMES OUT FROM THE STORY. AS SUCH, THEY ARE ACTUALLY *MUCH BETTER* AT READING WHO THE CHARACTERS ARE AND THEIR CAPACITIES FOR GOOD AND BAD, BECAUSE THEY ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE THE OBJECTIVE INFORMATION.

HULK KNOWS A FEW OF YOU MIGHT FIND THAT IDEA TO BE SILLY, BUT THINK ABOUT IT THROUGH THE ANALOGY OF LANGUAGE. YOU CAN TEACH YOURSELF FRENCH AND THINK YOU HAVE A MASTERY, BUT YOU WON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN ACTUALLY COMMUNICATE UNTIL A BUNCH OF NATIVE FRENCH SPEAKERS CAN UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE SAYING. CINEMA IS AN EFFORT TO COMMUNICATE. AND JUST BECAUSE THE PERFECT IDEA OF THE MOVIE AND ITS INTENTIONS EXIST IN YOUR HEAD DOES NOT MEAN THAT IS WHAT COMES THROUGH ON THE PAGE OR SCREEN.

AS SUCH, WHEN WRITING IT'S IMPORTANT TO GROUND YOURSELF IN THE CAPACITIES OF WHAT THE AUDIENCE WILL PERCEIVE. REMIND YOURSELF OF THEM CONSTANTLY. REMOVE YOURSELF. ASK HOW IS THE AUDIENCE SEEING THIS MOMENT? WHAT DO THEY KNOW BY THIS POINT? ASK WHAT WOULD *THE CHARACTERS* REALLY DO? WHAT ARE *THEIR* MOTIVATIONS? WHAT DO *THEY* WANT? WHAT DO *THEY* NEED? ARE THEY SMART ENOUGH TO DO THAT? ARE THEY KIND ENOUGH TO DO THAT? ARE THEY MEAN ENOUGH TO DO THAT? YOU MAY LIKE THE EFFECT OF A DECISION, BUT IT HAS TO BE SINCERE.

IN THE END, HULK UNDERSTANDS THAT WE ALL WANT TO EXPLORE STORYTELLING IN AS ADVENTUROUS A WAY AS POSSIBLE. WE WANT TO SURPRISE THE AUDIENCE AND BE UNCONVENTIONAL. BUT WHEN YOU DO THAT YOU HAVE TO DO IT RESPONSIBLY. YOU STILL HAVE TO DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR YOUR CHARACTER. YOU HAVE TO ACCOUNT FOR CHANGES WITH REAL, TANGIBLE REASONS TO DO THEM. GO WHERE THE CHARACTERS HAVE TO GO, NOT WHERE THE OBLIQUELY RELATED GRAND STORY WANTS THEM TO GO.

BUT TO DO THAT... HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT YOUR CHARACTERS WILL DO? BETTER YET, HOW DO YOU EVEN DECIDE WHO YOUR CHARACTERS REALLY ARE?

10. CHARACTER TREES!

Sweet! Actual methods of implementation! It only took Hulk 10,000 words to get there! Hurray!

CHARACTER TREES ARE BASICALLY A HANDY WAY TO ORGANIZE THE DETAILS OF YOUR CHARACTERS AND GIVE YOU THE RIGHT IDEAS ON HOW TO MAKE THEM DYNAMIC. THEY REALLY CAN BE AN INVALUABLE TOOL FOR HELPING YOU CREATE FULLY-REALIZED CHARACTERS, ESPECIALLY IN TELEVISION AND NOVELS WHERE THE DEPTHS AND HISTORIES OF YOUR CHARACTERS CAN BE EXPLORED IN A COHERENT WAY. BUT EVEN FOR TRUNCATED SCREENPLAYS, THE VALUE OF PRE-THOUGHT OUT CHARACTER DETAILS CAN DO SO MUCH FOR YOU.

HULK WAS ONCE INTRODUCED TO A SMART WAY OF KEEPING TRACK OF CHARACTER TREES BY USING HUMAN BODY PARTS. YOU START AT THE BOTTOM OF THE FEET AND GO ALL THE WAY UP TO THE MIND, THUS BUILDING "A COMPLETE PERSON."

TO WIT:

A) FEET – WHAT DOES THE PERSON LOOK LIKE? WHAT ARE THE FACTS OF THEIR FAMILY HISTORY? WHERE HAVE THEY LIVED? WHERE DID THEY GO TO SCHOOL? WERE THEY POOR? DO THEY HAVE TATTOOS? WHO IS THEIR BEST FRIEND? WHAT IS THEIR OCCUPATION? THERE ARE A MILLION PERTINENT QUESTIONS. *THE FEET ARE ESSENTIALLY ALL WHOLLY PALPABLE DETAILS TO DRAW ON, LIKE PHYSICAL DETAILS AND FACTS.*

B) GROIN – WHAT DOES THE PERSON WANT? HOW DOES THEIR SEXUALITY MANIFEST ITSELF? WHAT ABOUT THEM IS BASE AND PUERILE? GREED? APPROVAL? ESTEEM? GLUTTONY? YOU CAN BASICALLY RUN TOWARD THEIR APPROACH TO THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS HERE. *THE GROIN COVERS ALL THE THINGS ABOUT THE CHARACTER THAT ARE BORN OUT OF IMPULSE AND DESIRE.*

C) HEART - WHAT DOES THE PERSON NEED? WHAT WILL MAKE THEM A MORE FUNCTIONAL PERSON? DO THEY NEED TO FIND SELF-CONFIDENCE? DO THEY NEED TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR FAMILY? DO THEY NEED TO FIND THEIR HUMILITY? *THE HEART IS ESSENTIALLY ALL THE THINGS THEY SECRETLY NEED IN THEIR LIFE TO MAKE THEM A BETTER PERSON.*

NOTE: NOTICE THAT THE HEART IS EXTREMELY DIFFERENT FROM THE GROIN AND WHAT THE CHARACTER WANTS, WHICH ARE OFTEN MISGUIDED. AND SO WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR DRAMATIC STRUCTURE, NOTICE HOW OFTEN THE GROIN WITH ITS WANTS AND IMPULSES LEADS TO CONFLICT WHEREAS THE HEART LEADS TO RESOLUTION. SO WHEN DEVELOPING THE HEART OF YOUR CHARACTER YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE LIKELY DEVELOPING IT AROUND YOUR ENDING CATHARSIS (OR TRAGEDY OR LACK OF CATHARSIS, DEPENDING ON THE STORY YOU'RE TELLING). SIMPLY PUT: SINCE CHARACTER MOTIVATION IS SO IMPORTANT, YOUR HEART AND GROIN WILL REALLY HELP WITH YOUR PLOTTING AND CHARACTER OBJECTIVES!

D) THROAT – HOW DOES THE PERSON SOUND? NOT JUST THE LITERAL VOICE, BUT HOW DOES THE PERSON PROJECT THEMSELVES? HOW DO THEY TRY TO COME OFF TO OTHER PEOPLE? HOW DO THEY ACTUALLY COME OFF TO OTHER PEOPLE? WHAT IS THEIR "SURFACE VIBE" AS THEY SAY? *THE THROAT IS BASICALLY THEIR POSTURE, ATTEMPT AT PRESENTATION, AND AFFECTATION.*

E) LEFT CHEEK – WHAT IS THEIR INTELLIGENCE? HOW DOES IT MANIFEST ITSELF? WHAT IS THEIR PRACTICALITY? HOW DO THEY SOLVE PROBLEMS? BASICALLY, *THE LEFT CHEEK IS THEIR METHODOLOGY, EXPOSING THE "LEFT-BRAINED" ABILITIES.*

F) RIGHT CHEEK - WHAT IS THEIR IDEALISTIC / ARTISTIC CAPACITY? WHAT IS THEIR CONSCIENCE AND MORALITY? WHAT IS THEIR UN-PRACTICALITY? WHAT IS THEIR SPIRITUALITY? *THE RIGHT CHEEK IS THEIR ETHICS AND SOUL AND EXPOSES THEIR "RIGHT-BRAINED" ABILITIES.*

G) CROWN – NOW, THIS ONE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE WE LOOK AT ALL

THE BODY PARTS LISTED AND PIECE THEM TOGETHER TO SEE HOW THEY WORK AS AN *ACTUAL PSYCHOLOGY*. AND THAT'S WHEN YOU KNOW YOU'RE CREATING A COMPLEX PERSON WITH A CONSCIOUS MIND AND A SUBCONSCIOUS ID. IT'S ALSO WHERE YOU CAN START TO PIECE TOGETHER WHAT REALLY MATTERS ABOUT THIS CHARACTER TO YOUR STORY. WHAT ARE THEIR DEFINING MEMORIES? WHAT IS THEIR PATHOLOGY? THE CROWN ESSENTIALLY ALLOWS YOU TO ANSWER THE QUESTION:

WHO IS THIS CHARACTER?

TA-DA! THAT'S IT! THAT'S HOW YOU DO A CHARACTER TREE. IT'S SO SIMPLE AND TO THE POINT. YOU START FACTUAL, THEN GET EMOTIONAL, THEN IDEOLOGICAL, AND THEN AMALGAMATE THOSE DETAILS INTO AN ACTUAL CHARACTER PSYCHOLOGY. IT IS A GREAT WAY TO BUILD FULLY TEXTURED PEOPLE WITH WHOLE LIVES UNTO THEMSELVES. BETTER YET, CHARACTER TREES WORK SO WELL IN MAKING ALL YOUR CHARACTERS *TRULY DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER*.

ONE GREAT POSSIBLE HOMEWORK EXERCISE FOR THE MORE STUDIOUS AMONG YOU IS TO TAKE A RICHLIY TEXTURED CHARACTER IN EXISTING MEDIA AND TRY RETROACTIVELY FILLING OUT THE CHARACTER TREE FOR THEM. FOR EXAMPLE, HULK WILL BRING YOU BACK TO TONY SOPRANO BECAUSE IT'S SUCH A GREAT EXAMPLE OF HOW A POPULAR CHARACTER'S PSYCHOLOGY WAS BROUGHT TO THE FOREFRONT OF THE SHOW'S STORYTELLING. IT EXAMINED ALL THE WAYS HIS WANTS, NEEDS, POSTURE, METHODOLOGY, SOUL, AND HISTORY WERE SHOWN THROUGH BOTH HIS CONSCIOUS AND SUBCONSCIOUS EXISTENCE. TRY TO WORK IT OUT ON YOUR OWN!

ALL THAT BEING SAID, HULK IS GOING TO GIVE AN HONEST WARNING: *BEWARE THE DANGERS OF CHARACTER TREES TOO!* AND THAT IS BECAUSE CREATING SUCH AN ABUNDANCE OF INFORMATION BEFORE YOU'VE ACTUALLY FIGURED OUT YOUR STORY CAN ALSO LEAD TO A LOT OF EXTRANEIOUS BULLSHIT. FOR INSTANCE, THE WRITER CAN FEEL LIKE THEY ARE "LOCKED IN" TO THOSE DETAILS AFTER CREATING THE FULLY-TEXTURED TREES. KNOW THAT YOU CAN ALWAYS CHANGE IT TO ENHANCE THE PSYCHOLOGY OR FIND SOMETHING MORE APPROPRIATE TO YOUR STORY!

A MORE COMMON PROBLEM, HOWEVER, IS THAT A WRITER WILL FEEL LIKE THEY NEED TO CRAM IN ALL THE DETAILS OF THE TREE IN ORDER TO MAKE THE CHARACTER SEEM FULLY-REALIZED. THIS IS ALSO NOT THE CASE! FOR ONE, IT IS MORE THERE FOR YOU AS A COMFORT AND SUPPORT FEATURE. WHEREAS OTHER FORCES (THAT HULK WILL SOON GET INTO) SHOULD BE DRIVING YOUR STORY! FOR TWO, IT MAKES THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE DETAILS THEMSELVES DO THE HEAVY LIFTING OF CHARACTERIZATION. THAT IS ALSO NOT TRUE! INSTEAD CHARACTERIZATION IS MORE ABOUT THE TEXTURE OF HOW CHARACTERS BEHAVE IN DRAMATIC CONTEXT. SO DON'T GO OVERBOARD WITH YOUR TREES!

YOU WILL NOTICE A RUNNING THEME IN THIS BOOK IS THAT OF ACHIEVING BALANCE WITH ALL THESE DEVICES AND HELPFUL GUIDES. EVERY BENEFIT OF A METHOD WILL HAVE A DOWNSIDE. AND GETTING LOCKED INTO ANY ONE FORM OF CHARACTER METHODOLOGY WILL MAKE YOU LOSE THE ORGANIC QUALITIES A SCRIPT NEEDS TO FEEL NATURAL. BUT COMPLETELY IGNORING CHARACTER BACKGROUNDS WILL MAKE YOUR STORY SEEM PAPER THIN. LIKE ALL THINGS, IT IS ABOUT BALANCE.

SO EVEN IF THE SANCTITY OF CHARACTER TREES ARE NOT THE BE-ALL-END-ALL OF YOUR WRITING PROCESS, THEY REALLY ARE A GREAT TECHNIQUE FOR DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTERS AND THE WORLDS THEY INHABIT. AND THEY MAKE A GREAT CONTINUAL RESOURCE TO FALL BACK ON DURING YOUR WRITING PROCESS!

11. DON'T BASE YOUR CHARACTERS ON ONE PERSON; COMBINE THEM!

POINTS 11 THROUGH 15 CONCERN THE EFFECT OF REAL-LIFE INSPIRATION ON OUR WRITING PROCESS. BECAUSE LET'S FACE IT, OUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES ARE A HUGE INFLUENCE ON OUR THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES. THERE'S NO REAL WAY **NOT** TO INCORPORATE THEM INTO OUR WRITING IN SOME FORM OR OTHER, BUT YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL WITH IT. BEING EXTREMELY

SINGULAR WITH YOUR INFLUENCES CAN BE DEEPLY PROBLEMATIC FOR... WELL... A VARIETY OF REASONS.

LIKE DID YOU KNOW THAT IT'S SURPRISINGLY EASY TO TELL WHEN A YOUNG WRITER IS BASING A CHARACTER ON SOMEONE THEY KNOW? HULK SEES THIS ALL THE TIME IN SCRIPTS AND THE REASON IT SUCKS IS THAT THE WRITER MAKES THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE CHARACTER'S "REALITY" WILL DO ALL THE HEAVY LIFTING AND PROVIDE THE NEEDED TEXTURE.

KNOW THIS: JUST BECAUSE A CHARACTER IS REAL DOESN'T MAKE THEM *FEEL* REAL.

AN AUDIENCE CANNOT IMPLICITLY SENSE WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS REAL PERSON. THEY CAN ONLY SENSE THE INFORMATION AND CHARACTERIZATION THAT IS GIVEN, AND UNLESS THAT INFORMATION ACTUALLY CONVEYS SOMETHING WITH MEANING, IT IS HENCE MEANINGLESS. AND IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN IN OR TAUGHT CREATIVE WRITING STUDENTS, YOU WILL ABSOLUTELY ENCOUNTER THE SAME PROBLEM EVERY SINGLE SEMESTER:

HULK: "LISTEN JIMMY, HULK'S NOT SURE THE CHARACTER CHOICE THERE REALLY WORKS FOR WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO SET UP LATER-"

JIMMY: "But this is a real person!"

HULK: "OKAY, BUT-"

JIMMY: "But this really happened!"

IT'S A VERY EASY THING TO DO AS A YOUNG WRITER. IN FACT, HULK DID IT BACK IN THE DAY TOO. IF ANYTHING IT'S SOMETHING WE ALL NEED TO GET OVER. BECAUSE THE SOONER YOU CAN COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT THE PERSON'S REALITY DOESN'T MATTER FOR YOUR NARRATIVE, THE BETTER OFF YOU WILL BE. AND WHAT ACTUALLY MATTERS IS WHETHER OR NOT THE ACTION MAKES SENSE FOR THE CHARACTER AS PRESENTED.

SO WHAT TO DO WHEN REAL-LIFE PEOPLE ARE INSPIRING YOU ANYWAY? WHAT TO DO IF YOU RECOGNIZE A TRUTH IN THIS REAL-LIFE PERSON THAT YOU WANT TO EXPLORE IT? HOW DO YOU APPROXIMATE THE INFLUENCE OF REAL PEOPLE INTO YOUR SCRIPT IN A MORE ORGANIC FASHION? HOW DO YOU MAKE THEM INTO SOMETHING FAR MORE ORGANIC AND UNIQUE?

HULK HAS A SUREFIRE TRICK TO MAKING YOUR CHARACTERS MORE INTERESTING: *COMBINE THEM*.

YOU HAVE THAT ONE FRIEND WHO IS REALLY INTERESTING? AND THAT OTHER FRIEND WHO IS REALLY INTERESTING, TOO? IF YOU TRY TO WRITE THEM INDIVIDUALLY THEY ALWAYS HAVE A TENDENCY TO COME OFF AS FLAT AND WOODEN. BUT IF YOU COMBINE THE TWO OF THEM? AND YOU CREATE A SHARED WEALTH OF HISTORY AND WANTS AND NEEDS AND BACKGROUNDS TO DRAW ON? WELL, SUDDENLY THE CHARACTER HAS A BRAND NEW PSYCHOLOGY! SERIOUSLY, YOU'D BE SHOCKED HOW QUICKLY THE CHARACTER IS BRIMMING WITH DEPTH AND POSSIBILITIES.

A LONG, LONG TIME AGO HULK STUMBLED INTO THIS DYNAMIC (WHICH HULK ASSURES YOU IS NOT NEW). HULK WAS ONCE WORKING ON A SCRIPT IN FILM SCHOOL IN WHICH TWO OF THE SIDE-CHARACTERS WERE KIND OF BASED ON REAL LIFE FOLKS WHO WERE COMING OFF FLAT AND ONE-DIMENSIONAL. THE FIRST WAS A GREGARIOUS, FUNNY KID WHO LOVED PARTYING AND WAS WASTING AWAY HIS PARENTS' COLLEGE MONEY. THE OTHER WAS AN INDIAN STUDENT WITH AN INTERESTING FAMILY STORY WHO WAS TRYING TO APPROXIMATE SOME KIND OF FUN EXPERIENCE IN COLLEGE. (NOTE: THIS MOVIE WAS NOT **VAN WILDER**.) AND THEN IT JUST DAWNED ON HULK: COMBINE THEM!

WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT? BUT SUDDENLY THE CHARACTER WAS LEAPING OFF THE PAGE. HIS "INDIAN-NESS" NO LONGER DEFINED HIM, AND VICE-VERSA - THE PARTY-GUY SUDDENLY FELT SO MUCH MORE INTERESTING AND ATYPICAL OF THE ALPHA-MALE FIGURE OF AMERICANA. IT REMOVED THE STEREOTYPE OF *BOTH* CHARACTERS. AND THE GREGARIOUS PARTY-GOING

BEHAVIOR BECAME AN INTERESTING WAY FOR THE INDIAN CHARACTER TO MANIFEST HIS ASSIMILATION INTO AMERICAN SOCIAL CULTURE. IT BECAME A FASCINATING OVER-COMPENSATION. IT ALSO MADE THE PROBLEMS WITH HIS TRADITIONAL INDIAN PARENTS FEEL MUCH MORE TEXTURED INSTEAD OF OBLIGATORY. COMBINING THEM COMPLETELY REVOLUTIONIZED THIS CHARACTER'S STORY.

SO HULK STARTED TO DO THIS WITH PRETTY MUCH EVERY SINGLE REAL LIFE INSPIRATION, AND IT WORKED LIKE GANGBUSTERS. YOU FORCE THEM TO BE FILTERED THROUGH A PRISM OF OTHER CHARACTERISTICS AND SUDDENLY IT REMOVES THEIR SINGULARITY. SUDDENLY YOU'RE NOT SEARCHING FOR "WHAT'S THERE," BUT INSTEAD "WHAT MAKES SENSE." AND OF COURSE, THIS DEVICE IS NOT SOME ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL THING YOU CAN DO WITH ANY TWO CHARACTERS, BUT IT BECOMES SO MUCH FUN TRYING TO FIND THE NEAT COMBINATIONS OF PEOPLE THAT ACTUALLY FIT TOGETHER. BETTER YET, IT CREATES NEW MEANING TO ALL THOSE DETAILS. AND HECK, COMBINE THREE CHARACTERS IF IT MAKES SENSE!

PART OF THE REASON THIS SEEMS SO COUNTERINTUITIVE IS THAT WE LIKE TO THINK THAT WE SEE THE PEOPLE IN OUR LIVES AS COMPLEX, AND THEY VERY MUCH ARE, BUT BELIEVE IT OR NOT WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO STILL REDUCE THEM IN OUR MINDS TO THEIR OWN KIND OF STEREOTYPES OF INDIVIDUALITY. WE LOOK AT THEM AND RARELY THINK OF THEIR TOTALITY, BUT JUST GO "OH THAT'S JUST SO AND SO!" AND SO OFTEN WE CAN'T HELP BUT DEFINE THEM IN TERMS OF *HOW THEY AFFECT US*. SO WHAT HULK LOVES ABOUT THIS METHOD IS THAT IT *FORCES* YOU TO REMOVE THE SINGULAR WAY IN WHICH YOU THINK ABOUT THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU. IT GETS YOU TO MAKE CHOICES. IT MAKES YOU THINK ABOUT WHAT IS APPROPRIATE. AND IT ABSOLUTELY BREEDS THREE-DIMENSIONAL CHARACTERIZATION.

AND THE GREAT THING ABOUT THIS METHODOLOGY IS THAT IT IS NOT JUST TRUE OF CHARACTERS...

12. HOW TO FILTER YOUR REAL LIFE INTO STORYTELLING

STORY INSPIRATION DOESN'T JUST COME FROM THE CHARACTERS WE CREATE, IT COMES FROM OUR OWN LIVES, EXPERIENCES, AND STORIES WHETHER THEY BE HILARIOUS, HORRIFYING, OR MUNDANE. BUT AGAIN, THE SAME LESSON AS POINT 11 APPLIES:

JUST BECAUSE IT HAPPENED, DOESN'T MAKE IT *FEEL* REAL TO AN AUDIENCE.

THUS WE MUST TAKE THESE INSPIRATIONS AND EVENTS AND FILTER THEM INTO REAL STORYTELLING MODELS AND BEATS THAT MAKE SENSE FOR DRAMATIC PURPOSES (WE'LL EXPLORE THIS IN GREATER DETAIL LATER IN THE STRUCTURE SECTION). BUT THE SAME IDEA APPLIES: YOU CAN'T BE LAZY AND ASSUME THE READER KNOWS THE EVENT IN QUESTION IS TRUE JUST BECAUSE THE AUTHOR DOES.

IN FACT, MOVIES CAN OFTEN EXPERIENCE SOMETHING HULK CALLS "THE TRUE STORY COMPLEX."

YOU EVER NOTICE HOW REAL LIFE CAN HAVE THIS STRANGE WAY OF FEELING DISTINCTLY "UNREAL"? AFTER ALL, NONFICTION STORIES ARE USUALLY FILLED WITH THE GRANDEST ELEMENTS AND EXTREMES OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR. RARELY DO YOU SEE NORMALCIES CONTAINED WITHIN THEM, LIKE THE MUNDANE HEROISM OF GETTING UP AND GOING TO WORK EVERY DAY, OR DOING WHAT YOU NEED TO DO IN ORDER TO FEED YOUR FAMILY. NO, OUR NONFICTION IS OFTEN IMMENSE AND TOWERING BECAUSE WE ARE NATURALLY ATTRACTED TO OUR EXTREMES AND GRANDEST POSSIBILITIES. AND IF YOU'RE TRYING TO TELL A STORY WHERE YOU'RE INTERESTED IN OUR MOST AMAZING FEATS THEN BY ALL MEANS HAVE AT IT.

BUT A LOT OF YOU AREN'T. A LOT OF YOU ARE TRYING TO TELL HUMAN STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE FAULTS AND FAIL. AND AS AN UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE, A LOT OF "TRUE" ELEMENTS HAVE A FUNNY WAY OBSCURING THE THEMATIC POINTS YOU MAY WANT TO MAKE. AND THEY CAN OFTEN FAIL TO RESONATE WITH AUDIENCES. IT MAY SEEM COMPLETELY COUNTERINTUITIVE, BUT

DRAWING ON REAL LIFE REALLY DOESN'T MAKE YOUR WRITING RING TRUE. THINK ABOUT THIS MOST SIMPLE FACT: THE VERY REASON WE DESIGNATE THE ENTIRE GENRE AS NONFICTION IS BECAUSE WE ARE DOING SOMETHING SO "UNTRUE" THAT WE HAVE TO BACK IT UP WITH TRUE-STORY-ISM SO THE AUDIENCE *HAS* TO BELIEVE IT.

MEANWHILE, FICTION IS BUILT FOR WHAT *FEELS* TRUE.

BUT WHY DO WE DO IT, ANYWAY? WHY DO WE TRY TO COLOR OUR FICTION WITH THE OVERT SPECIFIC DETAILS OF OUR LIVES?

IT'S NOT A TERRIBLE INCLINATION IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT. WE HAVE TO DRAW ON EXPERIENCES TO HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT LIFE. WE NEED A HUMAN EXPERIENCE TO CREATE A HUMAN EXPERIENCE. IT SEEMS REASONABLE AND NECESSARY. BUT WHY DO WE RALLY AROUND THE SPECIFICITY SO MUCH? WHAT EXPERIENCES CAUSE US TO WRITE CERTAIN NON-FUNCTIONAL DETAILS IN OUR ART? A LOT OF TIMES, THE REASON WE DO IT IS SUBCONSCIOUS. AND THERE'S A SINCERE DANGER IN DOING SO.

TO ILLUSTRATE, HULK WILL NOW TURN TO ANOTHER OLD ADAGE ABOUT STORYTELLING. AND REALLY, HULK URGES YOU TO REMEMBER WHAT HULK IS ABOUT TO SAY, EVEN IF YOUR EYES ARE GLAZING OVER AND YOU HAVE SKIMMED THROUGH EVERY SINGLE OTHER THING IN THIS BOOK, JUST TAKE AWAY ONE SIMPLE GUIDELINE:

13. DO NOT JUST WRITE THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE WITH THE LINES YOU WISH YOU SAID!

NOT ONLY DOES IT REEK OF AMATEUR HOUR, IT REALLY JUST LEADS TO A LOT OF PURE MASTURBATORY WRITING. THINK ABOUT IT. ON THE MOST BASIC LEVEL, YOU ARE NOT SUPPLEMENTING A UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE FOR OTHERS. YOU ARE EXCLUDING THEM. AND YOU ARE LIKELY CREATING AN INSINCERE CATHARSIS FOR ONLY YOURSELF. AS PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON ONCE PUT IT "YOU'RE JUST WORKING OUT YOUR PSYCHOSIS AT EVERYONE ELSE'S \$8.50" (THAT SHOULD CLEARLY BE UPDATED TO 15 BUCKS). THE PROBLEM IS THAT IT'S SO NATURAL TO BELIEVE THAT A PERSONAL STORY IS INHERENTLY UNIVERSAL. HULK ASKED IN THE INSPIRATION SECTION "WHAT COMPELS YOU" AND SO OFTEN THE EXPERIENCES THAT HURT US ARE THE ONES THAT STICK WITH US. THEY CHANGE OUR DISPOSITION. AND QUITE OFTEN THEY TEACH US LESSONS AND HELP US GROW.

BUT WE HAVE TO BE SURE *WE ARE NOT THE ONES TRYING TO TEACH OUR STORIES A LESSON*. DO YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE? WHEN WE IMPART A DESIRE TO CORRECT THE TRAUMATIC THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO US, WE'RE NOT LETTING THE THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO US CHANGE US, WE'RE STILL TRYING TO CHANGE THEM... AND REALLY WE'RE JUST BEING PETTY. WE'RE EXACTING REVENGE ON OUR EXPERIENCES INSTEAD OF TRYING TO SHOW HOW THEY HELPED US GROW. IN FACT, IT DIRECTLY TIES INTO HULK'S PREVIOUS WARNINGS ABOUT INDULGENCE.

HULK COULD SINGLE OUT A HOST OF ROMANTIC COMEDIES AND INDEPENDENT MOVIES THAT ARE MOST GUILTY OF THIS BEHAVIOR, BUT IT'S MORE HELPFUL TO LOOK AT THE KINDS OF TROPES THAT ARE CREATED BY THIS "WISH" DYNAMIC: THE INFALLIBLE PROTAGONISTS, THE MAGIC GIRLFRIEND CHARACTERS WHO CAN DO NO WRONG, THE NOT-SO MAGIC GIRLFRIENDS WHO ARE JUST EVIL FOR NO REASON AND ARE THERE TO WRECK THE PROTAGONIST'S HEART, THE FACT THAT PROTAGONISTS ARE ALWAYS DUDES, THAT THEY HAVE THE KINDS OF FAULTS THAT AREN'T REALLY FAULTS ("SO AND SO NEVER HAD ANY TIME FOR LOVE!"), WRITERS TURNING THE ISSUES OF THE FILM AND STORY INTO THEIR OWN PERSONAL SOAPBOX, VIDEO GAME DESIGNERS AUTOMATICALLY PROGRAMMING THEIR LIKENESSES AS THE HEROES. HULK COULD GO ON AND ON. IT'S ALL A WEIRD FORM OF INSINCERE, SELF-AGGRANDIZING STORY PURPOSED THROUGH THE JUSTIFICATION OF "SINCERE EXPERIENCE."

ACTUALLY, ALL OF THIS IS HINTING AT A PRETTY DAMN GOOD RULE THAT WE CAN JUST USE AS EXTENSION:

14. DO NOT WRITE “YOURSELF” AS THE MAIN CHARACTER

WE ALWAYS WANT TO DO IT. IT’S HUMAN NATURE. BUT HULK SWEARS TO YOU IF YOU’RE A YOUNG WRITER IT WON’T BE A HELPFUL TOOL. IT JUST NATURALLY SKEWS TOWARD ALL THE INDULGENT, MASTURBATORY STUFF HULK ALLUDED TO ABOVE. YOU’LL ASSUME YOUR PROTAGONIST IS LIKEABLE, BECAUSE YOU THINK YOU ARE INHERENTLY LIKEABLE. YOU WILL SHADE EXPERIENCES THAT MAKE THEM SEEM BAD TO COME OUT BETTER. YOU WILL NATURALLY BE PREDISPOSED TO CHEAT EMPATHY AND EMBRACE POSTURE. YOU WILL BE ASSUMPTIVE. IT’S NOT THAT THE STORYTELLING CAN’T BE DONE WELL THIS WAY. IT’S JUST THAT IT’S A *TERRIBLE LEARNING TOOL*, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU NEED TO LEARN HOW TO WRITE OTHER PEOPLE FIRST.

HULK ARGUES THAT PICKING A MAIN CHARACTER THAT FEELS DISTANCE TO YOU IN TERMS OF EXPERIENCE OR ETHOS CAN ACTUALLY BE A GREAT LEARNING TOOL. IT WILL TEACH YOU HOW TO USE EMPATHY. IT WILL PLACE YOU IN THE MIND OF THE AUDIENCE WHO DOESN’T KNOW THIS PERSON, EITHER. THUS YOU WILL RELATE TO THEM THE WAY THE AUDIENCE DOES, AND YOU WON’T BE LIVING VICARIOUSLY THROUGH THEM IN YOUR MADE-UP UNIVERSE. YOU WILL BE ESCHEWING INDULGENCE. YOU WILL BE BEST SERVING THE PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING.

BUT LIKE EVERY “RULE” HULK PRESENTS IN THIS BOOK, IT’S NOT TO SAY YOU CAN’T MAKE THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE WORK, NOR IS WRITING A VERSION OF YOURSELF AS THE MAIN CHARACTER IMPOSSIBLE TO DO WELL... IT’S JUST THAT IT’S EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO DO SO. TRUST HULK ON THIS ONE. IT TAKES A SPECIAL KIND OF SELF-DISSONANCE AND THE DESIRE AND WILL TO EVISCERATE YOURSELF IN DRAMATIC FUNCTION. EVEN THE MOST LAUDED MASTURBATORY WORKS CALL DIRECT ATTENTION TO THE CALLOUSNESS OF WRITING A MASTURBATORY WORK. LIKE WITH THE BEST FILMS IN THE OEUVRE OF WOODY ALLEN, HE WEAVES THE PROBLEMS AND HANG-UPS OF HIS OWN MASTURBATORY WRITING *DIRECTLY INTO THE NARRATIVE*. HECK, AT TIMES HE OUTRIGHT EXPLAINS HOW INSIGNIFICANT IT IS AND HOW IT ONLY HELPS THE ARTIST (THIS IS THE ENTIRE THEME OF **DECONSTRUCTING HARRY**). THERE ALWAYS HAS TO BE A PURPOSE AND REASON FOR THE INCLUSION.

HULK KEEPS SAYING IT (BECAUSE IT’S TRUE), BUT ACHIEVING BALANCE IS ALWAYS THE RIGHT INSTINCT. IT’S ABOUT UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISM AND REASON WE DO SOMETHING. AND THIS TIME IT IS THE UNDERSTANDING THAT BOTH REALITY AND SELF-STORY DO NOT AUTOMATICALLY MAKE FOR GOOD FICTION. GO BACK AND WATCH KAUFMAN AND JONZE’S **ADAPTATION**, WHICH IS 100% ABOUT THIS ENTIRE CONCEPT. IT’S ALL ABOUT HOW ONE CANNOT SIMPLY RELY ON THE FACETS OF TRUTH AND MUST SEARCH FOR BEAUTY AND TRUTH AND THEMES, AND MUST ULTIMATELY EMBRACE STORYTELLING CONVENTIONS TO MAKE THOSE IDEAS RESONATE (EVEN IF ONE DOES SO SOMEWHAT CHEAPLY). AND THAT FILM EXPLAINS IT BETTER THAN HULK EVER COULD.

SO SURE, YOU CAN TELL THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE AND PRESENT YOURSELF AS THE MAIN CHARACTER, BUT HULK IMPLORES YOU TO CONSIDER THE REASONS YOU ARE DOING SO. AND TO FURTHER CONSIDER THE IMPORT OF WHAT YOU ARE GIVING AN AUDIENCE. BE SURE IT’S NOT JUST FOR YOU TO WORK OUT YOUR DRAMA. INSTEAD, GIVE US THE TOOLS TO HELP WORK OUT OUR OWN. GIVE US AN EXPERIENCE OF EMPATHY. BRIDGE GAPS. TELL A STORY.

BECAUSE GETTING TOO CLOSE TO REAL LIFE IS PRETTY COMPLICATED, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU START SELLING YOUR STORY AS “REAL”...

15. THE BIOPIC / REALITY COMPLICATION

IF WHAT HULK JUST SAID IS TRUE FOR YOUR FICTIONAL STORIES, THEN, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, IT GOES DOUBLE FOR BIOPICS AND “TRUE STORY” INSPIRED FILMS.

SO LET’S JUST BE UPFRONT: HULK HAS A GREAT DEAL OF RESERVATIONS WHEN IT COMES TO THE BIOPIC AS A FILM FORM, AS THEY TEND TO HAVE A REALLY HIGH DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY AND THAT

ALWAYS LEADS TO SEVERAL REOCCURRING PROBLEMS WITH THE FORM.

WHY IS THE FORM SO DIFFICULT? BECAUSE RECOUNTING A LIFE STORY TENDS TO HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH HOW NARRATIVES ACTUALLY WORK. SURE, EVERY HUMAN HAS EVENTS THAT CHANGE THEM AND NATURAL ACT BREAKS, AND SURE WRITERS DO THEIR BEST TO TRY AND MAKE IT A STORY, BUT IT DOESN'T EVER END UP FEELING LIKE ONE, DOES IT? OFTEN IT JUST FEELS LIKE *STUFF HAPPENING*. THE WRITERS WILL RECOUNT ALL THE "GREATEST HITS" IN A PERSON'S LIFE. AND OFTEN ATTEMPTS TO CRAM CLEAR NARRATIVE DEVICES OR SCENE PURPOSE OR RECURRING THEMES INTO THE STORY FEEL COMPLETELY DISINGENUOUS, SHOEHORNEDED, AND INCONSISTENT WITH THE OTHERWISE "REALISTIC" TONE OF THE FILM. IT'S ACTUALLY A HELLUVA PROBLEM.

SO AS A WRITER / FILMMAKER, YOU HAVE TWO REAL OPTIONS.

THE FIRST IS TO *HEAVILY* LAYER ON THE CONVENTIONS OF NARRATIVE OVER THE STORY, SO THAT THE TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING ELEMENTS DO NOT FEEL HALF-ASSED. SO THEY DO NOT FEEL INCONSISTENT WITH THE OVERALL TONE OF THE PIECE. YOU MAKE IT FEEL JUST AS TIGHT AS ANY FICTIONAL PIECE; YOU JUST HAVE TO BE SUPER CONFIDENT THAT THOSE NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS *ACTUALLY FIT* THE TRUTH OF THE PERSON TOO (OTHERWISE YOU MIGHT JUST BE MAKING PROPAGANDA).

THE BEST EXAMPLE OF HEAVY NARRATIVE LAYERING DONE RIGHT IS SPIKE LEE'S INCREDIBLE **MALCOLM X**. THE STORIES IN THE FILM ALL HAVE VERY SPECIFIC NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS. HE EXPRESSES MALCOLM'S LIFE THROUGH TRIED AND TRUE STORY TROPES. HE APPROACHES EACH OF MALCOLM'S LIFE EVENTS LIKE LITTLE MINI-MOVIES, ALL ADDING UP TO A MUCH LARGER STORY. HE MAKES THE FILM EPISODIC. AT FIRST THERE WAS MALCOLM'S HUSTLING DAYS. THEN HIS JAIL DAYS. THEN HIS PERIOD OF LEARNING (EDUCATION MONTAGE!). THEN HIS RISING UP INTO POWER DAYS. AND ULTIMATELY, HIS MEDITATIVE FINAL DAYS. THERE ARE WAY MORE SECTIONS THAN THESE, TOO, BUT EACH OF THEM FEELS LIKE ITS OWN SPECIFIC LITTLE MOVIE. THERE'S SO MUCH PROPULSION AND ECONOMY TO EACH MINI-STORY. LEE FULLY EMBRACED THE PRINCIPALS OF NARRATIVE AT EVERY TURN SO THAT THE SUPPOSEDLY RESTRICTING "FACTS" BECAME INCREDIBLY COMPELLING. HE DOESN'T CHANGE THE FACTS. HE *AMPLIFIES* THE FACTS CINEMATICALLY. AND IN DOING SO HE CREATES A BIOPIC THAT ISN'T JUST TRUE, IT *FEELS* TRUE.

THE SECOND OPTION IS TO PRETTY MUCH DISMISS THE CONCEPT OF NARRATIVE ALL TOGETHER AND COMMIT *SOLELY* TO THE CONCEPT OF ACCURACY. THIS MEANS YOU TELL THE STORY THROUGH THE EVOLUTION OF RELEVANT DETAILS. THIS WORKS LESS WELL WITH A PERSON'S LIFE, AND MUCH BETTER WITH A SPECIFIC EVENT OR TIME-FRAME. HULK CALLS THIS THE JOURNO-CINEMATIC ROUTE. YOU BE LIKE **ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN**. YOU BE LIKE **ZODIAC**. YOU BE LIKE **ZERO DARK THIRTY**. EVEN WITH MADE-UP STORIES THAT STILL WANT TO CAPTURE THE TEXTURE OF REALITY YOU CAN DO THIS. YOU BE LIKE **THE FRENCH CONNECTION**. YOU BE LIKE **CONTAGION**. IN ALL THESE FILMS YOU ESCHEW OR DOWNPLAY THE PRINCIPALS OF NARRATIVE AND CHARACTER ARCS TO TELL THE STORY OF "AN EVENT" THROUGH THE FIXATION OF DETAIL. THE ACTUAL HUMAN CHARACTERS COME IN AND OUT AND SHOULD BE ENTERTAINING AND FULLY-REALIZED, BUT THE FILM SHOULD BE FOCUSING ON NARRATIVE PROPULSION, USUALLY THROUGH THE CHARACTER'S FIXATION ON THE EVENT ITSELF!

THE FIRST TIME HULK REALIZED THAT LITTLE NUGGET SUDDENLY THE ENTIRE PLOT-BASED FILM CONCEPT MADE SO MUCH SENSE. THE CHARACTER'S DRIVE HELPS FUEL THE FILM'S DRIVE. IN ALL THESE REAL EVENT FILMS HULK LISTS ABOVE, WHETHER FICTION OR NONFICTION, THEY ARE FILLED WITH CHARACTERS THAT PUSH THROUGH DISCOVERING THE NARRATIVE ITSELF. TO UNLOCK NIXON'S WATERGATE. TO FIND THE ZODIAC KILLER. TO FIND OSAMA BIN LADEN. TO FIND CHARNIER. TO UNDERSTAND AND CURE THE DISEASE. THEIR UNBENDING FIXATION IS THERE TO SERVE THE PROPULSION OF THE NARRATIVE. SO WHERE IS THE ARC? WHERE IS THE CHARACTER CHANGE WE TRULY NEED IN MOVIES?

THE EVENT BECOMES THE CHARACTER.

IT ABSOLUTELY BLEW HULK'S MIND WHEN HULK FIRST HEARD THIS IDEA. IT SEEMS TO FLY IN THE

FACE OF ALL THE CHARACTER-CENTRIC STUFF HULK SAID EARLIER, BUT THIS DETAIL IS REVELATORY. EVEN THOUGH THESE KINDS OF FILMS ARE SOME OF HULK'S FAVORITES (AND MAYBE YOURS AS WELL), THERE ARE STILL A LOT OF PEOPLE IN THE TRADITIONAL AUDIENCE THAT CAN'T RELATE TO THEM. THERE'S OFTEN NO CENTRAL CHARACTER JOURNEY, OTHER THAN LITTLE SUBTLE STUFF. IT IS HARDER FOR THE AUDIENCE TO EMPATHIZE, BUT YOU JUST ALWAYS HAVE TO HOPE THEY STAY ENGAGED. ALWAYS HOPE THEY COULD SEE IT LIKE HULK DOES AND SEE THE EVENT AS THE CHARACTER, BUT HULK UNDERSTANDS WHY IT'S HARD. SURE, THEY MIGHT BE MISSING OUT, BUT THE FILMMAKER JUST HAS TO RECONCILE THE FACT THAT KIND OF PLOT-DRIVEN REALITY STORY IS NOT FOR EVERYONE.

NOW, YOU MAY SAY TO ALL THIS: *"B-but Hulk! That can't be right! Just two options?!? With nothing in the middle?!? There's gotta be a way to split the difference, Hulk, there's gotta be!!"*

FINE... THERE'S ONE OPTION. AND THAT IS YOU HAVE TO PERFECTLY CAPTURE THE SANCTITY OF REALISTIC DETAIL AND COMBINE IT WITH THE ETHOS OF CHARACTER-DRIVEN STORY IN COMPLETE AND TOTAL HARMONY.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT OPTION IS SO DIFFICULT TO DO THAT HULK HAS ONLY REALLY SEEN ONE NARRATIVE PERFECTLY CAPTURE IT IN THE ENTIRETY OF TV AND FILM (NOVELS ARE MUCH BETTER AT IT, BUT THEY HAVE THE SPACE AND CLARITY OF INTENTION).

THAT NARRATIVE IS **THE WIRE**.

PEOPLE OFTEN MISTAKE **THE WIRE** FOR ONLY HAVING THE JOURNO-CINEMATIC ROUTE AND THAT'S NOT ACCURATE. YES, THE SHOW WAS WRITTEN BY FORMER JOURNALISTS, WHO DREW ON THEIR REAL LIVES AND EXPERIENCES. AND THEY USED THOSE DETAILS IN SUCH A RESPONSIBLE WAY THAT IT JUST SEEMED LIKE THE JOURNALISTIC ELEMENT WAS DOMINANT. EVERYONE WAS LIKE *"The Wire is totally, like, real man."* ... BUT THAT'S ONLY HALF THE STORY.

BECAUSE THE SHOW ALSO STICKS SO BEAUTIFULLY TO THE ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE, PARTICULARLY GREEK DRAMA STRUCTURES. THEY WERE JUST SO DAMN GOOD AT GROUNDING THOSE NARRATIVES IN THE JOURNALISTIC INFLUENCES AND BLENDING ALL OF IT WITH A KIND OF MUTED UN-CINEMATIC TEXTURE. IT RESISTED ALL FORMS OF STYLIZATION (THERE'S A GREAT ANECDOTE WHERE DAVID SIMON TALKS ABOUT A CHOICE NOT TO HAVE THE CAMERA PAN DOWN TO SHOW AN IMPORTANT DETAIL BECAUSE "THE CAMERA WOULDN'T KNOW TO DO THAT." POINT BEING IT WAS AN UNSTYLIZED, NEUTRAL UNIVERSE). EVEN WITH ALL THE SHOW'S FIXATION ON DETAIL, THEY STILL USED PERFECT STORY ECONOMY. THEY ONLY USED THE LEVEL OF JOURNALISTIC DETAIL THEY NEEDED AND THE REST IS TRADITIONAL CHARACTER ARC AND CATHARSIS. AND IN TERMS OF THEME IT MAY BE THE SINGLE MOST SOCIALLY-CONSCIOUS, THEMATICALLY LOADED TELEVISION SHOW THAT HAS EVER EXISTED.

"Hyperbole much, Hulk?"

WHATEVER. IT'S **THE WIRE**. AND IF YOU'RE GOING TO TRY TO REPLICATE IT, IF YOU'RE GOING TO TRY AND SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE INFLUENCE OF REAL, TRUE STORY-ISM AND CHARACTER-CENTRIC INTENTION, JUST UNDERSTAND HOW HARD IT IS TO DO CINEMATICALLY... WE MAY NEVER SEE ANYTHING LIKE THIS SHOW AGAIN. BUT EVEN THEN, PERHAPS THERE ARE SOME LESSONS TO TAKE AWAY FROM IT.

LIKE THIS ONE:

16. RESEARCH!

HULK COULD GIVE YOU A SIMPLE NOTE HERE OF "DO YOUR RESEARCH!" AND BE DONE WITH THAT, BUT THAT WOULD IGNORE WHAT HULK SEES AS A RATHER COMPLEX ISSUE.

GIVEN #1: WHATEVER THE SUBJECT YOU ARE WRITING ABOUT, YOU SHOULD BE FULLY

RESEARCHED ON THE TOPIC SO THAT YOU ARE A MINI-EXPERT AND WILL BE READY TO REPRESENT IT AS TRUTHFULLY AS POSSIBLE IN YOUR STORY.

GIVEN #2: DON'T EVER LET ANYONE TELL YOU THAT YOU DON'T HAVE A *LITTLE* FLEXIBILITY.

THE PROBLEM WITH TALKING ABOUT MOVIES IS THAT SO OFTEN PEOPLE ARE COMING FROM DIFFERENT PLACES WHEN IT COMES TO NOT JUST THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR FILM BUT THE "ACCURACY" OF IT TOO. THERE IS JUST SUCH A WIDE RANGE TO HOW THE AUDIENCE TREATS VERISIMILITUDE.

AND HULK WILL GO INTO THE FOLLOWING IDEA AT GREAT LENGTH LATER IN THE STRUCTURE SECTION, BUT WRITING A COMPELLING NARRATIVE OFTEN DOESN'T HAVE THAT MUCH TO DO WITH SCIENTIFIC ACCURACY AND PLOT HOLES, BUT FAR MORE TO DO WITH THE IDEAS HULK HAS ALREADY MENTIONED REGARDING CHARACTER CONSISTENCY AND THEMATIC RESONANCE. BUT JUST BECAUSE THOSE THINGS ARE *MORE IMPORTANT* TO MAKING A GOOD NARRATIVE DOESN'T MEAN THAT WE SHOULDN'T BOTHER PUTTING THE EFFORT IN TO MAKE OUR FILMS AS ACCURATE AS POSSIBLE (WITHIN REASON). THAT WOULD JUST BE LAZY.

AND IF HULK IS BEING HONEST, THEN A LOT OF WRITERS IN THIS INDUSTRY ARE GUILTY OF BEING LAZY. HOLLYWOOD MOVIES AND GLITZY TELEVISIONS SHOWS ARE FILLED WITH ALL SORTS OF NONSENSE. LIKE HOW OFTEN HAS IT SEEMED THAT THE WRITERS HAVE NEVER USED A COMPUTER AND DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THE TERM "HACKING" ACTUALLY MEANS? THE '90S ARE AN UTTER GRAVEYARD OF TECHNO-BABBLE, BUT THANKFULLY OUR RESEARCH DEPARTMENTS HAVE GOTTEN PRETTY DAMN GOOD AT THIS.

WHAT HULK WOULD ACTUALLY ARGUE IS A FAR MORE VALID TOPIC WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR RESEARCH IS UPHOLDING THE SPIRIT OF ACCURACY.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? WELL, FOR INSTANCE WITH **LOST** (WHICH WAS AN AMAZING SHOW ALL THINGS CONSIDERED), IT HAD A SCIENTIFIC ELEMENT THAT WAS OFTEN LAUDED BY CASUAL VIEWERS. AND IT GOT PEOPLE EXCITED ABOUT THOSE CONCEPTS. SUDDENLY FANS OF THE SHOW WERE READING ABOUT ELECTROMAGNETISM AND MINKOWSKI SPACE AND HOW THOSE CONCEPTS FIT INTO THE LARGER THEMES... THE PROBLEM WAS THAT WHEN YOU EXAMINED THE SCIENCE UP CLOSE, IT WAS PRETTY MUCH GIBBERISH. HULK HAS A BUNCH OF NON-ARMCHAIR, SERIOUSLY HARDCORE SCIENCE FRIENDS AND IT WAS REALLY, REALLY HARD FOR THEM TO WATCH THE SHOW. MOSTLY BECAUSE THEY WOULD REFERENCE THESE COOL ADVANCED CONCEPTS AND THEN NOT ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND THEIR FUNCTION. AGAIN, HULK DOESN'T THINK THIS GOT IN THE WAY OF MAKING **LOST** A GREAT SHOW, AND HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT IT ACTUALLY DID A VERY GOOD JOB UPHOLDING THE INTEREST AND VALUE OF SCIENCE. BUT TO THE HARDCORE, THEY COULDN'T ABIDE. THERE IS QUITE SIMPLY A RIFT IN AUDIENCE NEEDS WITH THESE THINGS, SO UNDERSTAND THAT ANYTHING LESS THAN EXPERTISE WILL BE VIEWED AS SUCH BY CERTAIN PEOPLE.

PERHAPS THE REAL BOON OF TRUE RESEARCH IS HOW IT CAN GO ON TO INFORM SO MANY GREAT IDEAS AND REALLY FLESH OUT YOUR STORY. YOU JUST HAVE TO PUT THE WORK IN. AND IT MAY SOUND CRAZY, BUT HULK HONESTLY THINKS THAT AUDIENCES SUBCONSCIOUSLY RESPOND TO CHARACTERS WHEN THEY *REALLY* KNOW WHAT TO CALL THINGS. A LOT OF HOLLYWOOD PRODUCERS FEAR HAVING THEIR CHARACTERS TALK OVER THE HEADS OF THE AUDIENCE, BUT IN TRUTH, THE USE OF SPECIFIC, ESOTERIC DETAILS CAN ACTUALLY GIVE THE AIR OF VERACITY. AND SOMETIMES GREAT TRUTHS ARE ARRIVED AT WHEN YOU WORK BACKWARD FROM THAT VERACITY.

GOING BACK TO DAVID SIMON, **GENERATION KILL** IS COMPELLING BECAUSE ALL THEY TRIED TO DO WITH THE NARRATIVE WAS CREATE THE MOST ACCURATE DEPICTION OF LIFE AS A SOLDIER IN IRAQ IMAGINABLE - AND THAT WAS IT. AND THEY DID SO IN A WAY THAT WAS ONLY MEANT TO MAKE THOSE SOLDIERS AGREE. BUT BY PLEASING THOSE SOLDIERS, THEY CREATED A KIND OF DETAIL-ORIENTED TRUTH THAT HELPED STRIKE A CHORD WITH THOSE OF US LOOKING IN ON THE SITUATION. IT'S WHAT ALLOWED US TO ACCESS THEM.

SIMPLY PUT: AUDIENCES LIKE TO WATCH SMART, TALENTED PEOPLE DO THEIR PROFESSIONAL

THING.

AND IT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MOST OF THE GOOD COP, LAWYER AND DOCTOR SHOWS WE SEE ON TV. THE PROBLEM IS THAT SOME OF THEM HAVE TAKEN TO LYING RIGHT THROUGH THEIR FREAKING TEETH WHEN IT COMES TO “THE SPIRIT” OF THE WORK. AND HULK THINKS THAT THIS DISHONEST APPROACH TO PORTRAYING REAL-WORLD PROFESSIONALISM HAS REALLY BAD SOCIETAL CONSEQUENCES.

LOOK AT **CSI**. THE SCIENCE MAY BE SOUND AND IT MAY HAVE A TEAM OF EXPERTS TO SHOW OFF REAL TECHNIQUES, BUT THE SHOW IS THE MOST DISHONEST LOOK AT SOLVING CRIME IMAGINABLE. IT’S AN INAUTHENTIC NARRATIVE ABOUT HOW THOSE SCIENCES ARE ACTUALLY USED IN THE FIELD, HOW THOSE PEOPLE REALLY DO THEIR JOBS. IT IS EVEN UTTERLY DISHONEST ABOUT THE SUCCESS RATE OF THE TECHNIQUES AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE KINDS OF RESOURCES POLICE ACTUALLY HAVE. AND AS SUCH IT CREATES A SERIOUSLY DAMAGING PORTRAIT OF HOW POLICING ACTUALLY WORKS.

DON’T BELIEVE HULK? A LOT OF COURTS HAVE STOPPED TAKING JURORS IF THEY ARE **CSI** FANS... HULK’S NOT KIDDING. THE SHOW LIES SO BADLY WHEN IT COMES TO THE REALITY OF POLICE PROCEDURAL ABILITIES THAT POTENTIAL JURORS EXPECT EVERY SINGLE CASE TO HAVE THE KIND OF RESOURCES THEY NEED FOR HIGH-TECH ON-SITE FORENSIC EVIDENCE. IN TRUTH, **CSI** EXPERTS ARE THREE SCIENTISTS IN A LITTLE LAB NOWHERE NEAR THE ACTION AND THERE IS USUALLY A SIX-MONTH WAITING LIST FOR ONLY THE MOST HIGH PROFILE CASES. AN INFINITESIMALLY SMALL PORTION OF CASES GET A WHIFF OF THAT KIND OF SCIENCE APTITUDE AND WE’VE TURNED IT INTO B-MOVIE PULP.

AND SURE, NARRATIVELY SPEAKING, **CSI** IS FUN, SILLY TELEVISION WITH BIG REVEALS (THEY’VE PATENTED THE ACT 4 TO ACT 5 DOUBLE TWIST) AND A HYPER-STYLIZED FLARE, BUT THE REAL PROBLEM IS THAT THEY ARE DOING SO *UNDER THE GUISE OF REALISM AND SCIENTIFIC ACCURACY*. IT BRINGS UP A REALLY DIFFICULT ARGUMENT ABOUT THE PURSUIT OF NARRATIVE VS. THE PURSUIT OF REAL-LIFE LOGIC (AND AGAIN, THERE IS SOME WIGGLE ROOM HERE), BUT HULK THINKS YOU CAN OFTEN PUSH THOSE CREATIVE LIBERTIES INTO THE REALM OF CREATIVE DISHONESTY. THEY ARE LYING ABOUT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING POSSIBLE.

THEY ARE LYING ABOUT *THE PURPOSE*.

SO WHAT TO DO? ON ONE HAND, HULK IS ARGUING THAT ACCURACY DOESN’T MATTER FOR YOUR STORY. ON THE OTHER HAND HULK IS ARGUING THAT ACCURACY CAN MATTER MORE THAN ANYTHING. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN IS WHEN?

IT’S AN INSANELY TOUGH QUESTION, BUT IT’S ACTUALLY ONE YOU HAVE TO ANSWER FOR YOURSELF. WHAT KIND OF STORY ARE YOU TELLING? DOES THE ACCURACY MATTER TO YOUR STORY? WOULD IT BE DISHONEST TO REPRESENT IT AS ANYTHING BUT ACCURATE? IS IT OKAY TO BE PULPY AND USE PSEUDO-SCIENCE HERE? YOUR ULTIMATE TAKEAWAY SHOULD BE TO UTILIZE A MANNER OF STORYTELLING THAT ACCURATELY REFLECTS THE INTENTION OF YOUR STORYTELLING.

17. DRAMA VS. STORY

THE FOLLOWING WOULD LIKELY MAKE MORE SENSE AFTER HULK HAS FINISHED THE STRUCTURE SECTION, BUT IT’S JUST SO IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND BEFORE GOING INTO THE WRITING PROCESS THAT IT NEEDS TO BE MENTIONED NOW.

THUS FAR, HULK HAS PREPARED YOU FOR A LOT OF STORY CONCEPTS IN NARRATIVE. LIKE HOW CHARACTERS SHOULD HAVE MOTIVATIONS AND PSYCHOLOGIES. LIKE HOW THERE SHOULD BE THEMATIC BACKBONES AND MEANING TO WHAT YOU UNVEIL. BUT HULK HAS PREPARED YOU VERY LITTLE FOR THE REALITIES OF *DRAMA*. AND YES STORY AND DRAMA ARE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS WHEN IT COMES TO OUR OWN PARTICULAR WORKING DEFINITION.

THINK OF "STORY" AS THE LOGICAL SIDE OF YOUR NARRATIVE.

AS AN EXAMPLE, PRETEND ONE CHARACTER GOES AND MURDERS ANOTHER. LET'S SAY THEY HAVE A REASON FOR DOING IT. AND THE THING IS THAT WE CAN FIND OUT WHAT THEIR MOTIVATIONS WERE EITHER BEFORE THEY COMMIT THE MURDER, DURING, OR AFTER. AND IN TERMS OF "STORY SENSE," EACH OPTION WOULD BE JUST AS LOGICAL, RIGHT? FINDING OUT WOULDN'T AFFECT THE CHARACTER'S PSYCHOLOGY OR LOGIC FOR ANYTHING. THE PROBLEM IS THAT JUST BECAUSE A STORY MAY MAKE SENSE, DOESN'T MEAN IT'S NECESSARILY ENGAGING OR THE BEST WAY TO EXPERIENCE IT. AND WHERE YOU PUT INFORMATION REVEALS VERY MUCH AFFECTS THE EXPERIENCE.

THUS IT IS DRAMA THAT IS ABOUT *THE EXPERIENCE*.

AND THIS IS HOW TRADITIONAL DRAMA WORKS: A CHARACTER EXPLAINS WHY THEY CARE ABOUT SOMETHING. WE PUT THOSE CARES INTO JEOPARDY. AND THEN WE FRET AND WORRY ABOUT THE STATE AND WELL-BEING OF THOSE CARES. THAT'S IT. THAT'S DRAMA. IT'S LIKE THREATENING TO KILL THE KITTEN. YOU TAKE A COMPELLING CHARACTER AND SUDDENLY THEY'RE HANGING ON A ROOFTOP. BUT IT'S NOT JUST DANGER. IT HAS TO BE ACTIVE DANGER *FELT BY THE AUDIENCE*. WE HAVE TO CONNECT TO IT AND HAVE EMPATHY. AND SO THE IDEA OF DRAMA IS TO ENGAGE THE MOST ACTIVE PART OF THE AUDIENCE'S BRAIN AND TURN UP THE URGENCY AND VISCERA.

AND YOU DO THAT BY UNDERSTANDING THE STAKES.

LET'S GO WITH A HYPOTHETICAL: PRETEND YOU ARE... WELL... YOU. THIS IS NOT A MOVIE. THIS IS TOTALLY REAL LIFE AND YOU ARE ON YOUR WAY TO WORK OR SOMETHING. NOW PRETEND SOMEONE SUDDENLY SHOWED UP AND SAID "HI, I'M YOUR LONG-LOST BROTHER. QUICK, THERE'S SOMEONE AFTER ME! HELP!" ... WHAT WOULD YOUR REACTION BE?

ANSWER HONESTLY. MOSTLY YOU WOULD BE CONFUSED AS ALL HELL. YOU WOULDN'T KNOW IF YOU WANTED TO TRUST THIS PERSON. YOU MIGHT GO ON INSTINCT IN *EITHER* DIRECTION. THE ONLY THING THAT WOULD DRAW YOU IN TO DOING THIS IS A SENSE OF MYSTERY. YOU WOULD WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH, RIGHT? AND HULK IMAGINES IT WOULD BE A RUSHED AND CRAZY SCENARIO! WOULD IT BE EXCITING? SURE! WOULD IT BE THE CRAZIEST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU THAT MORNING? PROBABLY! BUT AS FAR AS YOU GO, MEANING *THE PERSON YOU ARE*, COMPLETE WITH YOUR OWN MOTIVATIONS AND INTERESTS, WOULDN'T YOU MOSTLY JUST BE LIKE "WHAT THE FUCK!?!?!?"

WELL GUESS WHAT, FOLKS? THAT'S EXACTLY HOW AUDIENCES REACT TO NEW INFORMATION TOO. WE LIKE TO THINK THE SUDDEN REVEAL OF INFORMATION AND "LET'S GO OFF AND DEAL WITH IT!" IS THE MOST EXCITING AND INTEREST-DRAWING APPROACH IN THE UNIVERSE, BUT IT'S NOT; IT'S JUST CHAOS AND CURIOSITY.

HULK SWEARS TO YOU THAT REVEALS OF NEW INFORMATION JUST DON'T HAVE THE SAME DRAMATIC EFFECT AS A PREVIOUSLY-ESTABLISHED LEVEL OF INVESTMENT. AND HOW COULD THEY? WE MAY LIKE SOMEONE AND BE INTRIGUED, BUT IF WE'RE NOT *EMPATHIZING* WITH SOMEONE, THEN WE'RE NOT SO WILLING TO GO OFF ON A CRAZY JOURNEY WITH THEM. WHICH, GUESS WHAT, IS EXACTLY WHAT WE DO WHEN WE WATCH MOVIES WITH TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES.

TO BACK UP WHAT HULK IS SAYING HERE, IMAGINE IF YOU HAD A LONG-STANDING, GREAT RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR HYPOTHETICAL BROTHER. AGAIN, THIS IS REAL LIFE. AND THEN ALL OF A SUDDEN HE SHOWED UP AND SAID SOMEONE WAS TRYING TO KILL HIM. WHAT WOULD YOUR REACTION BE THEN? WHEN IT WAS SOMEONE WITH WHOM YOU HAD A WHOLE HISTORY WITH AND HAD BUILT TRUST AND GENUINELY LOVED? WHY, THEN YOU'D HAVE MOTIVATION TO HELP. YOU'D EVEN HAVE UNDERSTANDING AND CLARITY ABOUT YOUR MOTIVES. YOU'D WANT TO HELP HIM AND YOU'D CARE WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM, BECAUSE YOUR RESPONSE IS BASED ON SOMETHING THAT *HAS BEEN BUILT AND EARNED*.

WELL GUESS WHAT? THAT'S EXACTLY HOW AUDIENCES REACT WHEN THEY HAVE BUILT A RELATIONSHIP WITH A CHARACTER IN WHOM THEY ARE INVESTED.

AND IT'S TRUE OF ALL DRAMA. WE NEED THE INFORMATION AND DEFINED RELATIONSHIPS AND THEN WE NEED THE STAKES. YOU MAY HAVE HEARD THE PHRASE "DRAMATIC IRONY" BEFORE AND ITS MEANING IS SIMPLE. DRAMATIC IRONY IS WHEN THE AUDIENCE IS PRIVY TO SOME PIECE OF INFORMATION THAT THE CHARACTERS ONSCREEN ARE NOT PRIVY TO YET, AND THUS IT CREATES TENSION IN THE AUDIENCE. THE MOST OBVIOUS EXAMPLE IS LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A HORROR MOVIE WHEN WE KNOW THE KILLER IS STANDING IN A ROOM AND THE LEAD CHARACTER WALKS IN, UNSUSPECTING. WE MAY EVEN SEE THE KILLER START STALKING THEM. AND THUS, WE FRET! BUT THIS IS THE CLEAREST EXAMPLE OF DRAMATIC IRONY; YOU CAN ACHIEVE IT ALMOST ANY WAY YOU SEE FIT FOR VARIOUS MODELS OF TENSION AND RELEASE. A CHARACTER WALKING INTO A TRAP. A CHARACTER NOT KNOWING SOMEONE IS ABOUT TO TURN ON THEM. IT BUILDS TENSION AND EFFECT. BUT THE IMPORTANT THING TO NOTE IS THAT DRAMATIC IRONY IS DERIVED FROM *THE AUDIENCE KNOWING THE INFORMATION*. WHEN YOU KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON, WHEN YOU KNOW WHAT IS AT STAKE, IT IS AMAZING HOW MUCH YOU CAN ACCOMPLISH IN ENGAGING YOUR AUDIENCE.

AND YET, HULK LOOKS AROUND AT THE LANDSCAPE OF NARRATIVE STORYTELLING THESE DAYS AND SEES A COMPLETE LACK OF UNDERSTANDING WHEN IT COMES TO DRAMA, BOTH TRADITIONAL AND IRONIC. SERIOUSLY, HULK THINKS IT IS THE NUMBER ONE BAD HABIT OF OUR *GOOD WRITERS*. IT'S LIKE THE ENTIRETY OF HOLLYWOOD NEEDS TO TAKE A PLAYWRITING CLASS.

LAST YEAR, **JOHN CARTER** WAS RELEASED AND IT WAS CONCOCTED BY A HANDFUL OF CERTIFIED STORYTELLING GENIUSES (STANTON, ANDREWS, AND CHABON). EVERY BIT OF STORYTELLING IN THE FILM IS LOGICAL. EVERY BIT OF PLOTTING EVENTUALLY MAKES SENSE. ALL THE ACTORS WERE COMPELLING AND FILLED WITH PERSONALITY. BUT WHY WAS THE MOVIE INERT? WHY DID IT FAIL TO CAPTURE OUR COLLECTIVE INTEREST? HULK KNOWS IT HAS ITS FANS, BUT ON THE POPULAR LEVEL IT DIDN'T QUITE ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE AT LARGE. WHY?

IT'S BECAUSE ALMOST EVERY BIT OF STORY INFORMATION AND CHARACTER MOTIVATION WAS SAVED FOR LATER REVEALS, OFTEN GIVEN RIGHT AS THE DRAMATIC ACTION WAS *ACTUALLY HAPPENING*. MEANING THE ENTIRE MOVIE WAS ESSENTIALLY THE BROTHER APPEARING OUT OF NOWHERE AND THEN EXPLAINING TO US THE "HOW" HOURS LATER, LONG AFTER WE REALLY NEEDED TO CARE.

PEOPLE JUST DON'T WATCH MOVIES WITH RAPT DRAMATIC INTEREST WHEN CLARITY IS DELAYED. THEY MAY BE CURIOUS, BUT CURIOSITY IS NOT A LONG-TERM PLAN. PEOPLE WOULD MUCH RATHER WATCH FILMS ACTIVELY, WITH SUBCONSCIOUS UNDERSTANDING. THEY FOLLOW THE ACTOR'S BODY LANGUAGE AND FEELINGS. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY CARE ABOUT. WE NEED TO SEE THE WORLD THROUGH THEM, NOT AT THEM. THUS WE NEED DRAMA, PLAIN AND SIMPLE. EMPATHY IS BASED ON CLARITY. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND.

WE NEED STORIES THAT GIVE US REASONS TO CARE AND THEN JUST STEP BACK AND LET US CARE.

WHAT'S RATHER IRONIC ABOUT THIS POINT IS THAT NOTHING MAKES THE CASE MORE THAN ONE OF STANTON'S PREVIOUS FILMS, **FINDING NEMO**. THAT FILM OPENS WITH A SHORT SCENE IN WHICH TWO FISH, MARLON AND HIS WIFE, ARE DECIDING WHAT TO NAME THEIR BIG BATCH OF CHILDREN WHO REST BELOW THEM IN EGG FORM. BUT SUDDENLY THERE IS A HORRIFIC BARRACUDA ATTACK - MARLON'S WIFE IS KILLED AND THEIR EGGS ARE EATEN, SAVE ONE (WHO WILL BECOME OUR TITULAR NEMO). IT'S A DEEPLY COMPELLING SCENE, ONE THAT ENGAGES THE AUDIENCE AND MAKES MARLON EXTREMELY EMPATHETIC (NOTICE HE'S NOT JUST DOING A NICE THING - INSTEAD, THE MOVIE KILLED THE CAT). BUT THE REAL IMPORT OF THE SCENE IS THAT WE THEN UNDERSTAND WHY MARLON SPENDS THE NEXT TWO HOURS OF THE FILM BEING OVERPROTECTIVE. HE WAS SO HAUNTED BY THAT EXPERIENCE THAT HIS OVER-PARENTING IS KICKING IN. AND EVEN IF WE DON'T AGREE WITH HIS BEHAVIOR, WE, THE AUDIENCE, COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND WHY HE'S DOING IT. WE CAN EMPATHIZE. AND WE WILL FOLLOW HIM THROUGH THE DEPTHS OF HELL TO GET NEMO

BACK. IT'S ALL A GENIUS BIT OF DRAMATIC STORYTELLING.

AND STANTON DIDN'T WANT TO DO IT.

HE WANTED TO PUT THE OPENING SCENE TWO-THIRDS OF THE WAY INTO THE MOVIE SO THAT IT WAS A REVEAL. SO THAT WE WOULD UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING IN THIS LATE MOMENT AND GO "Aha! There was a reason! The filmmaker knew what he was doing all along!" BUT THE FILMMAKER ALSO DID NOT REALIZE THIS "AHA" MOMENT MIGHT NOT BE WORTH SITTING THROUGH AN HOUR AND A HALF OF YOUR MAIN CHARACTER BEING AN OVER-PARENTING, NON-RELATABLE ASSHOLE. IT IS JUST SUCH A COMPLETE MISUNDERSTANDING OF HOW DRAMA WORKS. IT'S LATE INFORMATION FOR NO FUNCTIONAL REASON. THE MOVIE WORKS A THOUSAND TIMES BETTER PLAYING THE INFORMATION STRAIGHT AHEAD AT THE VERY BEGINNING. AND THE PIXAR STORY TEAM KNEW THIS AND ADAMANTLY INSISTED STANTON PUT THE SCENE AT THE BEGINNING. THEY WERE RIGHT.

BUT HULK GUESSES THAT STANTON WANTED TO PROVE HE WAS RIGHT ALL THESE YEARS LATER AND SO **JOHN CARTER** USES THE *SAME EXACT* DEVICE OF A DEAD FAMILY, ONLY STANTON REVEALS THIS TWO-THIRDS OF THE WAY INTO THE MOVIE IN THE MIDDLE OF A BIG FIGHT. THE SCENE ITSELF IS ROUSING AND PRETTY AND... COMPLETELY INEFFECTUAL WHEN IT COMES TO THE FILM'S OVERALL DRAMA. WORSE, THE DAMAGE IS ALREADY DONE. WE JUST SPENT MOST OF THE FILM TRYING TO BE EMPATHETIC TO OUR MAIN CHARACTER WHO JUST SEEMED TO BE A WITHDRAWN JERK TO EVERYONE HE MET. THERE IS NO UNDERSTANDING. THERE ARE NO STAKES. AND THIS POOR DECISION IS SYMPTOMATIC OF EVERYTHING IN THE FILM. IT'S ALL LOGICAL STORY INFORMATION WITH NO REAL DRAMATIC EXPERIENCE. THERE'S NO STAKES OR MOTIVATION. THE FILM HAS THREE PROLOGUES OF NOTHING BUT INFORMATION. NONE OF WHICH ARE CHARACTER-BASED OR REVEAL MOTIVATION (LIKE A CERTAIN DEAD FAMILY ONE WOULD ALLOW FOR), BUT INSTEAD ARE JUST MOVING BITS OF PLOT THAT WILL ONLY MAKE SENSE BY THE END. BUT THEY WON'T BE COMPELLING.

HULK DOES NOT MEAN TO SINGLE OUT STANTON BY ANY MEANS. THE FRUSTRATING THING IS HE IS SO DAMN TALENTED WITH ALMOST EVERYTHING ELSE THAT IT'S FRUSTRATING HE CAN'T GET THIS BASIC CONCEPT OF STORY EXPERIENCE. AND HE IS FAR FROM ALONE IN THIS TENDENCY, AS SO MANY WRITERS AND DIRECTORS DO IT TOO THESE DAYS. WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN? HULK'S NOT TOO SURE. OFTEN THE STORYTELLER WANTS IT TO BE... DIFFERENT, MAYBE? THE METHOD OF TRADITIONAL DRAMA AND HOW IT JUST LAYS OUT ALL THE INFORMATION MIGHT JUST BE SEEN AS TOO STRAIGHTFORWARD. INSTEAD, THEY WANT THE ALLURE OF MYSTERY AND DELIGHTING IN THE REVEAL, LIKE PERFORMING A CINEMATIC MAGIC TRICK OR SOMETHING. HONESTLY, HULK THINKS THIS TENDS TO BE A SHOW-OFFY WAY OF DISPLAYING AN UNDERSTANDING OF NARRATIVE. A WAY OF SAYING "Look how smart my writing is!" LIKE THEY WANT TO SHOW THAT THEY UNDERSTOOD THIS CONFUSING THING ALL ALONG AND YOU SHOULD HAVE TRUSTED THEM. BUT AS ONE OF HULK'S FAVORITE OLD ADAGES OF THIS BUSINESS GOES:

"DON'T IMPRESS ME, CONVINC ME."

AND DRAMA CONVINCES THE AUDIENCE EVERY TIME.

"But Hulk... isn't there a place for mystery, too? Can't curiosity work? Can't a reveal be an awesome thing?"

SURE THING... YOU JUST GOTTA UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISMS.

18. THE JJ ABRAMS QUESTION - MYSTERY? VS. URGENCY!

JJ ABRAMS HAS BUILT A CAREER OFF THE POWER OF MYSTERY.

HULK FEELS PRETTY COMFORTABLE SAYING THAT. HE KNOWS THAT A WELL-BUILT MYSTERY CAN ENGAGE AN AUDIENCE, PROPEL FURTHER DISCUSSION, CREATE A BEAUTIFUL ATMOSPHERE, AND LOCK INTO YOUR SENSE OF CURIOSITY. WHAT OBVIOUSLY HELPS IS THAT HIS WORK HAS TREMENDOUS ENERGY, BUT FAR MORE IMPORTANTLY, ALL OF HIS PROJECTS ABSOLUTELY *COMMIT*

TO THE POWER OF MYSTERY. HE OUTLINES THE WHOLE THEORY IN HIS NOW-FAMOUS (INFAMOUS?) TED SPEECH ABOUT HOW MYSTERY CAN COMMAND A STORY ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE STORY-TELLING AND ESPECIALLY THE MARKETING PRESENCE. EVEN HIS FREQUENT CO-WRITER AND COLLABORATOR DAMON LINDELOF OFTEN TALKS ABOUT HIS WRITING STRATEGY WHERE EVERY CHARACTER HE WRITES HAS A SECRET, WHICH INFORMS AND GUIDES THEIR DEPTH.

MAKE NO MISTAKE, THESE TACTICS HAVE GREAT VALUE. HULK HAS EVEN USED THE “SECRET” TIP A NUMBER OF TIMES TOO... BUT BOTH THESE GUYS TEND TO USE THE POWER OF MYSTERY AND SECRECY TO A FAULT.

LIKE FIRST AND FOREMOST, HOW SOMETIMES “MYSTERY” IS JUST NOT THE REQUIRED TONE OR CHOICE FOR NARRATIVE PROPULSION AND YET THEY USE IT ANYWAY. YES, WHEN USED CORRECTLY MYSTERY CAN HANG OVER A SCENE TO WONDERFUL EFFECT, BUT IT CAN ALSO HANG OVER A SCENE TO AN INCREDIBLY MUTING EFFECT TOO. LIKE THE HEART OF DRAMA, SOMETIMES SCENES JUST NEED TO BE FUNCTIONAL. SOMETIMES THEY JUST NEED TO BE CLEAR.

SOMETIMES THEY NEED TO HAVE URGENCY.

URGENCY IS SIMPLE. URGENCY IS BORN FROM CLARITY. *WE HAVE TO STOP THAT THING OR THE BOMB GOES OFF AND WE BOTH DIE!* THE THING HULK REALLY LIKES ABOUT THIS KIND OF STORYTELLING IS THAT IT IS A VISCERAL ENGAGEMENT. MYSTERY MAKES AN AUDIENCE MEMBER GO "OOOH, WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON HERE?" AND BRINGS PEOPLE INTO THEIR MINDS TO PONDER. THIS IS ADMITTEDLY A VITAL ENGAGEMENT THAT DOESN'T HAPPEN OFTEN ENOUGH IN CINEMA. BUT IT IS OFTEN *JUST* A CEREBRAL ENGAGEMENT. AND URGENCY, WITH ALL ITS DULL SIMPLICITY, ALLOWS THE AUDIENCE TO SKIP THE USE OF THEIR BRAIN AND JUST EXPERIENCE THE FILM IN THE MOST PRIMAL AND EXCITING WAY. THAT MAY SOUND LIKE HULK IS ADVOCATING BEING A PHILISTINE, BUT NOT IT ALL. DIFFERENT SCENES AND FILMS JUST CALL FOR DIFFERENT THINGS. AND HULK THINKS URGENCY IS GEARED TO HOW BEST USE FILMMAKING'S NATURAL POWER.

AND DON'T THINK THAT URGENCY ONLY APPLIES TO ACTION AND WORLD-ENDING CIRCUMSTANCES. IT WORKS JUST AS WELL FOR TWO CHARACTERS TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING THAT IS IMPORTANT TO EACH OF THEM. IT IS WHOLLY FUNCTIONAL. THINK BACK TO HOW MANY CONVERSATIONS ON *LOST* HAD TWO PEOPLE WAXING PHILOSOPHICAL ABOUT SOMETHING WE NEVER ACTUALLY UNDERSTOOD THE SPECIFICS OF. SURE, WE WONDERED WHAT THE HECK THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT AS THEY TIP-TOED AROUND VAGUE CONCEPTS, BUT WE WERE NOT NECESSARILY *ENGAGED* ON A CHARACTER OR STORY LEVEL. AND THE MOVING SHELL GAME OF “MYSTERY!” BECAME MORE AND MORE TIRESOME WITH EVERY PASSING SEASON. IT WASN'T THAT WE WANTED "ANSWERS," IT WAS THAT WE WANTED CLEAR STAKES AND SOMETHING THAT FELT LIKE IT MATTERED. MYSTERY IS GREAT, BUT IT TRULY HAS A SHORT-TERM LIFESPAN. IF YOU TRY TO SUSTAIN IT FOR TOO LONG, YOU'RE SUNK.

SO IF LINDELOF NEEDS TO GIVE EVERY CHARACTER A SECRET, DO WE THEN LOSE THE POWER OF TWO CHARACTERS ARGUING WITH ALL THEIR INFORMATION OUT IN THE OPEN? WHEN THERE ARE STAKES WE UNDERSTAND? HULK UNDERSTANDS THAT *LOST* WAS OFTEN INTERESTED ON A THEMATIC LEVEL IN SUBVERTING THE VERY IDEA OF WHAT ONE CAN ACTUALLY KNOW (FOCUSING ON THE NEED TO PLACE ONE'S ENERGY INTO FAITH), BUT SO OFTEN THIS WISHY-WASHY MYSTERIOUSNESS OVERPOWERED THE MECHANICS OF BASIC CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE. WHAT'S FUNNY IS THAT THE FIRST SEASON REALLY DID UNDERSTAND HOW TO BALANCE (THERE'S THAT WORD AGAIN) THAT MYSTERY WITH THE POWER OF CLEAR STAKES AND PERCEPTIBLE CHARACTER MOTIVATION. BUT THE DEEPER DOWN THE WELL THEY WENT, THE MORE THEY LOST SIGHT OF THAT BALANCE, SO MUCH SO THAT IT EVEN RUINED SOME OF THE POWER OF THE CENTRAL MYSTERY... AND PLEASE KEEP IN MIND THIS IS COMING FROM A HULK THAT REALLY, REALLY, REALLY LOVED THE SHOW. IT'S JUST A GOOD EXAMPLE BECAUSE SO MANY PEOPLE ARE FAMILIAR WITH IT.

ULTIMATELY, THERE ARE CLEAR REASONS TO USE BOTH MYSTERY AND URGENCY, BUT HULK JUST WANTS YOU TO BE AWARE OF, YOU KNOW, *HOW TO USE THEM AND WHY*. AGAIN, IT'S THE MECHANISMS. SO ASK YOURSELF, WHAT WOULD MAKE THIS SCENE WORK BETTER? NOT UNDERSTANDING THE URGENCY AND ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE ON A CEREBRAL LEVEL, OR

TOTALLY UNDERSTANDING IT AND ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE VISCERALLY? THAT IS THE CENTRAL QUESTION.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THE BEST EXAMPLE HULK CAN THINK OF WHEN IT COMES TO LATE CHARACTER REVEALS IS **PLANES, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES**. YOU SEE, THE FILM'S CENTRAL CONFLICT IS DRIVEN BY THE FACT THAT THIS CRAZY GUY (JOHN CANDY) SEEMS ONE-DIMENSIONAL AND ANNOYING. AND THIS PROVIDES COMEDIC CONFLICT FOR THE MAIN CHARACTER (OUR AUDIENCE SURROGATE, STEVE MARTIN) AS WE TAG ALONG WITH HIM ON HIS JOURNEY. AND THEN WHEN THE MOVIE CALLS FOR CATHARSIS, WE ARE GIVEN THE INFORMATION THAT THE ANNOYING TRAVEL COMPANION'S WIFE RECENTLY DIED AND ALL THIS BEHAVIOR IS SYMPTOMATIC OF THE FACT THAT HE IS LONELY. WHY DOES THIS LATE REVEAL PAY OFF HERE AND NOT IN **JOHN CARTER**? BECAUSE THE CONFLICT WE GET FROM *NOT* KNOWING IS WHAT DRIVES THE MOVIE. IF WE KNEW HIS WIFE WAS DEAD AT THE BEGINNING IT WOULD BE HARD FOR US TO LAUGH AT HIM WHILE EMPATHIZING WITH OUR MAIN CHARACTER'S SITUATION. AND WHEN IT'S TIME FOR THAT CONFLICT TO BE RESOLVED? THE INFORMATION IS REVEALED, AND IT WORKS.

THE FOLLOWING WILL SOUND CONFUSING, BUT FOR YOUR OWN WORK: YOU HAVE TO GAUGE THE VALIDITY OF THE CONFLICTS THAT ARE GIVEN TO THE AUDIENCE FROM CHARACTERS *NOT* KNOWING THAT INFORMATION AND YOU COMPARE THEM TO THE KINDS OF CONFLICTS THAT ARE CREATED BY THE AUDIENCE *KNOWING* THAT INFORMATION. DOES THAT MAKE SENSE? AND HULK WHOLLY ARGUES THAT IF WE KNEW FROM THE BEGINNING THAT JOHN CARTER'S WIFE HAD DIED, WE WOULD HAVE UNDERSTOOD WHY HE WAS PUSHING OTHERS AWAY FROM HIM, FELT AWFUL FOR HIM, AND FOLLOWED HIM HAPPILY ON HIS JOURNEY TO MARS WHERE HE WOULD FIND A NEW LEASE ON LIFE, AND ULTIMATELY WOULD HAVE RELISHED IN THE DEPTHS OF CONFLICT THE MOMENT HE WAS PUT IN HARM'S WAY. THE FILM'S NARRATIVE DIDN'T REQUIRE MYSTERY.

IT REQUIRED EMPATHY.

AND GOING BACK TO ABRAMS, PERHAPS NOTHING HIGHLIGHTS THE DIFFERENCES OF THE TWO APPROACHES LIKE THE STARK DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ABRAM'S **MISSION IMPOSSIBLE III** AND BRAD BIRD'S **MISSION IMPOSSIBLE IV: GHOST PROTOCOL**. THE FIRST STEEPS EVERY SINGLE CHARACTER AND EVEN THE FILM'S CENTRAL NAMELESS MACGUFFIN IN THE TOTAL SHROUD OF SECRECY. THE SECOND EXAMPLE ESCHEWS MYSTERY ALTOGETHER AND EXPLAINS ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING INVOLVED, GIVES YOU ALL THE TANGIBLE STAKES, AND TAKES YOU ON ONE HELL OF A COMPELLING RIDE.

19. DON'T OVER-MYTHOLOGIZE

HULK IS ALWAYS DEEPLY RELUCTANT TO GIVE VAGUE PERSONAL ANECDOTES, BUT SOMETIMES A SITUATION SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO A GREAT POINT AND THUS IT IS NECESSARY. SO... HULK ONCE SAT IN ON A BIG DEVELOPMENT MEETING. IT WAS GOING TO BE FOR THIS GIANT POPULAR THING, TOO. WE SAT DOWN AND THE WRITER STARTING PITCHING THEIR VERSION OF THE PROJECT AND THEY IMMEDIATELY STARTED TALKING ABOUT THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE WORLD THEY WERE CREATING. THEY WENT ON AND ON AND ON AND ON AND ON UNTIL SOMEONE HULK WILL JUST CALL "ONE OF THE SMARTEST PEOPLE IN HOLLYWOOD" STOPPED HIM DEAD IN HIS TRACKS AND SAID:

"Look. This is all good and neat. But what's the story?"

WRITER: "Oh yeah, well there's this main character and his parents die, and...."

THEN THEY WENT ON TO TELL A VERY FORMULAIC, UNINSPIRED STORY ABOUT THEIR CHARACTERS THAT THEY DIDN'T PUT HALF AS MUCH THOUGHT INTO AS THEY DID THE WORLD IN WHICH THEY WERE SETTING THOSE CHARACTERS.

THE ANECDOTE IS SYMPTOMATIC OF THE FACT THAT WE NOW LIVE IN THE AGE OF MYTHOLOGY. WE'VE BECOME FASCINATED WITH BUILDING WORLDS. NOT STORIES. AND YES MYTHOLOGIES CAN BE VERY COOL THINGS, BUT LIKE THE BACKGROUND INFORMATION IN CHARACTER TREES, HAVING

A FULLY REALIZED WORLD IS MERELY A GREAT THING TO FALL BACK ON WITH WHICH TO TEXTURE YOUR WORLD, BUT NEVER FORGET THAT *NARRATIVE AND CHARACTER ARE THE DRIVING FORCES OF YOUR FILM.*

HULK KNOWS WE'VE ALL COME TO LOVE THE **STAR WARS** UNIVERSE AND MYTHOLOGY, BUT WE FELL IN LOVE WITH IT BECAUSE THE ORIGINAL FILM WAS A GOOD STORY, WELL TOLD. IT WASN'T JUST THE REVOLUTIONARY EFFECTS, BUT THAT THE FILM'S NARRATIVE HAD A REVOLUTIONARY SENSE OF PROPULSION FOR ITS TIME (SEE THE ANECDOTE IN BISKIND'S **EASY RIDERS, RAGING BULLS** ABOUT MARCIA LUCAS MAKING THE CALL TO EDIT FOR PACE AND NOT THE ACTOR'S RHYTHMS). YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO REMEMBER THAT STORIES AND DRAMA ARE WHAT BRING US INTO A UNIVERSE, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND.

AND FOR ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE OF SUCH, THAT BIG POPULAR THING WAS NEVER MADE.

20. EVERYTHING YOU WRITE IS INHERENTLY SAYING SOMETHING

THE FOLLOWING ARE VALID ARGUMENTS BASED ON THE TEXT OF EACH MOVIE:

-**TRANSFORMERS 3** ARGUES FOR NOT TRUSTING OUR GOVERNMENT AND ADVOCATES MILITARY AUTONOMY.

-**SHREK** ARGUES YOU CAN ONLY DATE WITHIN YOUR RACE.

-**LIFE OF PI** PRESENTS A STORY THAT ISN'T REAL AS EXAMPLE OF THE POWER OF RELIGIOUS FAITH, THUS ARGUING RELIGION IS FALSE.

-**TOP GUN** ARGUES... WELL... ACTUALLY, QUENTIN TARANTINO ARGUED THAT ONE BEST.

ALL THESE EXAMPLES ARE SILLY EXTREMES, BUT PROOF POSITIVE THAT WHETHER OR NOT WE MEAN TO PUT MESSAGES IN OUR FILMS AND MEDIA, THEY ARE STILL THERE.

THIS IS AN INESCAPABLE FACT OF AUTHORSHIP AND THE ANCHOR BEHIND THE ENTIRE FIELD OF SEMIOTICS. EVERYTHING YOUR CHARACTERS DO AND SAY AUTOMATICALLY IMPLIES SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY THOSE CHARACTERS VIEW LIFE, OTHER PEOPLE, AND CONFLICT. AND THE WAY THE NARRATIVE REGARDS THOSE CHARACTERS CAN'T HELP BUT SHOW HOW YOU, THE PROVERBIAL AUTHOR, EQUALLY VIEW LIFE, OTHER PEOPLE, AND CONFLICT. EVEN IF YOU WROTE THOSE CHARACTERS SUBCONSCIOUSLY AS PART OF A PURE AUTOMATED ATTEMPT TO EXECUTE YOUR NARRATIVE, AND DID SO ONLY IN AN ATTEMPT TO BE ENTERTAINING, IT IS STILL TRUE: YOUR WRITING IS INHERENTLY ARGUING FOR *SOMETHING*.

BUT LET'S GET THIS OUT OF THE WAY IMMEDIATELY: PLEASE DO NOT ASSUME THIS MEANS THAT CHARACTERS ARE AUTOMATICALLY A STAND-IN FOR THE AUTHOR'S BELIEFS OR SOME SILLY NOTION LIKE THAT. OFTEN IT IS QUITE THE OPPOSITE. THE ART OF NARRATIVE IS INSTEAD DEPENDENT ON CONTEXTUALIZATION. IT'S ABOUT THE WAY THE ENTIRE PORTRAYAL OF EACH ENTITY ADDS UP TOGETHER THROUGH THE ACTION THEMSELVES, THROUGH THE REASONING, THROUGH THE TONE, THROUGH THE SUBTEXT, AND ULTIMATELY WITHIN OUR ABILITY TO PROCESS IT. AND EVEN IF THAT MAY SEEM LIKE AN OBFUSCATION OF INTENT, THE TOTALITY OF EVERYTHING IN A NARRATIVE HAS CONSEQUENCES AND SUPPLIES CONTEXT. FROM THERE, THE MESSAGES OF A FILM ERUPT OUTWARD NO MATTER WHAT.

A GOOD STORYTELLER, HOWEVER, KNOWS HOW TO HARNESS THOSE MESSAGES.

THEY USE THE STORY'S CONTEXT TO CREATE THEIR OWN MEANING. SURE, THE NUANCES OF SEMIOTICS ARE BEST LEFT FOR THE REALM OF CRITICISM, BUT THE ONE CORE THING THAT YOU, THE PROVERBIAL WRITER, NEED TO HAVE IS A SIMPLE AWARENESS OF WHAT YOUR WORK IS SAYING. YOU DON'T NEED TO UNDERSTAND EVERY PART OF IT, BUT THERE HAS TO BE AN ANCHOR. IT CAN BE SOME GRAND ON-THE-NOSE POLITICAL STATEMENT, IT CAN BE A SPECIFIC THOUGHT

ABOUT A CHARACTER'S BEHAVIOR, IT CAN BE A SIMPLE JUSTIFICATION OF HEROISM AND KINDNESS. BUT YOUR WORK IS SAYING SOMETHING. AND THE SHEER AWARENESS OF WHATEVER THAT IDEA IS, YOUR THEME, YOUR PURPOSE, OFTEN DOES HALF THE JOB OF SORTING THAT CONTEXT FOR YOU. HULK WILL SAY IT AGAIN: *THE MERE ACT OF HAVING A VIEWPOINT AND THEME IN YOUR HEAD WHILE WRITING WILL DO HALF THE JOB FOR YOU.*

HULK KNOWS THAT SOUNDS LIKE AN OVER-SIMPLIFICATION, BUT HULK SAYS IT ALL THE DAMN TIME: AWARENESS MATTERS. EVERYTHING YOU WRITE IN YOUR SCREENPLAY MEANS SOMETHING, SO HARNESS AWAY! THIS IS ACTUALLY WHERE WE GET INTO THE "SOUL" CONCEPT OF THAT POPULAR "MIND, BODY, SOUL" APPROACH TO MOVIES HULK MENTIONED IN THE INSPIRATION SECTION, BUT HULK ARGUES THE INTENT WAS TO PROVIDE THEMES THAT CAN BE USED TO COMPEL BOTH YOUR CHARACTERS AND *THEN THE AUDIENCE*. MEANING IT IS THE INTENT OF WHAT YOU'RE ARGUING WHICH IS YOUR BEST CHANCE TO CONNECT TO A PERSON'S SOUL.

AND THAT MEANS THAT THEMATIC MESSAGES ARE NOT A BURDEN OR A RESPONSIBILITY, BUT A DAMN OPPORTUNITY.

WHEN LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS OF OUR MOST DUTIFUL SENSIBILITY, THEME ALLOWS THE AUTHOR TO SAY SOMETHING IMPORTANT. IT DOESN'T NEED TO BE OPPRESSIVE AND DOMINATE THE STORY OR SENSE OF FUN IN YOUR FILM. EVEN IN THE MOST SILLY OF COMEDIES LIKE **THE OTHER GUYS**, MCKAY FINDS A WAY TO COMMENT ON THE THINGS HE FINDS IMPORTANT AND HE MAKES THEM WORK WITH THE CONTEXT OF A SEND-UP OF ACTION MOVIES. FOR INSTANCE, HE FINDS IT INTERESTING THAT ACTION FILMS OFTEN FEATURE THESE CRAZY ETHNIC BAD GUYS WHO OPERATE DRUG CARTELS AND MURDER AND STUFF, BUT WHOSE EXPLOITS ARE ALMOST NOTHING COMPARED TO THE PERVASIVE SHAME OF WHITE-COLLAR CRIME (WHICH OFTEN FUNDS THEM). SURE, THE FILM MAKES FUN OF OVER-THE-TOP CAR CHASES AND CLICHÉD SUPER-POLICE OFFICERS, BUT IT IS ALSO SERIOUS CRITICISM ABOUT THE SIMPLISTIC WAY ACTION FILMS PAINT GOOD AND BAD.

AND IN A LESS PREACHY WAY, IT'S REALLY JUST SAYING SOMETHING ABOUT HUMAN NATURE. SO MANY OF OUR FILMS ARE ABOUT LOVE, LOSS, HOPE, AND HEARTBREAK. THEY ARE UNIVERSAL SOUL-CONNECTORS, BUT DON'T FORGET YOU ARE INHERENTLY ARGUING SOMETHING ABOUT THOSE IDEAS, WHETHER YOU MEAN TO OR NOT. SO HARNESS! AND EVEN IF YOU JUST WANT YOUR MOVIE TO BE FUN AND NOT OVERWHELM YOUR AUDIENCE WITH MESSAGES, THEN IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TACT. OR HECK, YOU CAN POST-MODERNLY THUMB YOUR NOSE AT THE IDEA OF "SAYING SOMETHING," AND AVOID WHAT YOU THINK IS TRITE OR DIDACTIC, BUT ISN'T THAT JUST THE FORMALIZATION OF YOUR OWN MESSAGE? HULK MEANS, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU ACTUALLY THINK, ISN'T THE SCRIPT JUST AN OPPORTUNITY TO HARNESS THAT MESSAGE IN A COHERENT WAY?

REWARD BEHAVIOR YOU THINK SHOULD BE REWARDED. PUNISH BEHAVIOR YOU THINK SHOULD BE PUNISHED. EXPOSE THE SHAME OF HOW BEHAVIOR THAT SHOULD BE PUNISHED IS IN FACT REWARDED, OR VICE VERSA. SHOW WHAT YOU THINK.

THEME IS ALWAYS AN OPPORTUNITY, NOT A BURDEN.

SPEAKING OF OPPORTUNITIES...

21. DON'T WRITE WOMEN JUST IN THE CONTEXT OF MEN

OKAY...

HULK IS NOT GOING TO GET BIG INTO THIS, BECAUSE ANYTHING THAT DIPS INTO THE ARENA OF SEXISM BECOMES SUCH A DIFFICULT TOPIC TO DISCUSS ON A LARGER CANVAS. SO HULK WANTS TO CUT THROUGH ALL THAT AND JUST SAY THAT ALL WRITERS HAVE TO DO A BETTER JOB WITH HOW THEY PORTRAY WOMEN. THEY JUST DO. WE SHOULD ALL AT LEAST BE ABLE TO ADMIT THAT THE CULTURE OF WOMEN IN FILM IS IN A BAD, BAD WAY RIGHT NOW.

THERE ARE A LOT OF LEVELS TO IT. THERE'S THE OBVIOUS, ACTIVE SEXISM OF A MALE AUDIENCE

THAT DOESN'T CARE AND JUST ARGUES THAT WOMEN ONLY NEED TO BE IN A MOVIE SO MEN HAVE SOMETHING TO LOOK AT (THIS ACTUALLY HAPPENS. A LOT). AND THEN THERE IS THE CASUAL SEXISM OF "LET'S ONLY DEFINE WOMEN THROUGH THE GAZE AND CONTEXT OF THE MALE CHARACTERS!" OR EVEN THE SUBCONSCIOUS SEXISM OF "THE GIRL IN THIS MOVIE IS THE WAY MORE INTERESTING, DRIVING FORCE OF THE NARRATIVE AND THEME, BUT GUYS ARE DEFAULT MAIN CHARACTERS!" OF COURSE, GETTING INTO THE HOW OR WHY THESE TROPES DEVELOP WOULD BE THE SUBJECT OF THEIR OWN BOOK, BUT SUFFICE TO SAY THEY ARE A PROBLEM.

AND SO MUCH OF IT IS JUST LACK OF AWARENESS. SO MUCH OF IT IS A FAILURE TO ADMIT A PROBLEM.

AND HERE'S THE REASON IT MATTERS MOST OF ALL: IT IS IMPORTANT TO CREATE INTERESTING, VIVID WOMEN *FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR NARRATIVE ALTOGETHER.*

IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH POLITICS OR ANY "-ISM." IT HAS TO DO WITH GOOD STORYTELLING. YOU WANT ALL YOUR CHARACTERS TO HAVE THEIR OWN STUFF GOING ON. YOU WANT YOUR CHARACTERS TO BE TEXTURED AND SEEM HUMAN AND HAVE PURPOSE. NOTICE HULK DIDN'T SAY HULK WANTS YOU TO "WRITE STRONG ROLE MODELS!" BECAUSE THAT'S NOT THE SAME THING AS WRITING VIVID CHARACTERS. AND THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IS HOW OFTEN FEMALE CHARACTERS ARE MISSING BASIC HUMAN TRAITS. AND ANY ATTEMPTS TO FIX THE PROBLEM ARE OFTEN MET WITH A PHRASE HULK HEARS ALL THE TIME FROM SCREENWRITING STUDENTS (AND EVEN PROFESSIONAL WRITERS):

"But I don't know how to write women!"

ON THE MOST BASIC LEVEL THAT'S JUST BULLPOOP BECAUSE IT IS A SIMPLE MISUNDERSTANDING OF CHARACTERIZATION THAT ASSUMES A WOMAN HAS TO BE DEFINED BY "BEING FEMALE" AND NOT SIMPLY *BEING A FEMALE* WHO HAS HER OWN CHARACTER WORTH. 99% OF THE PLOTTING YOU CAN DO HAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH GENDER ITSELF. IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE, RELATIONSHIPS, EXTERNAL CONFLICTS, OR EVEN SAVING THE WORLD. YES THERE ARE A BUNCH OF WAYS TO TALK ABOUT GENDER ISSUES WITH YOUR WRITING, BUT YOU REALLY DON'T HAVE TO FEEL LIKE WRITING "AN INTERESTING WOMAN" AUTOMATICALLY IMPLIES TACKLING GENDER POLITICS. WE HAVE TO START ON THE MOST BASIC LEVEL OF IMPROVEMENT AND THAT MEANS HULK JUST WANTS YOU TO GIVE FEMALE CHARACTERS STUFF TO DO! STUFF THAT DOESN'T HAVE TO DO WITH MEN OR PASSIVE SEXUALITY! IF YOU CAN WRITE A MAN, YOU CAN WRITE A WOMAN. TO SUGGEST ANYTHING OTHER THAN THAT IS RIDICULOUS AND LAZY.

HULK JUST WANTS US TO GET THE BASIC IDEA OF NOT ALWAYS WRITING WOMEN AS VACANT OR DAMSELS OR PASSIVE CHARACTERS. AND IT'S NOT LIKE THIS IS SOME CONVERSATION RESERVED JUST FOR "MACHO" MALE-AIMED FILMS, EITHER: A LOT OF ROMANTIC COMEDIES STARRING WOMEN ARE PARTICULARLY GUILTY OF THIS. ACTUALLY, [THE BEST THING](#) HULK SAW ON THE TOPIC WAS FROM THE POPULAR BLOGGER BITTER GERTRUDE WHO IS THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF IMPACT THEATER IN BERKELEY. HERE SHE ADDRESSED THE STRANGE AND PROBLEMATIC SIMILARITY OF NARRATIVE APPROACH FROM YOUNG WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS:

"I'm seeing a significant amount of plays by women with female characters structurally positioned as the central character. However, that female character isn't driving the narrative— she is, instead, just reactive to whatever the male characters are doing. It's a woman sitting around wondering what to do about some man in her life, talking to her friends about some man, interacting with some man about his decisions or actions. It's still a story with a central male character, just told from the woman's point of view. If it's a lesbian play, just change that male character to a female character. The structurally central female character is just as reactive.

Here's the weird part: I ALMOST NEVER SEE PLAYS LIKE THIS FROM MEN. When I get a play by a man, the central character, male or female, almost always drives the narrative and has an active arc.

Ensemble pieces don't change anything— they work the same way, just in the plural.

So what the effing eff is going on here? I rarely see this from the more experienced, accomplished women playwrights, but it's shockingly common from early career women writers."

HULK LIKES HER USE OF CAPS! BUT THE PIECE RECEIVED A GOOD AMOUNT OF FALLOUT WHEREIN A LOT OF WOMEN ARGUED THAT IT WAS REPRESENTATIVE OF WHAT A LOT OF WOMEN'S LIVES ARE LIKE, BUT WITHIN THE PIECE ITSELF SHE NAILS WHY THAT THINKING IS PROBLEMATIC:

“Being empathetic and reactive aren't necessarily bad things, but these received narratives of how to 'correctly' perform our genders are having an impact on the way some playwrights are writing, and that impact is working against some women playwrights' ability to tell their stories.”

IT'S NOT THAT PASSIVITY CAN'T BE PART OF THE CHARACTER'S OPERATIONAL METHOD, BUT GOOD STORYTELLING REQUIRES THAT THE AUTHOR BE CONSCIOUS THAT PASSIVITY IS THE SUBJECT, EITHER BY TRANSCENDING THAT PASSIVITY WITH CHARACTER GROWTH (ONE OF HULK'S FAVORITE MOVIES EVER, **JULIET OF THE SPIRITS**, IS ABOUT TRAVERSING PASSIVENESS AND THE SAME GOES FOR IBSEN'S **A DOLL'S HOUSE**) OR SUCCUMBING TO THE TRAGEDY OF PASSIVITY. EITHER VERSION DISPLAYS AN AUTHORIAL INTENT TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE REALITY. IT'S JUST LIKE HULK ARGUED IN THE CONTEXT SECTION: WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR NARRATIVE PROVIDES A VIEWPOINT.

AND THE PROBLEM HULK SEES IS THAT THE PLAYS IN QUESTION, AS WELL AS A WHOLE HOST OF ROMANTIC COMEDIES AND TV SITCOMS ABOUT MARRIAGE, ARE OFTEN *REWARDING* THAT PASSIVITY. AND WHILE THAT CONTRIBUTES HORRIBLY TO THE OVERALL DOUBLE STANDARD AND CONDITIONS OF PATRIARCHY AND ALL THAT AWFUL STUFF, HULK'S PROBLEM FOR YOU IS A BIT DIFFERENT:

IT MAKES FOR BAD DRAMA.

FOR YOU, THE WRITER, IT REALLY IS THAT SIMPLE. HULK JUST EXPLAINED TO YOU WHY GOOD DRAMA IS ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING OF STAKES AND MOTIVATION. BUT HOW CAN YOU DO THAT WHEN YOU SKIMP ON THE CHARACTERIZATION AND PARTICIPATION OF 50% OF THE PEOPLE ON THIS PLANET? IT IS INSTINCTUALLY FELT. GOOD DRAMA IS BUILT ON THE FOUNDATION OF CHARACTER GROWTH. IT IS ABOUT CHARACTERS MAKING DECISIONS AND BEING COMPELLING AND HAVING ACTIVE INTEREST IN THEIR OWN LIVES. AND WHEN THEY DON'T, THE AUDIENCE NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND WHY THAT IS LIMITING THEM. CONTEXT HAS TO RULE. IN ESSENCE, THE STRIVING FOR GOOD DRAMA BACKS UP THE PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING, WHETHER THROUGH THE GAINING OF KNOWLEDGE, WHICH IS OFTEN RIFE WITH SORROW, OR BY HOW IT FEELS FOR HUMANITY, OR MAYBE EVEN SPEAKS TO INTEGRITY. AND THE GREAT THING ABOUT DRAMA IS IT CAN DO THOSE THINGS EVEN WHEN PEOPLE ARE BEING THE OPPOSITE OF THOSE THINGS. AND WE ARE SIMPLY DROPPING THE BALL WHEN IT COMES TO DOING *ANY OF THIS* WITH OUR FEMALE CHARACTERS.

YOU MAY THINK THIS ISSUE IS NOT ALL THAT IMPORTANT TO THE STORY YOU ARE TELLING, BUT EVERY FILM ON THE PLANET CAN BE MADE BETTER BY MAKING THE FEMALE CHARACTERS THREE-DIMENSIONAL. SERIOUSLY. IT'S NOT A REVOLUTIONARY CONCEPT. *EVERY FILM CAN BENEFIT*. THINK OF ALL THE RARE FILMS THAT ACTUALLY MANAGE TO DO IT. THINK ABOUT HOW EVEN THE MOST BASIC EXAMPLE OF A NOT-EMBARRASSING CHARACTER LIKE PRINCESS LEIA HAS GONE ON TO HAVE SUCH CULTURAL RESONANCE. THINK THAT'S AN ACCIDENT? SHE'S A SMART, CAPABLE LEADER WITH HER OWN OPINIONS, HER OWN STUFF GOING ON, DISPLAYS A WHOLE RANGE OF KINDNESS AND ANGER AND LUST AND FRUSTRATION AND NUANCE. AND WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT, BUT IT JUST SO HAPPENS *EVERY* AUDIENCE MEMBER COMES TO LOVE HER. EVEN THE MOST SEXIST DUDES ON EARTH, WHO INSIST THEY DON'T "NEED" INTERESTING PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN THEIR FILMS, ALL ADORE LEIA. IT'S NOT AN ACCIDENT. WE CAN'T HELP BUT ENJOY WHEN FULLY-RANGED AND INTERESTING *PEOPLE* ARE ONSCREEN, NO MATTER WHAT GENDER THEY ARE. IT'S NOT MAGIC, FOLKS.

WE ARE SIMPLY MOVED BY INTERESTING, HUMAN CHARACTERS.

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NOTE: WE ARE FINALLY WINDING DOWN THE CONCEPTUAL SECTION (HURRAY), SO THE LAST TWO POINTS WILL COVER THE IDEAS BEHIND BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS.

22. THE VALUE OF PREEXISTING CONFLICT

"Everything was just fine! And then it wasn't!"

WHILE THIS DESCRIPTION SUITS A NUMBER OF WONDERFUL MOVIES, HULK IS HERE TO TELL YOU THAT IT IS ALSO THE FIRST ACT OF A WHOLE SHIT LOAD OF BAD MOVIES. WE GET A LOOK AT SOME WORLD THAT IS BUILT UP WITH NON-VITAL, NON-COMPELLING CHARACTER WORK AND THEN AT A CERTAIN POINT, IT'S LIKE THE MOVIE *ACTUALLY DECIDES TO START*. AND WHILE THERE IS TOTALLY A WAY TO BUILD UP NORMALCY AND THEN TAKE A SPECTACULAR RIGHT TURN WITH YOUR NARRATIVE, THAT SORT OF WRITING TAKES A LOT OF DEFT UNDERSTANDING OF RHYTHMS AND SOME SERIOUS CRAFT. SO INSTEAD, HULK IS ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS OF A LOT OF OUR MORE TRADITIONAL HOLLYWOOD NARRATIVES, LIKE ACTION FILMS AND ROMANTIC COMEDIES.

SO MANY OF THOSE FILMS DON'T USE THAT TIME FOR ANYTHING IMPORTANT OR CRITICAL TO THE STORY. THIS HAS BECOME OUR MODUS OPERANDI. EVEN WITH SCRIPTS THAT TRY TO START OFF WITH SOME BIG ACTION SCENE OR ATTENTION-GRABBING DEVICE, IT IS OFTEN AN EMPTY GESTURE. IT IS OFTEN ENERGY WITHOUT PURPOSE. IT IS OFTEN NOT EVEN PART OF THE REAL STORY. THEY ASSUME JUST BECAUSE WE'RE WATCHING OUR CHARACTERS THAT WE'RE BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEM AND IT TAKES SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT TO INGRAIN STORY PURPOSE.

AND THUS SO MANY MOVIES PASS UP ON THE OPPORTUNITY TO INGRAIN THEIR FILMS FROM THE VERY ONSET WITH A SENSE OF WEIGHT. ALL THEY HAVE TO DO IS START PEOPLE IN THE MIDST OF A WORLD *ALREADY IN CONFLICT*. DOING THIS GIVES YOUR STORY IMMEDIACY, IMPORTANCE, STAKES, *MEANING*.

THINK ABOUT HOW MANY GREAT MOVIES START RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A LARGER CONFLICT. THERE'S BIG, BOLD EXAMPLES LIKE **STAR WARS**, WHICH FAMOUSLY STARTS IN THE MIDDLE OF A SPACE BATTLE (WITH *THAT* EPIC SHOT TOO) AND THERE ARE HUGELY UNDERRATED MOVIES LIKE MANN'S **MIAMI VICE** (IT'S A SUPER PLOTTY, LESS-ACCESSIBLE MOVIE THAT WAS USING DIGITAL TOO EARLY, BUT IT'S STILL GREAT). IT DOESN'T EVEN NEED TO BE SOME GRAND SCALE THING. WE CAN START IN THE MIDDLE OF INTIMATE HUMAN PROBLEMS TOO. A PARENT'S DEATH. A RELATIONSHIP AT ODDS. A PAST PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA. STARTING OFF WITH THESE PROBLEMS GIVES YOUR SCRIPT IMMEDIACY.

THIS ISN'T SOME RULE THAT INHERENTLY WORKS BETTER, IT'S JUST THAT HULK THINKS PEOPLE TREAT THE OPPOSITE AS THE RULE. SO DON'T BE AFRAID TO JUMP RIGHT INTO IT. IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT THE GREATEST WRITER OF ALL TIME, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, LOVED DROPPING US RIGHT DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF A LARGER CONFLICT. THAT WAY ONE ENTERS A WORLD THAT ALREADY FEELS LIVED-IN AND RIFE WITH HISTORY. IT CREATES A WORLD THAT WE ALREADY KNOW HAS CONSEQUENCES AND IMPORTANCE.

THIS ISN'T TO SAY PREEXISTING CONFLICT SHOULD BE REQUIRED FOR EVERY MOVIE, NOT FOR A SECOND! JUST THAT SO MANY STORIES SEEM TO MISS OUT ON AN OPPORTUNITY TO USE IT. AND THAT'S A SHAME.

SO KEEP IT IN MIND!

23. THE ENDING IS THE CONCEIT

IF ALL THE IDEAS IN OUR FILMS MEAN SOMETHING, THEN YOUR ENDING SHOULD SAY *EVERYTHING*.

WE OFTEN LOOK AT ENDINGS AS THOSE THINGS THAT JUST WRAP UP THE STORY AND MAKE US FEEL BETTER AFTER THE CONFLICT IS OVER, BUT A BETTER WAY TO THINK OF AN ENDING IS FOR IT TO HAMMER IN *EVERYTHING YOU EVER MEANT*. ALL THE STORY, ALL THOSE THEMES, ALL THOSE

IDEAS, ALL THAT WORK, IT SHOULD RESONATE AS THE AUDIENCE LEAVES THE THEATER. IT SHOULD NOT BE EXTINGUISHED IN A MERCIFUL, PLACATING WHIMPER.

SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T EVEN NEED NOT BE A BIG THING, BUT A SMALL HUMAN MOMENT. FOR INSTANCE, HULK ADORES THE ENDINGS OF PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON, WHICH ALWAYS SEEM TO END ON A SLIGHT GESTURE OF SORTS. SPOILERS IF YOU NEVER SEEN THESE FILMS, BUT WITH **SYDNEY (HARD EIGHT)** OUR TITULAR CHARACTER COVERS THE BLOOD ON HIS CUFF, AS HE IS A MAN WHO HAS ALWAYS KEPT HIS VIOLENCE UNDER A SURFACE OF SHINE AND PROPRIETY. WITH **BOOGIE NIGHTS** WE HAVE EDDIE ADAMS FROM TORRANCE STARING AT A MIRROR WITH HIS JUNK OUT, BUT HE HAS COMPLETELY LOST HIMSELF: HE'S DELIVERING A MONOLOGUE NOT EVEN AS DIRK DIGGLER, BUT HIS CHARACTER'S CHARACTER BROCK LANDERS, FINALLY PUMPING HIS EGO / ID / WEINER UP WITH "YOU'RE A STAR! YOU'RE A STAR!" OR WITH **MAGNOLIA**, WHERE THE SADDEST, MOST TRAGIC CHARACTER FINALLY EARNS THE ABILITY TO SMILE. OR WITH **THERE WILL BE BLOOD**, WHEREIN PLAINVIEW'S MEGALOMANIA IS FINALLY SATIED WHEN HE HAS COMPLETELY RUINED AND ULTIMATELY KILLED AN INSIGNIFICANT, YET ETHICALLY BOTHERSOME FIGURE FROM HIS PAST, CITING "I'M FINISHED." AND MOST RECENTLY WITH **THE MASTER**, IN WHICH OUR SINCERELY DAMAGED AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY-PLAYED-WITH PROTAGONIST OF FREDDIE QUELL HAS FINALLY MADE A TANGIBLE (IF PUERILE) CONNECTION WITH A LADY IN THE BAR, THE FIGURATIVE SAND CASTLE FIGURE MADE REAL. ALL THESE MOVIES END WITH TRULY STRIKING MOMENTS THAT DON'T FIT IN A LOT OF CONVENTIONAL "RESOLUTION" MODELS, BUT THEY CONNECT WITH US BECAUSE THEY HAMMER HOME THE ENTIRE THEME OF THEIR RESPECTIVE MOVIES WITH GREAT CHARACTER MOMENTS.

ONE FILM HULK LOVES TO USE AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE ENDING BEING THE CONCEIT IS JAMES GUNN'S EXCELLENT **SUPER**, WHEREIN HE DIDN'T JUST USE THE ENDING TO RAM HOME ALL HIS IDEAS, BUT USED IT TO REVEAL WHAT THE THEMATIC IDEA OF WHAT THE FILM WAS *REALLY* ABOUT THE WHOLE TIME. AND IT WASN'T SOME CHEAP PLOT TRICK OR A TWIST OR ANYTHING AS TRITE AS THAT. THE FILM JUST TOOK ON A BIGGER, MORE HUMAN AND EMOTIONAL SCOPE. THE FILM, OFTEN HARD-EDGED AND SATIRICAL, WAS TRANSFORMED BY A REAL EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY TO WHAT HAD TRANSPIRED AND THEN WAS DRIVEN HOME BY THE THEMATIC HAMMER. IT WAS DOWNRIGHT RESONANT AND RE-SHAPED THE ENTIRE FILM YOU SAW. AND THE MOVIE COULD HAVE SO EASILY PLACATED US AND ALLEVIATED OUR WORRIES AFTER THE CLIMAX, BUT GUNN REALLY UNDERSTOOD HOW MUCH YOU COULD SAY WITH AN ENDING.

ENDINGS ALWAYS MATTER AND THEY MATTER THEMATICALLY, DAMMIT. WHY ELSE WOULD SHAKESPEARE (THE AFOREMENTIONED GREATEST WRITER OF ALL TIME) *ALWAYS* END HIS PLAYS WITH SOME HAUNTING OR BEAUTIFUL MONOLOGUE? ONE WHICH WAS DELIVERED BY AN ACTOR *RIGHT TO THE AUDIENCE*? ONE IN WHICH THEY WOULD RUMINATE ON THE EVENTS THAT HAVE TRANSPIRED, WHAT IT MEANT, AND HOW THEY SHOULD RESONATE GOING FORWARD?... HULK MEAN... HE IS BASICALLY SAYING THE CONCEIT RIGHT AT THE END!!!

LIKE HULK KEEPS SAYING WITH MOST OF THESE POINTS, DO NOT LOOK AT THE ENDING OF YOUR PIECE AS A BURDEN, BUT AS AN OPPORTUNITY. AN OPPORTUNITY TO SAY EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO SAY IN YOUR MOVIE. IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE POETIC, RESONANT, AND INTERESTING. IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE SOULFUL AND UNDERLINE THE PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING.

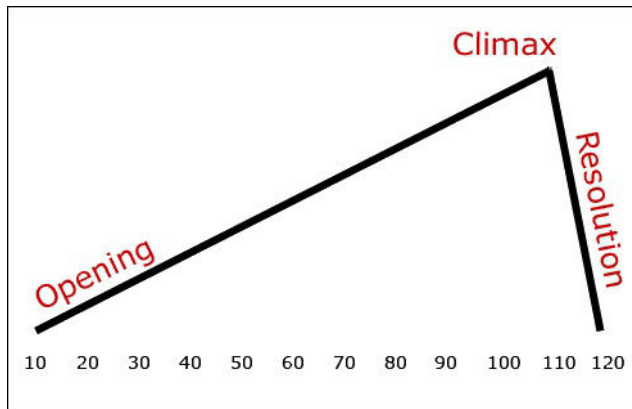
AND IF YOU SKIRT ON THAT OPPORTUNITY? AND JUST WRAP A FEW THINGS UP WITHOUT LIVING UP TO THE REST OF YOUR FILM? THEN THAT MIGHT BE A BIT OF A PROBLEM BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT THE AUDIENCE LEAVES WITH. HULK SWEARS THIS IS WHY SO MANY PEOPLE FORGET MOVIES SO QUICKLY. THEY MAY HAVE A SMILE ON THEIR FACE AS THE CREDITS ROLL, BUT THEY NEED SOMETHING TO STAY WITH THEM. SO GIVE THEM A REASON TO REMEMBER IT ALL ON THEIR WAY OUT OF THE THEATER.

THE ENDING IS THE CONCEIT.

SO HAMMER HOME YOUR POINTS. END STRONG. SAY SOMETHING.

NOW LET'S QUIT THIS CONCEPTUAL SHIT AND GET INTO PART FIVE AND HOW TO USE STRUCTURE!

PART FIVE - - HOW TO TELL THE STORY – STRUCTURALLY



NOTE: THE CORRESPONDING PICTURE OF SCREENPLAY MANAGEMENT, SHOWN ABOVE, CAN DIE IN A FIRE.

MOST SCREENPLAY BOOKS ARE OBSESSED WITH TELLING YOU EXACTLY HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR SCREENPLAY. THEY GIVE YOU CHARTS AND GRAPHS AND TELL YOU ALL STORIES WORK IN THE SAME WAY AND GIVE YOU PAINT-BY-NUMBERS GUIDES TO DOING THE SAME.

HULK REJECTS THAT CRAP.

BECAUSE THE SAD TRUTH IS, THAT APPROACH DOESN'T ACTUALLY TEACH YOU HOW A STORY WORKS AT ALL. IT JUST TELLS YOU WHAT A STORY SOMETIMES LOOKS LIKE AND HOW TO COPY IT. AND THAT WON'T HELP YOU UNDERSTAND HOW TO WRITE ONE BIT. IT'S LIKE USING A SINGLE RECIPE WITHOUT ACTUALLY UNDERSTANDING HOW TO COOK.

SO HULK IS GOING TO DIVE HEADLONG INTO STRUCTURE TOO (BECAUSE, YEAH, IT'S SUPER IMPORTANT), BUT IT'S GOING TO BE FOCUSED ON UNDERSTANDING HOW IT WORKS! THIS IS GOING TO BE ABOUT GIVING YOU THE MECHANISMS YOU NEED TO CRAFT AND TELL THE STORIES YOU WANT TO TELL AND SAY WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY. UNDERSTAND THE "WHY" OF HOW ALL THESE TACTICS WORK AND SUDDENLY YOU WILL BE ABLE TO COOK, SO TO SPEAK. AND HULK ASSURES YOU THAT HULK'S APPROACH IS NOT GOING TO FEEL RESTRICTIVE.

IT'S HOPEFULLY GOING TO FREE YOU.

* * *

SO THE PARSING OUT OF A SCREENPLAY'S STRUCTURE (AKA DECIDING HOW TO TELL YOUR STORY) IS COMMONLY REFERRED TO AS "BREAKING A STORY." HULK LIKES THAT PHRASE BETTER THAN "CONSTRUCTING A STORY" BECAUSE THAT WORD REMINDS HULK OF THE IDEA OF LOGISTICAL ASSEMBLAGE, WHEREAS BREAKING A STORY IS ABOUT TAKING THE IDEA ITSELF, ALMOST AS IF IT WAS A RAW CHUNK OF MARBLE, AND CARVING IT DOWN TO YOUR IMMACULATE SCULPTURE. IT'S LIKE YOU ARE TAKING YOUR INCLINATION AND THE STORY ALREADY LOCKED IN YOUR MIND, AND BREAKING IT DOWN SO YOU UNDERSTAND IT ON A STRUCTURAL LEVEL. IT'S LIKE YOU ARE MANIPULATING WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW ON AN INSTINCTUAL LEVEL. HECK, MAYBE IT'S LIKE WORKING WITH PLAY-DOH OR SOMETHING. WHATEVER YOUR METAPHOR, HULK LIKES THIS KIND OF THINKING MUCH, MUCH BETTER THAN THE NOTION OF "CONSTRUCTION."

ANYCRAP, LET'S LOOK AT THE BEST WAYS TO BREAK A STORY!

24. ECONOMY IS YOUR NEW SECOND BEST FRIEND

A FRIEND OF HULK'S SAID SOMETHING FASCINATING RECENTLY. HE MADE THE COMMENT THAT THERE'S NOT A SINGLE SUMMER TENT-POLE RELEASED IN THE LAST TEN YEARS THAT COULDN'T STAND TO LOSE AT LEAST 15-20 MINUTES.

THIS IS A TRUTH.

IT IS STUNNING HOW MANY MOVIES TODAY TELL THEIR STORIES WITH A TON OF FAT. AND NO, HULK NOT TALKING ABOUT MERE "PACING" WHICH IS BUILT IN THE EDIT AND DIRECTION (AND SOMETHING THAT IS ACTUALLY EXECUTED FASTER THAN EVER THESE DAYS). HULK IS TALKING ABOUT SCRIPT-LEVEL FAT. HULK IS TALKING ABOUT WHOLE SCENES THAT HAVE NO PURPOSE OTHER THAN TO BE FUNNY OR COOL. HULK WILL GET INTO THE INCLINATIONS THAT CREATE THIS STORY FAT IN THE NEXT FEW CHAPTERS, BUT THE POINT IS THAT YOU REALLY, REALLY NEED TO EMBRACE THE CONCEPT OF ECONOMY. IT SHOULD BE THE HUGE THOUGHT IN THE BACK OF YOUR HEAD. REPEAT IT AGAIN AND AGAIN: *TELL ONLY AS MUCH STORY AS YOU NEED...* AND IF YOU'RE TELLING MORE THAN YOU NEED, IF YOU'RE DELVING INTO CHEWING ON THE PROVERBIAL FAT, WELL, THEN THERE BETTER BE A DAMN GOOD REASON FOR IT.

LOOK, HULK ALREADY KNOWS THAT YOU MIGHT BE SUSPICIOUS OF WRITING WITHOUT THAT KIND OF LOOSE FREEDOM, AS THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS TO EVERY RULE. SOME MOVIES EXCEL IN HOW THEY ARE ABLE TO REVEL IN THE FAT. QUENTIN TARANTINO AND THE COENS HAVE LONG-RUNNING TANGENTS AND JOKES, BUT HULK WANTS YOU TO KEEP ONE VERY IMPORTANT FACT IN MIND: THEY ARE SOME OF THE BEST WRITERS ON THE PLANET AND CAN DO WHAT HULK IS ARGUING FOR HERE IN THEIR SLEEP. AND BY COMPARISON, HULK READS FOUR SCRIPTS A WEEK OF PEOPLE INDULGING THE FAT FOR NO OTHER PURPOSE THAN 1) PADDING STUFF OUT OR 2) BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW HOW TO GET WHATEVER IS FUNNY OR INTERESTING ABOUT THAT FAT INTO MORE PURPOSEFUL METHODS OF STORYTELLING.

BUT THE REAL VALUE OF KEEPING ECONOMY IN MIND AS YOU WRITE IS THAT IT'S A PERFECT LEARNING TOOL. BY FOCUSING ON ECONOMY AS A DEVELOPING WRITER, YOU WILL FORCE YOURSELF INTO MOMENTS WHERE YOU LEARN HOW TO COMBINE THEMATIC IDEAS WITH CHARACTER. HOW TO LINK A "FUN" SCENE DIRECTLY INTO THE PLOT. AND HULK GUARANTEES YOU THAT BY VALUING ECONOMY FROM THE ONSET, IT WILL HELP YOU CREATE A TIGHTER, MORE FOCUSED, EXCITING SCRIPT.

BETTER YET, IF YOU DO MANAGE TO WRITE A CRACKLING, ECONOMICAL NARRATIVE, THEN HULK IS HERE TO TELL YOU THAT IT WILL BE FAR EASIER TO INTEGRATE CHARACTERIZATION, TEXTURE AND THEME THAN IT WOULD BE TO GO IN THE OTHER DIRECTION. TRUST WHEN HULK SAYS IT IS FAR MORE DIFFICULT TO TAKE A LUMBERING STORY, FULL OF THOROUGH CHARACTERIZATION AND THEMATIC EXPLORATION, AND THEN SOMEHOW PARSE IT DOWN INTO A TIGHT STORY. SO WHY NOT GO THE OTHER DIRECTION?

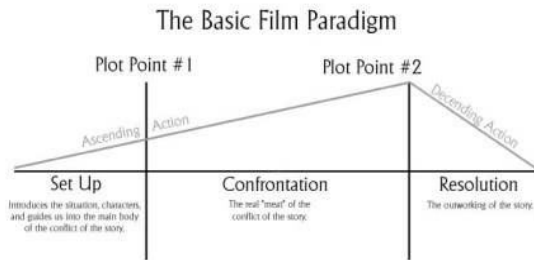
IN EVERY KIND OF STORY, EVEN THE MOST CASUAL CHARACTER PIECES, EVEN FILMS WITH A LEISURELY EDITING PACE, YOU STILL WANT THE CHARACTER'S EVOLUTION TO SECRETLY BE PROPULSIVE. EVEN WITH THE MOST INTIMATE, HUMAN STORIES, YOU ALWAYS WANT TO ENTER EACH SCENE WITH A NEW SENSE OF PURPOSE AND INTEREST. AND THEN YOU WANT TO DO IT OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN. YOU WANT THE FILM TO FEEL LIKE IT SHOULD NEVER END.

"Okay, Hulk! I should write a propulsive story. But what's the best way of doing that!?"

WELL... IN ORDER TO DO THAT YOU ARE FIRST GOING TO HAVE TO UNLEARN TWO OF THE MOST POPULAR STORYTELLING MODELS IN SCREENWRITING. WHY? BECAUSE THEY ARE JUST TOTALLY BOGUS.

LUCKILY, HULK IS HERE TO HELP YOU DO THAT.

25. THE MYTH OF THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE



HULK HEARS IT ALL THE TIME WHEN PEOPLE COMPLAIN ABOUT MOVIES: “IT’S THE PROBLEMS IN THE FILM’S SECOND ACT!”

ALL... THE FUCKING... TIME.

NOW, HULK UNDERSTANDS WHAT THE COMPLAINERS MEAN BY THE STATEMENT. IT IS USUALLY USED TO IMPLY WHEN A FILM IS TREADING WATER, OR LOSING TRACK OF CHARACTERS, OR RUNNING OUT OF STEAM, OR CRAMMING STUFF IN, OR WHATEVER STORY-FAULT YOU CAN THINK OF. OH, HULK GETS HOW THE COMMENT IS INTENDED. BUT THE PROBLEM WITH THIS GENERIC “SECOND ACT” DESIGNATION IS THAT IT CAN IMPLY A PROBLEM WITH VIRTUALLY ANYTHING IN THE MIDDLE PART OF STORYTELLING. MEANING IT IS A *BEYOND* VAGUE WAY TO TALK ABOUT STORY STRUCTURE.

SO WHAT CREATES SUCH WISHY-WASHY STORYTELLING? AND THE EVEN WISHY-WASHIER WAY OF EXPLAINING IT?

IT IS BECAUSE OF THE EVER-POPULAR NOTION OF **THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE**, WHICH HULK PERSONALLY FINDS TO BE THE MOST ABOMINABLE WAY TO BOTH EXPLAIN AND INSTRUCT STORYTELLING. SO FALSE IN WHAT IT DESCRIBES, SO FALSE IN WHAT IT ACHIEVES, THAT EVEN THOUGH THE PHRASE IS USED TO NEAR UBIQUITY, AND EVEN THOUGH THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF WRITERS USING THE 3 ACT MODEL AS THEIR GUIDE AT THIS VERY MOMENT...

HULK ARGUES IT IS STILL, ESSENTIALLY, A *MYTH*.

* * *

QUESTION: WHAT IS AN ACT?

PEOPLE USE THE WORD ALL THE TIME WITHOUT REALLY BOTHERING TO THINK ABOUT WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS. ISN’T THAT A LITTLE FUCKING WEIRD? ANY TIME HULK HEARS PEOPLE COMPLAINING ABOUT PROBLEMS IN A FILM’S ACT STRUCTURE OR TALKING ABOUT THEIR OWN, HULK WILL JUST ASK THEM THAT SAME QUESTION: WHAT IS AN ACT? HULK WILL ASK YOUNG STUDENTS, FILM JOURNALISTS, EVEN WORKING WRITERS AND MOST DON’T HAVE AN ANSWER. SOMETIMES THEY’LL FALL OVER THEIR WORDS. SOMETIMES THEY’LL BE HIT BY A BOLT OF SPEECHLESSNESS. BUT THEIR ANSWERS BASICALLY AMOUNT TO AN ACT BEING A TERM THAT’S A GENERAL PLACEHOLDER FOR CHUNKS OF STORY THAT USUALLY SEPARATE “BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END.” AND WELL... THAT DOESN’T ACTUALLY *MEAN* ANYTHING, DOES IT?

NO. NO, IT DOESN’T.

SO HULK’S GOT ANOTHER OF HULK’S FAMOUS WORKING DEFINITIONS FOR YOU. AND IT’S NOT OUT OF HULK’S BUTT HERE. IT’S ONE USED BY MANY GREAT SCREENWRITERS, PROFESSORS, AND OTHER WAY-SMART PEOPLE. AND THE BEST WAY TO PUT IT IS TO DEFINE AN ACT BY ITS POINT OF SEPARATION FROM THE NEXT. THUS:

THE END OF AN ACT IS A POINT IN THE STORY WHERE A CHARACTER(S) MAKES A CHOICE AND CAN NO LONGER “GO BACK.”

THE FIRST THING TO UNDERSTAND IS THAT THE USE OF THE WORD “POINT” IS PURPOSELY VAGUE. AFTER ALL, THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF STORIES, ALL WITH MANY DIFFERENT KINDS GOALS, AND THAT MEANS IT CAN SORT OF BE ANY KIND OF MOMENT.

“But Hulk! Couldn’t that point really be anything? Like a character just leaving his house and grabbing coffee or something?!?”

OKAY IT HAS TO BE *SLIGHTLY* MORE VALID THAN A SIMPLE CHANGE IN ACTION OR THE ENVIRONMENT. THE ACT BREAK CAN BE A NEW AND INTERESTING PLOT DEVELOPMENT, A POIGNANT CHARACTER REALIZATION, A PERSONALITY REVEAL, TWO PREVIOUSLY UN-MET CHARACTERS BECOMING FRIENDS, OR EVEN, IF HANDLED CORRECTLY, SOMETHING AS INSIPID AS “NO! THE BAD GUYS ARE HERE! RUN!” ... AN ACT BREAK CAN BE ANYTHING AS LONG AS IT HAS A SIGNIFICANT CHANGING EFFECT ON THE NARRATIVE RESULTING IN THE CHARACTER CHOOSING AN ACTION DEFINED BY THAT CHANGE; ONE THAT CAUSES THEM TO MOVE FORWARD IN THIS NEW REALITY WITH UNDERSTANDING.

MORE IMPORTANTLY, AN ACT BREAK CREATES *PROPULSION*.

WHAT HAS HULK SAID ABOUT CHARACTER AND EMPATHY AND ALL THIS GOOD AMAZING STUFF SO FAR? HOW MUCH HAS HULK TALKED ABOUT CHARACTERS BEING OUR GATEWAYS INTO EXPERIENCE? THE MORE WE GROUND THE STORY CHANGES INTO THOSE REASONS FOR CONNECTING, THE MORE WE INVOLVE THE AUDIENCE. IT’S NOT JUST KILLING THE CAT, IT’S BRINGING THE AUDIENCE INTO A CHARACTER, WHICH BRINGS THEM INTO THE STORY. IT’S GIVING THE AUDIENCE THE STAKES AND MEANING. IT’S NOT JUST “STUFF HAPPENING.” IT IS STORYTELLING WITH PURPOSE.

BETTER YET, WITH THIS WORKING DEFINITION, IT MEANS A FILM CAN HAVE *ANY NUMBER OF ACTS* DEPENDING ON WHAT IT’S TRYING TO SAY AND DO. HULK TALKED ABOUT IT BEFORE, BUT A MOVIE LIKE **MALCOLM X** HAS ABOUT 9 DISTINGUISHABLE ACTS IN HULK’S ESTIMATION, EACH FOCUSING ON A TIME IN HIS LIFE WHERE MALCOLM COULD GO THROUGH PERIODS OF FOCUS AND COME TO A NEW KIND OF ENLIGHTENMENT OR CHARACTER REALITY. IT IS A TRULY EPIC FILM THAT TAKES THE STANDARD BIOPIC AND SEPARATES THOSE EVENTS INTO VERY OBVIOUS “SECTIONS” OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT. AND AT THE END OF EACH OF THOSE ACTS HE MAKES A CHOICE AND GOES FORTH INTO A VASTLY DIFFERENT SITUATION, FULL OF CHANGE AND NEW CONFLICTS. HULK SERIOUSLY CANNOT ADVISE YOU ENOUGH TO GO BACK AND WATCH THIS AND SORT OUT ALL THE ACT BREAKS. WRITE DOWN THE CHOICES BEING MADE AND HOW IT HELPS THE CHARACTER GROW AND GO ON THEIR JOURNEY. IT WILL BE SUCH A USEFUL LEARNING TOOL IN UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISM OF ACTS AND ACT BREAKS. PLUS, IT’S JUST AN AMAZING FILM!

HECK, SOME MOVIES HAVE UPWARDS OF 20 ACTS. IT’S ALL A QUESTION OF WHAT STORY YOU WANT TO TELL AND THE BETTER YOU UNDERSTAND THIS DEFINITION OF PROPULSIVE, CHARACTER DECISION-CENTRIC ACT BREAKS, THE BETTER YOUR SCREENPLAY WILL BE AT PROPELLING THE NARRATIVE IN MEANINGFUL WAYS.

LOOK. IT’S NOT LIKE THE ACTION MOVIE STAPLE OF “OH NO, IT’S THE BAD GUYS! RUN!” CAN’T WORK IN TERMS OF CHANGING THE SITUATION AND MAKING THINGS INTERESTING FOR A MOMENT. AFTER ALL, RAYMOND CHANDLER HAD THE FUNNIEST QUOTE EVER WHEN HE SAID: “IN WRITING A NOVEL, WHEN IN DOUBT, HAVE TWO GUYS COME THROUGH THE DOOR WITH GUNS,” BUT THAT STATEMENT WAS PURPOSEFULLY A LITTLE BIT FLIP. HE’S LITERALLY TALKING ABOUT A QUICK STORY INVERSION THAT GIVES ENERGY WHEN YOU’VE GOT NOTHING ELSE GOING ON. AND THE REAL REASON YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL WITH THAT STUFF IS THAT IT BECOMES SO DULL AND REPETITIVE THAT WE GET TIRED OF THE CHASE AFTER ONLY TWO INSTANCES OR SO.

THAT’S WHY CHARACTER IS THE FUNDAMENTAL AND IDEAL DRIVING FORCE OF ACT BREAKS. YOU NEED MORE INTERESTING THINGS TO BE GOING ON THAN SURFACE-LEVEL CONFLICTS AND EXTERNAL THREATS. BY THE WAY, THIS IS PROBABLY THE CHIEF REASON MICHAEL BAY MOVIES DON’T ACTUALLY WORK. HE FILLS THEM WITH ALL THIS HOOPLAH AND MAYHEM, BUT HE’S ONLY INTERESTED IN THE CHASE. SURE, HE’LL SOMETIMES BE ABLE TO MASK THIS MACGUFFIN / SET-PIECE-JUMPING WITH DISTRACTING VISUALS (OR ATTEMPTS AT QUASI-RACIST COMEDY), BUT THE

CHASE IS ALWAYS HIS FOCUS AND IT WILL ALWAYS BECOME BORING WITHOUT ACTUAL CHARACTER PROPULSION. IN PROMOTING **TRANSFORMERS 2** HE TOUTED THE EPICNESS OF THE 45 MINUTE END BATTLE, BUT IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE MOST BORING THINGS HULK HAS EVER SEEN BECAUSE IT SO LACKED IN PURPOSE AND CHARACTER DECISION. IT WAS CHAOS. MEANWHILE GO BACK AND LOOK AT THE HOUR-LONG BATTLE OF HELMS DEEP IN **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS** AND COUNT HOW MANY CHOICES WERE CHARACTER-CENTRIC. LOOK HOW THE MOMENTS OF THE BATTLE WERE GIVEN PAUSES AND CONSIDERATION, PUNCTUATION MARKS IN THE LONGER RHYTHMS OF STORY AND CHARACTER. IT WAS ANYTHING BUT “THE CHASE.”

IT’S STRANGE WHEN YOU LOOK AT CERTAIN NOT-SO-GOOD MOVIES WITH THIS DEFINITION OF AN ACT AND YOU REALIZE HOW MANY OF OUR BIG SUMMER TENT-POLES JUST DO NOTHING LIKE THAT. AND HULK HONESTLY FEELS LIKE THIS TINY BIT OF ADVICE, THIS TINY RETHINKING OF A POPULAR CONVENTION, THIS WAY OF FINALLY IGNORING 3 ACT STRUCTURE IN FAVOR OF CONSTANT CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT, COULD SAVE HUNDREDS OF MOVIES. HULK REALLY DOES.

FOR EXAMPLE, THE RECENT DEBACLE WITH **THE GREEN LANTERN** WAS ENTIRELY DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE FILM HAS ONE REAL, GENUINE ACT BREAK. REPEAT. **ONE**.

OH SURE, THERE’S LOTS OF *STUFF THAT HAPPENS*, BUT IN TERMS OF MAIN CHARACTER PROPULSION AND DECISION-MAKING? NOPE. THE MAIN CHARACTER MAKES ONE DECISION IN THE ENTIRE FILM. IN FACT, NO OTHER FILM QUITE HIGHLIGHTS THE FAILURE TO CREATE PURPOSEFUL STORY CHANGES QUITE LIKE THIS ONE. AND NO OTHER FILM QUITE HIGHLIGHTS HOW OUR TRADITIONAL, PURPOSELESS UNDERSTANDING OF THREE ACT STRUCTURE RESULTS IN A STORY THAT IS. SO. DAMN. BORING.

BUT LET HULK REITERATE THE FILM’S PLOT FOR YOU IN AN EFFORT TO MAKE IT CLEAR: HAL JORDAN STARTS AS A PISSY-ASS FIGHTER PILOT WHO IS THEN GIVEN A LANTERN RING BY A DYING ALIEN CAUSE, LIKE, DESTINYORWHATEVER, AND IS THEN ZAPPED TO PLANET OA (NEITHER OF WHICH IS HIS DECISION). HE THEN TRAINS FOR ALL OF TWO SECONDS ONLY TO THEN *QUIT AND NOT EMBRACE HIS NEW SITUATION* (WITH NO DISCERNIBLE CONSEQUENCES AND GETS TO KEEP HIS RING) WHEREIN HE GOES BACK TO BEING A PISSY-ASS FIGHTER PILOT WHO DOESN’T EVEN FLY PLANES ANYMORE AND INSTEAD NEEDS ABOUT 10 PEP TALKS IN HIS APARTMENT. AND IT IS NOT UNTIL 90 DIFFERENT SCENES OF RELATIVE MOPING, FUTZING AROUND IN HIS SUIT, AND *FUCKING REJECTING BLAKE LIVELY’S ADVANCES* THAT HE FINALLY EMBRACES BEING A LANTERN OR WHATEVER AND MAKES AN *ACTUAL FUCKING DECISION* TO CHANGE THINGS AND GO BACK TO OA. THEN HE JUST FIGHTS A GIANT FACE-CLOUD IN THE ENTIRE THIRD ACT. A FEW TIMES. REPETITIVELY.

NOW... HULK BROUGHT THIS “ONE ACT BREAK” THING UP TO EVERYONE IN A GROUP AFTER WE SAW THE MOVIE AND THEY SAID “No, the second act starts when he gets the ring and goes to Oa!” ... BUT AFTER EVERYTHING HULK HAS JUST TOLD YOU, DO NOT TELL HULK THAT HAL JORDAN GETTING THE RING IS EQUAL TO AN ACT BREAK. EVEN THOUGH IT’S THE SHIFT THAT COMES ONE-THIRD OF THE WAY INTO THE MOVIE AND THUS *FEELS* LIKE AN ACT BREAK, THERE’S NO REAL POINT TO IT, NOR CHARACTER URGENCY OF CHANGE. THERE DEFINITELY *SHOULD BE* IN THAT MOMENT, BUT THERE ISN’T. AND THAT’S BECAUSE THE FILMMAKERS DEFINED AN ACT BREAK AS LAZILY AS THIS GROUP THAT WAS EVALUATING IT. THEY JUST FIGURED A CHANGE IN ENVIRONMENT AND SOME OBLIGATORY HERO JOURNEY NONSENSE WOULD DO ALL THE STORY WORK. AND THAT’S WHY THE FILMMAKERS LET THEIR MAIN CHARACTER SPEND LITERALLY THE ENTIRE MIDDLE OF THE MOVIE *GOING BACK ON THAT ACTION*. THEY NEVER UNDERSTOOD WHAT THE ACT TRANSITION MEANT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

HULK CAN’T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME A FILM HAD **ONE** REAL ACT BREAK. EVERYTHING ELSE, OUTSIDE OF HECTOR HAMMOND (WHO WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO GET AN ACTUAL MINI-STORY ARC), IS JUST STUFF HAPPENING. THERE IS NO CLEAR CHARACTER MOTIVATION AT PLAY IN ANY ONE OTHER CHARACTER. MEANING THE FILM, ALONG WITH HUNDREDS OF OTHER MOVIES LIKE IT, SIMPLY DOES NOT REALIZE WHAT AN ACT ACTUALLY REQUIRES. THEY DON’T REALIZE THAT CHARACTERS HAVE TO MAKE DECISIONS.

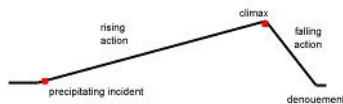
AND HULK BLAMES THIS STRINGENT, UBIQUITOUS HOLLYWOOD BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF THE 3

ACT STRUCTURE FOR CRAP LIKE THIS. HULK REALLY DOES. BY INDOCTRINATING WHAT MIGHT SEEM LOGICAL, WE HAVE ENDORSED THAT WHICH MAKES FOR TERRIBLE MOVIES.

AND IT'S NOT JUST THE FACT THAT THEY CAN'T DEFINE WHAT ACT BREAKS MEAN WHATSOEVER. IT'S ACTUALLY THE ENTIRE ARRAY OF LANGUAGE WE USE IN TALKING ABOUT STORY STRUCTURE. IT'S THIS WHOLE DULL FOCUS ON BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END, WHICH MAKES SOME BASIC SENSE IN TERMS OF "SUMMARIZING" A PLOT, BUT IT GIVES ZERO INDICATION OF HOW TO ACTUALLY WRITE THAT STORY.

AND SHOULDN'T THAT BE THE MOST IMPORTANT PART?

THINK ABOUT IT. THINK ABOUT HULK'S EXAMPLE FROM THE BEGINNING, THE COMPLAINT ABOUT SECOND ACTS BEING PURPOSELESS. IF WE WERE USING THE TRADITIONAL MODEL OF 3 ACT STRUCTURE, THEN THE FIRST ACT IS ALL INTRODUCTION AND SET UP AND THE THIRD ACT IS THE CLIMAX. THESE TERMS ARE BOTH VAGUE BUT STILL SELF-EXPLANATORY, AND WHEN YOU LOOK AT THAT PESKY SECOND ACT, WHICH IS OFTEN JUST DEFINED AS "RISING ACTION" OR "A RISE IN CONFLICT," YOU BEGIN TO SEE WHY SO MUCH "MIDDLE" STORYTELLING HAS A LACK OF REAL PURPOSE... SERIOUSLY, WHAT THE FUCK DOES "RISE" EVEN MEAN ON AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL?



"YOU KNOW... THE CONFLICT! JUST, UM, RISE IT!"

WHATEVER IT MEANS, IT'S CERTAINLY NOT GOOD STORYTELLING. SURE, IT CAN BE AN ACCURATE SUMMARY OF WHAT'S HAPPENING ONSCREEN (OR AT LEAST HOW IT FEELS). BUT IN TERMS OF THE ACTUAL MECHANISM IT IS STILL INCREDIBLY VAGUE ON THE BROADEST OF LEVELS. WORSE, IT IS NOT INSTRUCTING YOU *HOW TO ACTUALLY WRITE*. IT PROVIDES NONE OF THE GOOD STUFF THAT IS CRITICAL TO UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE. STUFF LIKE CHARACTER ARCS, PERSONAL MOTIVATION, RELATIONSHIPS, CONFLICTS, TURNS, REVEALS, AND PROPULSION. NONE OF IT IS IN THERE!

"But, Hulk doesn't that exist separately from structure? Can't you just do all that stuff within the 3 act guide?"

NO! YOU CAN'T!

BECAUSE THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT STRUCTURE *SECRETLY IS*. STORY STRUCTURE IS INHERENTLY DEPENDENT ON UNDERSTANDING PURPOSE AND ALL THAT GOOD NARRATIVE STUFF LISTED ABOVE. GOOD STRUCTURE IS ABOUT TAKING THOSE QUALITIES AND APPLYING THEM IN THE MOST ECONOMICAL, FUNCTIONAL, AND DRAMATIC WAY POSSIBLE. AND FOR THAT YOU NEED REAL SPECIFICITY WHEN IT COMES TO UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE.

90% OF 3 ACT MODELS LACK THAT SPECIFICITY. AND EVERY SINGLE OTHER HIGHLY-DETAILED 3 ACT MODEL AUTOMATICALLY CREATES SO MUCH DEAD AIR AND PURPOSELESS SPACE-FILLING THAT IT MAKES FOR TERRIBLE PROPULSION. THOSE MODELS FOCUS ON PAGE COUNTS AND TRICKS AND THINGS THAT ARE SUPPOSEDLY UNIVERSAL APPLICATIONS OF "WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING TO A CHARACTER" THAT MAY HAVE ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH HOW TO MAKE A MOVIE. HULK CAN ALWAYS TELL WHEN HULK IS READING A SYD FIELD DEVOTEE SCREENPLAY AND THEY ALL FAIL IN THE EXACT SAME WAYS.

AND THAT'S BECAUSE A 3 ACT STRUCTURE LEADS WRITERS TO JUST TRY TO MAKE CONNECTING POINTS BETWEEN THE BEGINNING AND ENDING OF THEIR STORY. THAT'S REALLY ABOUT ALL IT DOES. WHICH MEANS YOUR CHARACTERS ARE **NOT** MOVING FORWARD IN ANY DISCERNIBLE WAY. THEY'RE JUST WAITING AROUND FOR THE 80 MINUTE MARK SO THAT THEY CAN BEGIN THAT WHOLE ENDING THINGY. IT DESCENDS INTO A SHELL GAME OF UNMOTIVATED EVENTS AND IT'S ALL BECAUSE THE DEFINITION OF THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE IS COMPLETE ASS.

AS A RESULT, WE HEAR IT ALL THE TIME: "The problems in the film's second act."

SORRY IF HULK HAS BEEN COMING OFF AS TOO SMASHY HERE. IT'S JUST SUCH A PERSONAL ISSUE. HULK HAS NEVER SEEN SOMETHING SO UNHELPFUL BECOME SO WIDELY ACCEPTED. SURE, IT MAKES SENSE AND IS A SIMPLE WAY TO SEE STORIES FROM AFAR, BUT IT'S ALSO SO SIMPLE THAT IT'S TAUGHT TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL KIDS WHEN THEY'RE FIRST GRASPING THE CONCEPT OF NARRATIVE. AND WHILE HULK ARGUES THAT THE SIMPLE TRUTHS ARE OFT TIMES THE MOST IMPORTANT ONES, THE EXPRESSION OF THOSE TRUTHS SHOULD BE FAR MORE COMPLICATED. AND THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE IS NOT EVEN "A TRUTH." IT'S A WRITING MODEL ATTEMPTING TO HELP YOU GET AT ONE. SO HULK THINKS THAT HOLLYWOOD COULD MAYBE STAND TO DO A LITTLE BETTER THAN A *THIRD GRADE GRASP OF STORY*.

SO LET'S GET SERIOUS.

IF 1) THE 3 ACT MODEL SUCKS. 2) WE DEFINE ACTS AS SOMETHING WHERE THE CHARACTERS CAN'T GO BACK. AND 3) A FILM CAN HAVE ANY NUMBER OF ACTS IT WANTS - HOW DO WE ACTUALLY APPROACH STRUCTURE? WELL, HULK'S GONNA TELL YOU FOR THE WHOLE REST OF PART FIVE!

BUT THE FIRST STEP IN DOING SO IS COMPARING THE TRADITIONAL 3 ACT MODEL WITH THE STORYTELLING MODEL THAT ERUPTED OUT OF THE LEGACY OF THE GREATEST STORYTELLING GENIUS OF ALL TIME...

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

FACT: WHILE SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS WERE NOT OFFICIALLY WRITTEN WITH ACT DESIGNATIONS, HE DID TALK A GREAT DEAL ABOUT HIS VIEW OF ESSENTIAL STORYTELLING. AND WHEN HIS WORKS WERE LATER PRESERVED THEY WERE ALL BROKEN UP INTO 5 ACTS AND STUDIED EXTENSIVELY AS TO THE PURPOSE OF HOW HIS STORIES WORKED. AND IN DOING THAT, WE IDENTIFIED ALL THE BRILLIANT WAYS THAT SHAKESPEARE (AGAIN, THE GREATEST STORYTELLING GENIUS OF ALL TIME) USED STRUCTURE TO MAKE IT WORK.

FOR SAKE OF EXPLANATION, HULK WILL USE MOST SHAKESPEARE'S MOST POPULAR PLAY, **ROMEO AND JULIET** AS AN EXAMPLE-

"audible groooooooan!"

HEY, IT'S A SNEAKY GOOD PLAY THAT'S WAY MORE SATIRICAL THAN PEOPLE REALIZE! AND FAR MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT IS HIS BEST KNOWN PLAY SO IT HELPS VASTLY WHEN TRYING TO EXPLAIN SOMETHING.

SO SHAKESPEARE'S **1ST ACTS** WERE ALWAYS COMPRISED OF INTRODUCTIONS AND THE ESTABLISHING OF A *PREEXISTING* CENTRAL MAIN CONFLICT (I.E. TWO FAMILIES ARE AT ODDS, ROMEO IS A LOVESICK PUP OVER ROSALINE, JULIET IS A NAIVE AND LOVELORN GIRL). NOW, HULK TALKED ABOUT IT BEFORE, BUT THIS PREEXISTING CONFLICT IN THE BACKGROUND IS SO IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT CREATES A CONDITIONAL WORLD FOR THE AUDIENCE WHO IS ENTERING IT. SHAKESPEARE DIDN'T HAVE CINEMA'S NEAT TRICKS OF LANDSCAPE SHOTS AND VOICEOVER PROLOGUES. SO HE STARTED US IMMEDIATELY IN THE STORY AND IT WAS AN AMAZING WAY OF CREATING A SENSE OF SPACE, HISTORY, AND BELIEVABILITY. AND IT'S A BIG SURPRISE TO HULK HOW OFTEN THIS PRACTICE IS IGNORED IN BLOCKBUSTER FILMMAKING. AND HECK, EVEN IF IT IS SOME INTRICATE HUMAN DRAMA OR SOMETHING, A PREEXISTING CONFLICT COULD DO SO MUCH. MOSTLY BECAUSE IT GIVES YOU A GREAT SITUATION TO SPUR THE MAIN CONFLICT INTO EFFECT!

AND THAT'S BECAUSE THE **2ND ACT** IS USUALLY COMPRISED OF SOME KIND OF CENTRAL EVENT THAT CHALLENGES OR DEEPLY WORSENS THE MAIN CONFLICT. IT'S USUALLY IN THE FORM OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT, A FIGHT, A REVEAL, OR A SURPRISE (I.E. STAR-CROSSED TEENAGERS ROMEO AND JULIET MEET AND GO GA-GA OVER ONE ANOTHER, WHICH IS A HUGE PROBLEM GIVEN THE NATURE OF THE PREEXISTING CONFLICT OF THEIR FAMILIES' FEUD). BASICALLY THIS ACT FEATURES THE MAIN SURFACE PLOT OF THE STORY COMING INTO EFFECT. MEANING IF YOU HAD TO EXPLAIN WHAT THE MOVIE WAS ABOUT, THE CONFLICT BEING CREATED IN THE 2ND ACT COULD EASILY DESCRIBE THE MAIN CONFLICT OF THE ENTIRE FILM, I.E. "TWO STAR CROSSED LOVERS FALL

IN LOVE WHILE THEIR FAMILIES ARE AT WAR WITH EACH OTHER.” AND HOWEVER THIS CONFLICT IS REVEALED, IT SHOULD BE DONE IN WHICHEVER WAY WOULD BENEFIT THE STORY MOST.

THEN THE **3RD ACT** COMPRISES A TURNING POINT. NOW, HULK REMINDS YOU THAT THIS NEED NOT BE A “TWIST” PER SE, BUT MORE OF A SPURRING INCIDENT OR ACTION THAT MAKES THE CONFLICT INFINITELY MORE COMPLICATED (I.E. MERCUTIO GETTING KILLED BY TYBALT THEN ROMEO KILLING TYBALT). OFTEN THESE MOMENTS ARE SURPRISING. THEY DEEPLY AFFECT NOT ONLY THE LEVEL OF SERIOUSNESS OF MAIN CONFLICT, BUT DRAMATICALLY ALTER THE ACTUAL DIRECTION OF IT. THIS IS THE SORT OF THING ALLUDED TO IN THE “RISE IN CONFLICT” STATEMENT, BUT YOU KNOW, WAY MORE SPECIFIC. IT REQUIRES THAT YOU THINK INTENSELY ABOUT THE NATURE OF YOUR CONFLICT: WHY DOES IT EXIST? WHAT IS PERPETRATING IT? WHAT WOULD MAKE IT WORSE? AND HAVE THE STORY RESPOND ACCORDINGLY. AND THE SHAKESPEAREAN 3RD ACT IS SUCH A GREAT OPPORTUNITY IN STORYTELLING BECAUSE:

IT’S A WAY TO HIT THE AUDIENCE WITH CLIMAX-LIKE DRAMA BEFORE THEY’RE READY FOR IT. BEFORE THEY EXPECT IT. AND IT’S NOT MERE “GOTCHA” TACTICS. IF DONE RIGHT, YOU CAN CREATE THE KIND OF EMOTION TO CARRY YOU RIGHT THROUGH TO THE END.

SHAKESPEARE’S 3RD ACTS WERE OFTEN FILLED THEM WITH SUCH MOMENTS OF STORYTELLING BEAUTY: GREAT INVERSIONS OF FORTUNE. BEST INTENTIONS GONE AWRY. DEATHS! LOSS! CONFUSION! SUDDEN CHAOS! EVEN THOUGH THESE 3RD ACTS DON’T FINISH THE ARC OF THE WHOLE STORY, THEY ARE OFTEN THE MOST RESONANT MOMENTS AND THEY ARE STILL CLIMAX-WORTHY IN SCALE.

WHAT DOES HOLLYWOOD TEND TO DO IN THEIR BIG ADVENTURES? THEY HAVE “2ND ACT PROBLEMS,” THAT’S WHAT THEY DO. THEY SAY “HEY, LET’S PUT AN ACTION SCENE HERE!” OR SPIN THEIR WHEELS AND LOSE ALL SENSE OF PURPOSE, OFTEN SAVING WHAT COULD HAPPEN NOW FOR SOME INEVITABLE 3RD ACT OBLIGATORY CONCLUSION. THEY FUCK UP THE MIDDLE OF THEIR STORYTELLING. MEANWHILE THE SHAKESPEAREAN 3RD ACT IS PERFECT. IT MAKES FOR A “TURNING POINT” THAT IS BOTH DEEPLY AFFECTING AND PROVIDES CHANGE TO THE ARC OF THE ENTIRE STORY. AND IT IS SOMETHING FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT 3-ACT-STRUCTURE ARGUES IS JUST PUTTING THINGS IN PLACE FOR CLIMAX. SPEAKING OF WHICH...

THE **4TH ACT** OF SHAKESPEARE’S MODEL WAS KNOWN AS “THE SPIRAL” AND IT IS ACTUALLY *FULL OF CHARACTER DECISIONS* THAT CAUSE CHARACTERS TO SINK TOWARD THE REAL CLIMAX (I.E. ROMEO AND JULIET DECIDE GO ON THE LAM, HATCH A PLAN TO FAKE THEIR DEATHS, ETC). THESE DECISIONS ARE RAPID. FAST-PACED. POORLY CONCEIVED. AND HUGELY DRAMATIC. IN TRUTH, THIS IS THE POINT WHERE YOU ARE REALLY ARRANGING AND SETTING UP THE CLIMAX.

BUT IN THAT GOAL IT IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT YOU HAVE TO STAY TRUE TO THE CHARACTER ARCS AND FLAWS, OTHERWISE IT WILL FEEL LIKE THINGS ARE FLYING OFF THE RAILS INSTEAD OF SIMPLY GETTING MORE INTENSE. AND THIS FEVERISH, INTENSE CLIMATE IS THE BEST PLACE TO EXPOSE THE DEEP CHARACTER FLAWS THAT WILL EITHER BRING DOWN OUR HEROES OR ALLOW THEM TO SUCCEED. (MEANWHILE, THE SHAKESPEAREAN 3RD ACT TURNING POINT CAN SOMETIMES ALLOW FOR A MAIN CHARACTER ACTING *OUT OF CHARACTER*. IT’S A NEAT LITTLE DISTINCTION TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN YOU ARE TRYING TO DECIDE WHAT A CHARACTER WOULD DO IN A SITUATION VERSUS WHAT THEY DIDN’T DO).

THE SHAKESPEAREAN 4TH ACT ALSO PROVIDES A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR A QUIET MOMENT OF REFLECTION BEFORE THE FINALE, BEFORE THEY MAKE THE KINDS OF GRAVE DECISIONS THAT SEAL THEIR FATE. BUT IT CAN’T JUST BE *ALL* REFLECTION AND PAUSING (COUGH COUGH **GREEN LANTERN**). AGAIN, IT SHOULD REALLY FEEL FULL OF DECISIONS. THE PACE SHOULD QUICKEN. THINGS SHOULD FEEL LIKE THEY ARE FALLING OUT OF CONTROL FOR OUR CHARACTER. IT IS “THE SPIRAL,” AFTER ALL. AND IT SHOULD FEEL LIKE IT’S ALL HAPPENING IN A VERY SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME BEFORE WE GET TO...

THE **5TH ACT** IS WHERE THE AUDIENCE GETS THE CLIMAX / RESOLUTIONS / WEDDINGS / TRAGEDY / FALLOUT/ ETC. (I.E. ROMEO AND JULIET HAVE A FATAL MISCOMMUNICATION, KILL THEMSELVES,

AND LEAVE THEIR FAMILIES TO BE HEARTBROKEN AND DECLARE PEACE). THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO REMEMBER IS THAT THIS LAST ACT IS NOT JUST WRAPPING THINGS UP, BUT IS THE ENCAPSULATION OF THE STORY AND SHOULD EXHIBIT ALL THE POINTS ONE IS TRYING MAKE IN YOUR MOVIE. AS HULK SAID EARLIER, THE ENDING IS THE CONCEIT SO THE CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION ARE THE VERY GOAL OF YOUR MOVIE. WHILE SHAKESPEARE WOULD HAVE A CHARACTER TALK DIRECTLY TO THE AUDIENCE AND SUM UP THE LESSONS THEY SHOULD TAKE AWAY FROM THE STORY, HULK GETS WHY THAT SAME METHODOLOGY MIGHT NOT FLY IN SCREENPLAY FORM. BUT SCREW IT, MODERN WRITERS ARE SO DREADFULLY AFRAID TO BE DIDACTIC THAT THEY FORGET TO INCORPORATE THEIR PURPOSE AND INTENT IN THEIR ENDINGS. THEY OPT FOR ALLEVIATION OR OBFUSCATION. MOST OF THEM COULD DO WITH A FAIR BIT OF DIRECT MORALIZING. HECK, **NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN** ENDS WITH THE SHAKESPEAREAN SOLILOQUY TO THE AUDIENCE, SO YOU SHOULD BE LESS AFRAID OF IT TOO. NO MATTER WHAT, YOUR ENDING SHOULD BE THE SUMMATION OF *EVERYTHING* YOU HAVE WRITTEN SO FAR. IT SHOULD NOT BE A FREAKIN' AFTERTHOUGHT.

NO MATTER WHAT THE STORY - TRAGEDY, COMEDY, OR HISTORY - SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS WERE IMBUED WITH THIS SPECIFIC 5 ACT STRUCTURE EVERY TIME. THE INTRO, THE ESTABLISHING OF THE CONCEIT, THE TURN, THE SPIRAL, AND THE CLIMAX (WHICH HAMMERS HOME THE CONCEIT). SURE, HE GETS HEAPED WITH PRAISE OVER HIS MASTERY OF LANGUAGE AND THE DEEP RESONANCE OF THEMES, SOME JUSTIFIABLY CREDIT HIM AS THE FATHER OF PSYCHOLOGY, BUT HULK WANTS TO MAKE IT CLEAR TO YOU THAT HE WAS JUST SO FUCKING BRILLIANT AT STORY STRUCTURE TO BOOT... IT'S SORT OF UNFAIR. AND HULK KNOWS IT MAY SEEM LAME BRING UP SUCH AN OBVIOUS CHOICE AS "BEST WRITER EVER" BUT, WELL, HE WAS.

BUT WHILE HULK CLEARLY ADORES THE WAY THAT SHAKESPEARE'S 5 ACT STRUCTURE CAN HELP YOU UNLEARN 3 ACT STRUCTURE, CHIEFLY IN HOW IT GIVES IMPORT AND MEANING TO "THE MIDDLE" OF STORYTELLING, IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT THIS SHAKESPEAREAN 5 ACT MODEL IS JUST ANOTHER POSSIBLE EXAMPLE AND NOT THE RULE. YOU CAN HONESTLY DO WHATEVER YOU THINK BEST IN TERMS OF NUMBER OF ACT BREAKS. IT'S WHATEVER WORKS FOR YOUR STORY, LIKE THE USE OF 9 ACTS IN **MALCOLM X**. BUT HEY, IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A TOOL TO HELP BETTER STRUCTURE YOUR STORY, OR IF YOU ARE A STUDENT LOOKING TO GET BETTER AND LEARN HOW TO WRITE WITH PURPOSE AND INTENT... WELL... ONE COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THAT SHAKESPEARE GUY.

SO NOW THEN.

AFTER REVIEWING ALL THIS, HULK WANTS YOU TO GO BACK TO THE TRADITIONAL 3 ACT STRUCTURE MODEL FOR A SECOND. YOU MAY NOTICE SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT WHEN COMPARING IT TO SHAKESPEARE'S MODEL. YOU MAY NOTICE THE WAY THE SECOND ACT DESCRIBED IN THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE *IS THE EXACT SAME WAY* ACT 4 IS DEFINED IN SHAKESPEARE'S MODEL, MINUS THE WHOLE IMPORTANT "DECISIONS" PART. SHAKESPEARE'S "SPIRAL" WITH ITS INCREASING OF INTENSITY AND POSITIONING OF DETAILS BEFORE THE CLIMAX IS REALLY SIMILAR TO THE 2ND ACT'S RISE IN CONFLICT.

HULK ARGUES THAT THIS IS SO TELLING THAT IT'S NOT EVEN FUNNY. IT MEANS THAT THIS LITTLE, SHORT MOMENT THAT SHAKESPEARE USED FOR ESCALATING THE FINAL STAKES AND POSITIONING THE ENDGAME IS THE SAME EXACT WAY HOLLYWOOD SCREENWRITERS *HANDLE THE ENTIRE CENTRAL SECTION OF THEIR GODDAMN MOVIES*. NO WONDER SO MANY ARE AIMLESS AND BORING.

AFTER ALL, IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT'S SHAKESPEARE'S 4TH ACTS ARE ALWAYS THE SHORTEST, LEAST INTERESTING, AND LEAST COMPELLING PART OF EVERY SINGLE ONE OF HIS PLAYS. NAME A MEMORABLE MOMENT FROM ANY OF THEM! HULK'S SURE THERE'S SOMETHING, BUT HULK CAN TELL YOU THE MAJOR EVENT OF EVERY ACT 3 IN EVERY SINGLE ONE OF HIS PLAYS. HE KEPT THIS 4TH ACT STUFF SHORT FOR A REASON.

SO IMAGINE A WHOLE HOLLYWOOD FULL OF WRITERS TRYING TO EXPAND THAT SAME TINY AMOUNT OF STORY AND PURPOSE INTO THE 30-60 SUM ODD PAGES THAT MAKE UP ENTIRE SECOND ACTS... HOW TERRIBLE IS THAT? IT MEANS THAT CHARACTERS CAN'T HELP BUT JUST WAIT

AROUND. IT MEANS THE WRITERS ARE SIMPLY TRYING COME UP WITH DISTRACTIONS AND B.S. CONFLICTS THAT DON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE POINT OR TRULY AFFECT OR ALTER THE ARC OF THE STORY. IT MEANS THAT WRITERS END UP CRAMMING TOO MUCH GOOD STUFF IN THE FIRST ACT TO TRY AND ESTABLISH ALL NEEDED DETAILS WHEN REALLY THEY ARE MISSING GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR DEVELOPING A STORY AT AN ORGANIC PACE.

THE LESSONS OF SHAKESPEARE CAN TRANSLATE TO ANYTHING. YOU MAY ASK: "Hulk! How does this 5 act thing work with popular movie-going? Big budget movies aren't exactly Shakespeare!"

FIRST OFF, SHAKESPEARE WOULD TOTALLY WRITE THE BEST SUMMER BLOCKBUSTERS EVER AND THAT'S ACTUALLY SORT OF WHAT HE WAS DOING FOR HIS TIME AND AGE!

SECOND OFF, WHILE THERE ARE A HOST OF GREAT EXAMPLES, LET'S LOOK AT HULK'S OLD BUDDY / GREAT MOVIE: **IRON MAN**, WHICH HAS AN EXCEPTIONAL STORY STRUCTURE. IT MAY NOT HAVE BEEN WRITTEN WITH THIS FIVE ACT SHAKESPEAREAN INTENT, BUT HULK SWEARS TO YOU IT FITS AND IS WORTH TALKING ABOUT. AFTER ALL, THE ONE THING EVERYONE SEEMED TO LOVE ABOUT THAT FILM IS THAT IT SPENT SO LONG BEFORE TONY ACTUALLY BECAME IRON MAN, AND THUS THE AUDIENCE GOT TO EXPERIENCE ALL THE GREAT CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT ALONG THE WAY. MORE TELLING, EVERYONE LAUDED THE FUN SENSE OF ADVENTURE THAT CAME FROM OUT OF THE CONFLICTS OF HIS TRYING TO BUILD THE SUIT. IT AVOIDED SO MANY MODERN PRATFALLS. IT NEVER RUSHED GETTING TO "THE ACTION" THAT SO MANY BIG BUDGET MOVIES REQUIRE, BECAUSE THE FILM INSTINCTIVELY KNEW THAT IT COULD TAKE A MOVIE ABOUT THE PROCESS OF INVENTION AND MAKE IT WORK GREAT. THE STORYTELLING WAS THE ACTION. AND GUESS HOW MANY ACTS THE MOVIE HAS, IN HULK'S HUMBLE ESTIMATION?

YUP. **FIVE.**

ACT ONE – INTRO + STATE OF PREEXISTING CONFLICT – WE GET TO KNOW TONY AS A PLAYBOY AND EVEN SEE HIM DEAL WITH THE EXTERNAL MORAL CONFLICT OF SUPPLYING WEAPONS AND BRUSH OFF THE CONCERNS OF THE FACT THAT HIS WEAPONS ARE FALLING INTO THE WRONG HANDS.

ACT TWO – THE CONCEIT AND BEING AT ODDS WITH THE PREEXISTING CONFLICT – TONY IS CAPTURED AND PUT TO WORK IN THE TERRORIST CAMP. HE DISCOVERS THE REALITY ABOUT HIS WEAPONS GOING TO THE BAD GUYS AND HE IS ALREADY AT HIS LOWEST POINT AND ON THE BRINK OF SURVIVAL. HE DECIDES TO BUILD THE PROTOTYPE SUIT AND ESCAPE. HE BECOMES IRON MAN; CONCEIT ESTABLISHED!

ACT THREE – THE TURNING POINT – TONY IS NOW BACK AT HOME, AND HE MAKES A MORAL DECISION, SHUTS DOWN WEAPONS OPS, AND CHANGES THE DIRECTION OF HIS LIFE. TONY DECIDES TO CONTINUE ON THIS PATH AND STARTS BUILDING A NEW SUIT (WHICH HAS A HILARIOUS SET OF TRIALS). OBADIAH IS REVEALED AS THE BAD GUY BEHIND TONY'S KIDNAPPING. TONY GOES LIVE WITH HIS SUIT AND HELPS OTHERS, NOT JUST HIMSELF.

ACT FOUR – THE SPIRAL/ESCALATION OF CONFLICT – TONY CONTINUES TO USE THE SUIT OUT IN REAL WAR CONFLICT, ADMITS THE TRUTH TO RHODES, GETS SIDELINED BY OBADIAH, AND NOW FACES A GRIM CIRCUMSTANCE. NOTICE THAT THESE DEVELOPMENTS FEEL MORE OF THE ACTION-Y WHEEL-SPINNING ACTIVITIES THAT REEK OF STANDARD ACT 2 DEVELOPMENTS THAT ONE SEES IN TYPICAL 3 ACT STRUCTURE. BUT IN THIS MOVIE? BECAUSE IT ALL COMES AFTER THE AWESOME SUIT-BUILDING TRANSFORMATION OF ACT 3? IT FEELS SO FRESH AND EXCITING TO THE VIEWER WHO HAS HAD TO WAIT. THE MOVIE HELD OUT BEAUTIFULLY BEFORE TIPPING ITS HAND. AND IT ALL GOES ON FOR A PERFECTLY SHORTER LENGTH OF TIME, BEFORE MOVING TO THE INEVITABLE FINALE...

ACT FIVE - CLIMAX/CONCLUSION/RESOLUTION – TONY'S CONFLICT WITH OBADIAH COMES TO A CONCLUSION BOTH PERSONALLY AND AS BIG-ASS IRON MEN FIGHTING IN DEATH SUITS. THE IMPORTANT PART OF THIS ACT IS HOW ALL THE PLOTS COME TOGETHER (EVEN THOUGH THE ACTION FELT A LITTLE UNDERWHELMING). HULK ACTUALLY FINDS THAT DETAIL TO BE NEAT, TO BE HONEST. IT MEANT THAT THE ACTION WAS THE LEAST INTERESTING PART OF A BIG SUMMER

BLOCKBUSTER FOR ONCE. AND THAT'S A SERIOUS ACHIEVEMENT. SCORE ONE FOR CHARISMA AND CHARACTERIZATION!

BUT HULK UNDERSTANDS THAT SOME OF YOU MAY ARGUE THERE LOTS OTHER POSSIBLE ACT BREAKS IN **IRON MAN**. SOME OF YOU MAY CONTEND THAT THE FILM WAS NOT WRITTEN WITH FIVE ACTS IN MIND.

BOTH ARE ABSOLUTELY TRUE.

FOR ONE, WRITING IS FILLED WITH "MICRO-ACTS" WHICH HELP PROPEL EVERY SCENE FORWARD AND HAVE DIFFERENT ACTS FOR ALL THE DIFFERENT STORIES AND CHARACTERS (WE'LL GET INTO THIS LATER), BUT TONY'S ARC WITH PEPPER HAS ITS OWN ACT BREAKS. TONY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH OBADIAH HAS ITS OWN BREAKS. IT ALL COMES TOGETHER TO MAKE THE STORY FEEL PROPULSIVE + ORGANIC. AFTER ALL, EVERY SCENE SHOULD HAVE A REAL GOAL AND OBJECTIVE TO IT. AND GOING BACK TO THE POINT AT HAND, LABELING ALL THAT GREAT CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MOVIE AS JUST THE RISE IN CONFLICT IS JUST DOWNRIGHT ASININE.

FOR TWO, HULK KEEPS SAYING IT, BUT YOU CAN DECIDE THE ACT BREAKS ARE WHEREVER YOU WANT AND YOU'D BE RIGHT. IT'S JUST ABOUT WHAT SEEMS THE MOST REASONABLE AND MAKES THE MOST SENSE. BETTER YET, IT IS ABOUT WHAT MAKES THE MOST SENSE FOR GIVING YOUR ACT BREAKS PURPOSE AND MEANING. AND CALL IT A NATURALLY OCCURRING NUMBER, BUT HULK SEES MOVIES WITH THE 5 ACT STRUCTURE TURN UP IN GOOD STORIES AGAIN AND AGAIN. AND IT'S NOT JUST SHAKESPEARE AND **IRON MAN**, FOLKS.

EVER NOTICE THAT ALL ONE HOUR TV DRAMAS ARE ALL SEGMENTED INTO 5 ACTS? YES, IT'S DONE FOR COMMERCIAL BREAKS, BUT THAT MAGIC NUMBER IS NO ACCIDENT. IT'S A TRIED AND TRUE SYSTEM THAT HELPS MAKE THOSE TV SHOWS PROPULSIVE INSTEAD OF LANGUISHING. AGAIN, LIKE ANYTHING, YOU ARE MORE THAN ALLOWED TO BREAK AWAY FROM THIS MODEL AND MAKE GOOD TELEVISION, BUT YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW MANY NON-TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES UTILIZE 5-6 ACTS TOO.

PEOPLE LOOOOOOOOVE TO TALK ABOUT QUENTIN TARANTINO'S NON-LINEAR STORYTELLING AS A COUNTER EXAMPLE TO TRADITIONAL "ACT-BASED" STORYTELLING, PARTICULARLY WITH **PULP FICTION**. BUT GUESS WHAT EVERYONE? THAT MOVIE HAS EXACTLY 5 ACTS, WHICH ARE ALL DISTINCTLY SEPARATED WITH TITLE CARDS. OH, AND **RESERVOIR DOGS**? 5 ACTS SEPARATED WITH TITLE CARDS. BOTH **KILL BILLS**? EACH ONE HAS 5 ACTS SEPARATED WITH TITLE CARDS. **INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS**? 5 ACTS SEPARATED WITH TITLE CARDS. **DJANGO UNCHAINED**? 5 ACTS WITH SUPER-IMPOSED SIGNIFIERS. YOU SENSE A THEME HERE?

HULK JUST CANNOT EMPHASIZE THIS ENOUGH.

A STORY IS A MULTIFACETED THING. IF YOU WANT TO STRUCTURE YOUR STORY, REMEMBER TO HAVE BOTH ACT STRUCTURE FOR THE MAIN PLOT AND ACT STRUCTURE FOR EACH OF YOUR CHARACTERS' PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENTS. BY HAVING ALL THESE VARYING STRUCTURES, EACH WITH THEIR OWN BEATS, WITH EACH CHARACTER MAKING ACTIVE DECISIONS, IT CREATES A CONSTANT SENSE OF MOVING FORWARD FOR YOUR MOVIE. THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT "DEVELOPMENT," AS IT IS THE KEY TO BRINGING YOUR AUDIENCE ALONG FOR THE JOURNEY.

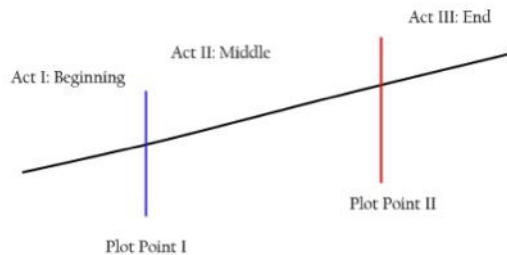
BUT PERHAPS YOU THINK HULK IS BEING TOO HARD ON THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE. PERHAPS YOU THINK HULK IS SIMPLIFYING IT IN AN EFFORT TO TEAR IT DOWN.

THAT'S FINE.

BUT HULK WOULD ARGUE THAT THE HEAVY ADVOCATES OF 3 ACT STRUCTURE DO A GOOD ENOUGH JOB OF THAT ON THEIR OWN. IN RESEARCHING THIS TOPIC HULK CAME ACROSS SO MANY WEBSITES THAT... HULK JUST CAN'T EVEN QUOTE THEM... IT'S TOO SOUL-CRUSHING. IT'S JUST FULL OF BLIND REDUCTIONS AND OVER-SIMPLIFICATIONS AND GROSS AMOUNTS OF LYING. ENTIRE CHARTS WHERE

THEY SAY “NO, SHAKESPEARE WAS TOTALLY WRITING IN THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE!” AND THEN THEY REDUCE ACT 2-4 OF HIS PLAYS AND JUST SLAP THE “ACT 2” DESIGNATION ON IT, WHICH IS NOT ONLY HILARIOUS IN ITS OVER-SIMPLIFICATION BUT IT ACTUALLY IGNORES 3 ACT STRUCTURE RULES BECAUSE HE INTRODUCED HIS MAIN CONCEITS IN THE SECOND ACT, NOT THE FIRST. THE WHOLE THING IS BASICALLY LAUGHABLE. THEY’LL TOSS OUT ENTIRE ACT STRUCTURES OF 4 ACT MODERN DRAMAS, BECAUSE THEY THINK IT IS ONLY THERE TO ACCOUNT FOR SET CHANGES. THEY’LL LOOK AT ENTIRE ACTS THAT LAST HALF THE RUNNING TIME AND SAY “WELL, YOU PROBABLY SHOULDN’T DO THAT.” IT’S UPHOLDING A MODEL THAT IS NOT ONLY WRONG, BUT DEEPLY UNINFORMATIVE.

SERIOUSLY, DOES THE FOLLOWING IMAGE MAKE YOU FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT YOUR WRITING?



HULK SEES MODELS LIKE THIS SHOWN TO YOUNG WRITERS ALL THE TIME. SO IF YOU ARE WRITING A SCREENPLAY. HULK IS TELLING YOU. THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE IS GARBAGE.

STOP CITING IT IN ARTICLES.

STOP TALKING ABOUT IT WITH FRIENDS.

IT WILL NOT HELP YOU.

IT CAN ONLY HURT YOU.

START THE DIALOGUE. INSIST THAT IT IS A MYTH PROPAGATED BY A NEED FOR SIMPLICITY. SAY “OF COURSE STORIES HAVE A BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END, YOU INSUFFERABLE TURD!” THEN THROW A DRINK IN THEIR FACE AND RUN AWAY... OKAY, MAYBE HULK IS GETTING CARRIED AWAY HERE. BUT HULK SERIOUSLY WORRIES THAT UNLESS WE REALLY, TRULY CHANGE THE CULTURE OF HOW WE TALK ABOUT THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE AND ACT BREAKS, THEN ALL THIS ADVICE MAY BE USELESS.

CHANCES ARE YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF IN A HOLLYWOOD MEETING SOMEDAY, AND THEY’LL START TALKING ABOUT 3 ACTS AND TO TRY AND ARGUE WITH THEM WOULD BE FRUITLESS. SAY WHAT YOU NEED TO, HULK GUESS, BUT STICK TO A MORE PROPULSIVE METHOD OF NARRATIVE IN YOUR OWN WORK. TELL ‘EM IT’S 3, BUT REALLY MAKE IT 5. DO EVERYTHING YOU CAN, BECAUSE IN THIS HULK’S OPINION THE STRICT ADHERENCE TO 3 ACT STRUCTURE IS KILLING HOLLYWOOD.

HECK, IF THIS BOOK WERE TO HAVE ANY SORT OF REAL-LIFE, SUBSTANTIAL CHANGE, HULK WOULD ADORE IF IT GOT STUDIOS TO START THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE 3 ACT BOX. IT’S CERTAINLY SOMETHING HULK HAS TRIED TO SHARE EVERY PLACE HULK HAS WORKED... BUT WHO KNOWS IF GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS IS POSSIBLE GIVEN ITS LEVEL OF ACCEPTANCE.

AND THE VERY WORST THING IS THAT THIS SAME HOLLYWOOD OFTEN FAILS AT THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE THEY’RE TRYING TO UPHOLD. AND THAT’S BECAUSE SO MANY MOVIES ARE GREEN-LIT ON JUST A PITCH AND POSSIBLY HAVING STARS ATTACHED, SO YOU BASICALLY HAVE MOVIES BEING MADE THAT HAVE ONLY FIGURED OUT THE CONCEIT SO FAR. MEANING THEY ONLY KNOW THE FIRST ACT OR SO... AND THAT’S FUCKING IT. THE ENDINGS OF THESE FILMS ARE SO BARELY ESTABLISHED AND UNIFORMLY TEND BE TERRIBLE. SO MANY SCRIPTS SEEM TO START WITH A STRAIGHT LINE FROM THEIR STARTING POINT AND PURSUE THE FALLOUT UNTIL THEY JUST RUN OUT OF STEAM. IT REALLY IS INCONCEIVABLE TO HULK THAT FOLKS CAN START MAKING A MOVIE

WITHOUT TRULY KNOWING THE ENDING. SO IF YOU WANT BE A WRITER, ALWAYS **KNOW** YOUR ENDING. ALWAYS UPHOLD YOUR PURPOSE.

SO, TO SUMMARIZE THIS RANT OF UNLEARNING:

THE AMOUNT OF ACTS IN A MOVIE SHOULD BE DEPENDENT ON THE STORY YOU WANT TO TELL. EACH ACT SHOULD REACH THIS MOVING FORWARD POINT IN AN ORGANIC, EARNED WAY. AND THE TOTAL NUMBER OF ACTS YOU USE IS DEPENDENT ON HOW MUCH YOU ARE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH WITH THE STORY. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THEY SHOULD ALL TIE TOGETHER IN A COHERENT WAY. AND THEN, IT SHOULD ULTIMATELY BE DONE WITH THE BEST POSSIBLE ECONOMY WITHOUT LOSING ANYTHING CRITICAL OR AFFECTING THE ORGANIC QUALITY OF THE TELLING. IT'S A LOT TO HANDLE, BUT THAT'S THE IDEAL. AND IF YOU'RE STARTING OUT, TRY SHAKESPEARE'S 5 ACT ON FOR SIZE. HULK THINKS IT'S A WONDERFUL LEARNING STRUCTURE.

AFTER ALL, NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE, STORYTELLING IS LARGELY ABOUT PROBLEM SOLVING. ONE CAN ALWAYS COME UP WITH GREAT IDEAS THAT MOTIVATE AND EXCITE THEM, BUT THE OTHER HALF OF THAT EQUATION IS FIGURING OUT HOW TO MAKE IT TRANSLATE TO A FULLY-FORMED REALITY ON THE PAGE. HOW DO WE MAKE THIS SCENE ENTERTAINING AND YET PROPULSIVE? HOW DO WE MAKE A MOVIE THAT IS TRUE TO OUR CONCEIT? ONE THAT WORKS ON EVERY CHARACTER LEVEL? YOU NEED TO CONSTANTLY ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS.

WHICH MEANS THAT WRITING IS PROBLEM-SOLVING.

AND TAKE HULK'S ADVICE: THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE WON'T HELP YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM. IF ANYTHING, IT WILL CREATE MORE PROBLEMS. AND THUS, THERE'S NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO UNLEARN IN YOUR QUEST TO BECOME A BETTER WRITER...

... EXCEPT MAYBE THIS NEXT THING:

26. WHY WE HAVE TO QUIT IT WITH THE HERO JOURNEY SHIT

AHHH, *THE MONOMYTH*.

IT IS A FASCINATING ACADEMIC PURSUIT, A JOURNEY INTO OUR CULTURAL HISTORY, TO THE TIES OF COMMUNICATION THAT BONDED OUR EARLY CIVILIZATIONS. IT EVEN EXPLAINS HOW OUR STORYTELLING ROOTS ARE DIRECTLY BORN FROM THAT SHARED HISTORY. AND THE LESSONS AT THE CORE OF THE MONOMYTH ARE MANIFOLD, RICH, AND TEXTURED; A THOUSAND VERSIONS OF A HERO'S JOURNEY, ALL BOUND BY THE HUMAN CONDITION, ALL CRUCIAL TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHY WE TELL STORIES IN THE FIRST PLACE. SIMPLY PUT, THE HERO'S JOURNEY IS VITAL TO OUR HUMANITY.

AND NOW IT'S A TOTAL FUCKING CRUTCH.

A LOT LIKE HULK'S DISMISSAL OF 3 ACT STRUCTURE, THE PROBLEM WITH JOSEPH CAMPBELL'S **THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES** IS NOT ITS LACK OF ACCURACY IN A DESCRIPTIVE SENSE, BUT INSTEAD HOW WE MISREAD ITS INTENTION AND FALSELY USE THE INFORMATION IT PROVIDES. CHIEFLY, THE FACT THAT OUR SOCIETY HAS WHOLLY ADOPTED THE BOOK'S BREAKDOWN OF THE HERO JOURNEY AS SOME KIND OF READY-MADE APP FOR PAINT-BY-NUMBERS STORYTELLING.

TO BE HONEST, HULK'S NOT EVEN REALLY SURE HOW MANY PEOPLE WHO REGULARLY CITE THE HERO'S JOURNEY AS A STORY MODEL HAVE ACTUALLY READ THE DAMN BOOK PAST A FEW CHAPTERS... OR READ IT AT ALL.... THIS REALITY IS ACTUALLY QUITE OBVIOUS BECAUSE THE BOOK'S INTENDED VALUE IS DEEPLY, EVEN MADDENINGLY ACADEMIC (AT TIMES IT IS DOWNRIGHT ANTHROPOLOGICAL). THE TRUTH ABOUT CAMPBELL'S MUCH-LAUDED BOOK IS IT DOESN'T ACTUALLY HAVE A LOT TO DO WITH ALL THOSE NEAT LITTLE DIAGRAMS YOU SEE AT THE BEGINNING. INSTEAD, IT'S FAR MORE INTERESTED IN CULTURAL DEDUCTIONS ABOUT ANTHROPOLOGICAL COMMONALITIES THAT YOU CAN MAKE BASED ON THOSE CONCEPTS. BUT SINCE THOSE DIAGRAMS ARE ALL WE SEEM TO REMEMBER, IT IS THUS ALL WE SEEM TO TAKE FROM

IT. FOR MANY, THE HERO'S JOURNEY IS JUST UNIVERSAL STORYTELLING MADE EASY.

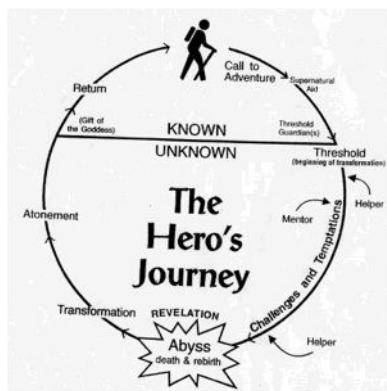
AND THAT REALITY IS HURTING MORE THAN IT'S HELPING.

HERE ARE THE REASONS WHY:

FOR STARTERS, THERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL ERROR MADE IN HOW WE INTERPRET THE APPARENT "SIMPLICITY" OF THESE MYTHS, MAINLY IN HOW THEY ARE NOT SIMPLE WHATSOEVER. THE UNIVERSAL BREAKDOWN OF THEM MAY RENDER THEM AS SEEMINGLY SIMPLE, BUT THE STRUCTURE ON DISPLAY IS ANYTHING BUT THAT. FOR INSTANCE, YOU'LL NOTICE THAT ONE OF THE MAIN REFERENCED MYTHS IN THE BOOK, **THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH**, IS ANYTHING BUT A PAINT-BY-NUMBERS STORY.

IN FACT, THE 12 TABLET **EPIC OF GILGAMESH** IS ACTUALLY PRETTY FUCKING COMPLEX FROM A STRUCTURAL STANDPOINT, EVEN THOUGH IT'S SOMEHOW CONSIDERED THE ROSETTA STONE FOR THE HERO JOURNEY. SURE, IT CONTAINS THE FAMILIAR BIG PICTURE REFERENCE POINTS (THE PASSING INTO THE STRANGE WORLD, THE CALL/RETURN, ETC), BUT THESE AMOUNT TO NOTHING BUT LOOSE PLOT POINTS OR ACTIONS AND ARE BY NO MEANS *THE ENGINE OF THE NARRATIVE*. NO, WHAT DRIVES THE NARRATIVE AND THE PLOT ARE THE BASIC METHODS OF CAUSE AND EFFECT STORYTELLING (WHICH WE WILL TALK ABOUT SOON) AS WELL AS ITS FOCUS ON THE DYNAMIC THEMES IN PLACE. LIKE WITH THE IN-FLUX RELATIONSHIP WITH ENKINDU, WHICH IS BORN OUT OF STOPPING GILGAMESH FROM ENGAGING IN HIS MORE, UM, SORDID ACTIVITIES (RAPE MOSTLY). THERE'S ALSO THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY (**L'MORTE D'ARTHUR ALERT!**), SOME OTHER STUFF ABOUT RELIGION, PROSTITUTION, DREAM STATES, YOU NAME IT. HULK HAS EVEN READ MORE ANALYSISSES OF GILGAMESH AND ENKINDU AS HIDDEN LOVERS THAN YOU WOULD IMAGINE IS POSSIBLE (OH, COLLEGE PAPERS!... ACTUALLY, THEY MAY HAVE A POINT WITH THAT ONE). THE POINT IS THERE'S A SHIT TON GOING ON WITH HOW THE STORY IS FUNCTIONING ON A MOMENT-TO-MOMENT LEVEL THAT GOES BEYOND ITS FUN LITTLE ABILITY TO BE VAGUELY OUTLINED IN TERMS OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY. AND IT IS THOSE THINGS THAT MAKE THE MYTH A COMPELLING AND INTERESTING CLASSIC, NOT THE MERE FACT THAT IT MOSTLY FITS WITHIN THE CONFINES OF MONOMYTH CLASSIFICATION.

AND YET, **GILGAMESH** ONLY SEEMS TO SURVIVE IN OUR CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS BECAUSE OF THE CAMPBELLIAN HERO DIAGRAM AND OUR DESIRE TO TALK ABOUT IT IN THOSE VERY SPECIFIC AND UNIVERSAL TERMS: THE CALL! THE REFUSAL! THE TRIALS! THE RETURN! YAY!



YAY!

NOW, IS MOST OF THAT STUFF ABOVE IN **GILGAMESH**? ABSOLUTELY.

IS THAT WHAT MAKES IT A STORY WORTH TELLING? EH, MAYBE WHEN IT COMES TO THEMATIC PURPOSE.

IS THAT WHAT MAKES IT A GOOD STORY? NO.

IS THAT WHAT MAKES IT A WELL-TOLD, WELL-STRUCTURED STORY? FUCK NO. BUT MANY ASSUME

IT DOES.

AND THIS MISUNDERSTANDING SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO WHAT HULK BELIEVES IS THE GREAT FUNDAMENTAL ERROR OF HOW WE INTERPRET ACADEMIA. CHIEFLY, THAT WHEN YOU BOIL DOWN STORYTELLING TO ITS MOST BASIC ELEMENTS, YOU ARE THEREFORE **BOILING DOWN STORYTELLING TO ITS MOST BASIC ELEMENTS!** HULK MEAN... GAAAHHH. THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE ACTUALLY DOING! THE INTENTION OF THIS BREAKDOWN IS TO FIND SIMILARITIES AND MAKE DEDUCTIONS ABOUT OUR CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INCLINATIONS! WHICH MEANS THIS BREAKDOWN IS *NOT* THE KEY TO UNLOCKING UNIVERSAL STORYTELLING, BUT A KEY TO MAKING YOUR STORY AS *SIMILAR AS POSSIBLE* TO EVERYTHING ELSE OUT THERE.

TO REITERATE: THERE IS GREAT VALUE TO THE CAMPBELLIAN HERO BREAKDOWN, SPECIFICALLY CONCERNING THE FORMATIVE NATURE OF CULTURE AND *WHY* WE VALUE AND TELL THESE STORIES, BUT IT IS ACTUALLY THE FURTHEST THING AWAY FROM A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR STORY STRUCTURE. WHOEVER ARE THE FOLKS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ORAL TRADITIONS BEHIND STUFF LIKE **BEOWULF** AND **GILGAMESH**, THEY WEREN'T SITTING DOWN SAYING "OKAY, OKAY, NOW HE HAS TO REFUSE THE CALL AND THEN BY TABLET 2 THE NEXT BEAT SHOULD..." GAAAAH. HULK SMASHY! IT WAS ALL PRIMAL AND CONSTRUCTED FROM A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SENSE. WHAT'S SO INTERESTING ABOUT THE HERO'S JOURNEY IS THE WAY THESE THEMES AND DYNAMICS SEEPED NATURALLY OUT OF THESE *DIFFERENT* STORIES, NOT THAT EVERYONE FELT OBLIGATED TO UPHOLD THE MODEL *OR WERE PURPOSELY TRYING TO DO IT*. THE HERO'S JOURNEY SECRETLY HAS NOTHING TO DO WHATSOEVER WITH GOOD STORY STRUCTURE! JUST THEMATIC CONTENT AND ICONOGRAPHY!

IF THERE IS ANYTHING THAT HULK SO DESPERATELY WANTS TO CONVEY TO ALL OF YOU IN THIS SCREENWRITING BOOK IT IS THAT **THERE IS A STARK DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE LANGUAGE WE SHOULD USE IN THE BROAD STROKES OF DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS VERSUS THE LANGUAGE WE SHOULD USE IN TERMS OF CREATION AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION.**

IT'S LIKE THE MYTH OF THE 3 ACT STRUCTURE. JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN BREAK A STORY DOWN EASILY INTO A BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END DOES NOT MEAN THAT IT IS THE BEST WAY TO APPROACH STRUCTURING A STORY. YOU DON'T WANT TO START FROM THOSE BROAD, REDUCTIVE ELEMENTS AND WORK BACKWARDS. WE WILL GET TO HULK'S PREFERRED METHOD OF STRUCTURE CALLED "MULTI-ACT FLOW STRUCTURE" SOON, BY THE WAY, BUT IT'S A COMPLICATED METHODOLOGY THAT IS MEANT TO ACCOUNT FOR ALL THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF *PRACTICAL APPLICATION*.

FOR EXAMPLE, YOU CAN'T SIT DOWN AND STRUCTURE YOUR NEW NOVEL SAYING "I'M GOING TO BASE IT ALL OFF BEING POST-MODERN AND EVERYTHING WILL FALL INTO PLACE!" THAT'S NOT HOW YOU BUILD THE THING. SIMILARLY, YOU CAN'T SIT THERE AND GO "I'M GOING TO MAKE COOL ACTION SCENES" WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW THE MECHANISMS AND FUNCTION OF HOW TO DO THAT. ACTION SCENES WORK BEST WHEN THEY CONSTRUCT A-TO-B CAUSE AND EFFECT VISUAL STORIES, BUT BECAUSE WE THINK THEY'RE "COOL" WE JUST BUILD OUR ACTION AROUND POSTURE, DISCONNECT, AND SLICK IMAGERY; WHICH LOOKS ALLURING BUT DOES NOT ACTUALLY WORK DRAMATICALLY. ALL OF THESE PROBLEMS ARE ABOUT THE CONFUSION OF LANGUAGE. THE WAY WE BREAK THINGS DOWN AND DESCRIBE THEM IS NOT NECESSARILY HELPFUL TO UNDERSTANDING HOW TO BEST CONSTRUCT THEM OR WHAT WE CONSTRUCT THEM FOR. YET WE CONSTANTLY MISTAKE THESE MODELS OF DESCRIPTION FOR "HOW-TO'S" AND THUS WE KEEP RUNNING INTO THE SAME BASIC STORYTELLING PROBLEMS AGAIN AND AGAIN.

AS HULK HAS ALLUDED TO, STORYTELLING SHOULD BE GEARED AROUND THE CONSTRUCTION AND EVOLUTION OF *DRAMA AND CHARACTER*, NOT THE LAME OBLIGATION TO HITTING TIRED, EVER-PRESENT BEATS. WE HAVE TO GEAR OUR MOMENTS AROUND FUNCTION AND PURPOSE, NOT OBLIGATORY SERVITUDE. WE HAVE TO REFORM AND BROADEN OUR MODELS. WE HAVE TO REVISE OUR LANGUAGE.

Let Hulk put this argument of categorization vs. practical application into a metaphor: knowing that a house is made from wood with plastered walls and a roof does not allow one to simply build a house. You have to understand how to literally build it and shape those things, not just know that they exist and where they should more or less go. You can't look at blueprints and just copy them to make the house feel like the real thing. Meaning, the hero stories that worked

structurally worked for completely different reasons than you think.

AND YET EVERY YEAR WE SEE MOVIES THAT DESPERATELY CLING TO THE HERO JOURNEY MODEL, AS IF IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS.

SERIOUSLY, HOW MANY MOVIES HAVE WE SEEN THAT ARE BEAT-FOR-BEAT THE SAME STORY AS **STAR WARS**? IT DOESN'T HELP THAT THERE ARE A MULTITUDE OF WRITERS WHO SIMPLY EQUATE **STAR WARS** WITH THE ONLY EXISTING MODEL OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY (HINT: IT'S NOT AT ALL) AND THEN JUST REGURGITATE IT AS IF THEY WERE PHOTOCOPYING THE SCRIPT AND CHANGING THE NAMES (**ERAGON** TAKES THE PROVERBIAL CAKE ON THAT ONE, THOUGH TO BE FAIR, **STAR WARS** TAKES A STUNNING AMOUNT OF ITS DYNAMICS FROM **DUNE**. BUT SINCE IT IS SO SEEPED INTO OUR CONSCIOUSNESS, WE SEE IT ALL THE TIME).

THERE ARE ALSO THE NOW UBIQUITOUS COMIC BOOK ORIGIN STORIES, WHICH HAVE BECOME UNIVERSAL IN THEIR CONSTRUCTION (EXCEPT FOR HULK'S ORIGIN! HULK'S IS TRULY UNIQUE! ... IN THAT IT'S A BLATANT USAGE OF **DR. JEKLL & MR. HYDE**). THERE IS RARELY A SUPER HERO ORIGIN THESE DAYS THAT FEELS INTERESTING OR DIFFERENT. THE ONE EXCEPTION? HULK GOES BACK TO **IRON MAN**! THE REASON THAT MOVIE WORKS SO WELL IS THAT IT KNOWS WHEN TO COMPLETELY AVOID THE BEATS OF THE HERO JOURNEY THAT DON'T MATTER TO THE STORY IT WANTS TO TELL. THINK OF HOW MANY BEATS IN THE "HERO JOURNEY" WOULD NOT BE CALLED FOR WITH THAT CHARACTER. THEIR SOLUTION? THEY JUST DON'T USE THEM! INSTEAD, EACH STEP OF TONY'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING SHELLHEAD IS AN ARTICULATED, CHARACTER-BASED MICRO-STEP; A SINGULAR DECISION THAT DEALS WITH THE MOMENT AND IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE SITUATION AT HAND. WHICH MAKES IT REAL FUCKING WRITING AND NOT PAINT-BY-NUMBERS.

LASTLY, THERE'S HULK'S FAVORITE EXAMPLE OF THE FORMULAIC VERSION OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY... VIDEO GAMES.

FORGIVE THE FOLLOWING NON-MOVIE DIGRESSION, BUT IT'S IMPORTANT. HULK LOVES VIDEO GAMES. THEY ARE CHALLENGING, IMMERSIVE, AND A TON OF FUN. THE MEDIUM IS REALLY BURGEONING NOW AND THERE ARE A LOT OF COMPANIES LIKE VALVE, BETHESDA, ROCKSTAR, ETC. THAT ARE PRODUCING INCREDIBLE, THOUGHTFUL WORK. BUT HONESTLY, THERE IS NOTHING THAT SHOWCASES BACKWARD THINKING QUITE LIKE THE OBLIVIOUS WRITING OF THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY TAKEN ON THE WHOLE. PEOPLE LIKE TO MAKE FUN OF HOLLYWOOD'S POOR UNDERSTANDING OF STORYTELLING, BUT THIS IS REALLY A WHOLE DIFFERENT LEVEL OF BAD. AND THAT'S BECAUSE MOST VIDEO GAME WRITING IS WHOLLY IMITATIVE, ASSEMBLED WITHOUT ACTUALLY UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE CRAFT ON ANY LEVEL. IT WOULDN'T EVEN BE FIT FOR EVEN THE WORST HOLLYWOOD MOVIES. DOES THIS SOUND HARSH? HULK IS SORRY, BUT THIS BROAD CHARACTERIZATION HAS MERIT. AND THAT'S BECAUSE MOVIES DON'T ACTUALLY WORK IF THE CHARACTERIZATION OR PLOT ISN'T COMPELLING IN SOME WAY. MEANWHILE, VIDEO GAMES CAN WORK JUST FINE WITHOUT THOSE THINGS AS LONG AS IT HAS COMPELLING GAMEPLAY. AND THAT DIFFERENCE IS EVERYTHING.

BUT HULK WANTS TO TALK ABOUT THE STORY OF ONE GAME COMPANY IN PARTICULARLY, FOR IT IS WHOLLY RESONANT TO OUR DISCUSSION. THE COMPANY OF BIOWARE HAS BEEN LAUDED FOR A LONG TIME, BUT IT ALSO TOOK THEM AGES TO ESCAPE THE CLUTCHES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY. FOR A LONG TIME, EVERY SINGLE GAME THEY RELEASED HAD THE SAME STORIES, WITH THE SAME EXACT CHARACTERS (JUST WITH SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT PROPER NOUNS). AGAIN, IT'S NOT A MATTER OF THINGS MERELY BEING SIMILAR, BUT THAT THEY ARE ALL SO SIMILAR IN THE MOST ROTE, SOUL-CRUSHING WAY POSSIBLE. THE PROBLEM OF WHY IT GOT SO BAD WAS THAT THEY THOUGHT THIS WAS THE CORRECT WAY TO DO THINGS. THEY NAKEDLY THOUGHT THE MONOMYTH CAMPBELL MODEL WAS THEIR HOW-TO GUIDE. *THEY THOUGHT SIMILARITY WAS THE POINT.*

THE SITUATION CAME TO LIGHT FOR MOST PEOPLE WHEN A POPULAR MEME SHOWED UP IN THE FORM OF A "BIOWARE GAME CHART" THAT IDENTIFIED JUST *HOW SIMILAR* ALL THE STORYTELLING AND CHARACTERIZATION WAS. AND THAT LED TO VERY FUNNY SITUATION WHERE ONE OF THE WRITERS AT BIOWARE WHO WAS IN PART RESPONSIBLE FOR THESE HERO-JOURNEY REGURGITATIONS CAME OUT TO DEFEND THEMSELVES IN... WELL, LET'S JUST BE HONEST, IT WAS IN A RATHER PISSY WAY, USING A LEVEL OF SMUGNESS ONE CAN ONLY GET FROM FAUX-

INTELLECTUALISM. HULK ISN'T TRYING TO ACCUSE THE WRITER OF PERPETUALLY BEING LIKE THAT, JUST THAT IN THIS INSTANCE THAT'S HOW IT CAME OFF. HERE IS EXACTLY HOW THE BLOWARE WRITER RESPONDED [VIA MESSAGE BOARD, AT THAT]:

“So I'm supposed to believe someone is smart enough to do a big Excel spreadsheet with color coding and stuff but not smart enough to know about Campbellian archetypes? Yeah, guys, every BioWare game has the same plot! See, things are kind of normal, and then things change and you have to go out and do stuff, and you go to crazy weird places! Aaaaaand so yeah, totally the same story. That's asinine.”

IF HULK WERE TO BE A BIG FAT JERK ABOUT ALL THIS, HULK WOULD SIMPLY REPLY: “YES. HULK TOO IS FAMILIAR WITH THIS BOOK YOU SPEAK OF. THAT'S BECAUSE WE ALL READ IT IN, LIKE, 9TH GRADE. AND THAT'S REALLY NOT WHAT THE BOOK IS SAYING, BUT THANKS FOR CALLING EVERYONE AN IDIOT FOR NOT BLINDLY ACCEPTING ITS UNIVERSAL APPLICATION AND DISMISSING THE CONCERNS OF SOMEONE WHO WAS ACTUALLY MAKING A GREAT POINT. PARTICULARLY FUN WAS THE POINT WHEN YOU START ARGUING FOR THE SAMENESS OF CAMPBELLIAN ARCHETYPES AND THEN PROCEED TO SARCASTICALLY ARGUE THE CRITICS ARE OVER-TYPIFYING SAID SAMENESS.”

AND HERE ARE THE SAME WRITER'S OTHER COMMENTS, WHICH FOLLOWED THE DUST-UP AND WERE SUMMARIZED IN AN ARTICLE IN EUROGAMER:

“[The writer] said the ‘intro, four planets, finale’ structure familiar to BioWare games is picked for a number of good reasons.

Firstly, it's ‘easy’ in the sense of QA, as areas can be culled if they're not ready in time for launch with minimal impact on the final product.

Secondly, ‘Players understand it.’ Weekes explained that four is a golden number of objectives for an area that may confuse, overwhelm and frustrate once exceeded.

Thirdly, ‘There's nothing wrong with it.’

‘It's a structure, like any other,’ he wrote. ‘Humorously snarking that our games have a beginning part that is streamlined and introduces you to the game, a middle that allows you the freedom to go to several places and have adventures, and then a tightly focused ending is like riffing on how romance novels generally start out with two people being attracted to each other but having emotional issues, then gradually building trust, then having a complication that splits them up, and then in the end they get together and are happy.’

‘People who create fiction in any form use a structure appropriate to that form. They do it because their audience understands and responds on an emotional level to that structure,’ he concluded.”

WHEN HULK FIRST RESPONDED TO THESE COMMENTS A LONG TIME AGO HULK GOT ANGRY. HULK SMASHED THINGS. BUT HULK HAS SINCE CALMED DOWN. BECAUSE THERE IS ACTUALLY A WAY THAT HIS COMMENTS MAKE PERFECT SENSE AND SEEM REASONABLE, BUT THERE IS A REALLY RELEVANT POINT THAT HULK WANTS YOU TO UNDERSTAND: 1. “EASY” IS A NEVER A GOOD REASON TO DO ANYTHING. 2. ASSUMING IT'S EASY TO “UNDERSTAND” AND WOULD FRUSTRATE YOUR SIMPLETON AUDIENCE IS NOT THE WAY TO RELATE TO THEM, LET ALONE BUILD A CHALLENGING GAME. PLUS THAT'S AN OUTRIGHT FALSEHOOD. GAMERS ADORE A LOT MORE OBJECTIVES, DEPENDING ON THE CONTEXT AND EXECUTION. 3. HULK HAS THUS FAR ARTICULATED THAT THERE IS PLENTY WRONG WITH IT (AND MORE TO COME). ESPECIALLY GIVEN THE FACT YOU HAVE 30-80 HOURS' WORTH OF STORY TO TELL AND YOU'RE USING A MODEL BUILT FOR SHORT MYTHS OR 2 HOUR MOVIES. BUT EVEN ALL THAT ISN'T THAT BIG A POINT OF CONTENTION. IT'S WHAT HE SAYS AFTER THAT COMPLETELY MISSES THE POINT. THE PROBLEM IS NOT THAT THEIR STORIES WERE DOING ALL THE GENERAL STUFF MOST COMMON STORIES WERE DOING...

IT'S THAT IT WAS ALL THEY WERE DOING.

THEY WERE GROUNDING THE MECHANICS OF THE STORY IN THOSE BASIC FUNCTIONS. THERE WAS NO TACT. NO OTHER PURPOSE. THEY WERE CLINGING TO THE SIMILARITY AS IF THE SIMILARITY WAS THE IMPORTANT PART.

AND IN THE TIME SINCE, SOMETHING ELSE HAS HAPPENED WITH BOWARE GAMES THAT MAKES HULK'S ARGUMENT FOR HULK...

BIOWARE'S **MASS EFFECT 2** HUGELY ABANDONED THE HERO'S MODEL AND TOOK A MUCH MORE BROAD APPROACH TO STORYTELLING. THEY CRAFTED NEW PERSONALITIES OUTSIDE THE ARCHETYPES. THEY BROUGHT A TON MORE OBJECTIVES BEYOND THE GOLDEN NUMBER AND PLAYERS ATE IT UP. THEY EXPANDED THE SCOPE FAR BEYOND THE "4 WORLD" DYNAMIC AND CRAFTED LONG-FORM STORYLINES FOR THE CHARACTERS THAT WERE SERIOUSLY MORE IN LINE WITH WELL-CRAFTED TV DRAMAS AND GROUP DYNAMICS INSTEAD OF ROTE CAMPEBLIAN TYPICALITY. STORIES THAT SEEMED TO DIRECTLY COMMENT ON HUMAN ETHICS AND GET TO THE HEART OF NUANCED POLITICS. AND AS A RESULT OF ALL THIS HARD WORK AND MODEL-BREAKING?

MASS EFFECT 2 WAS WIDELY HAILED AS ONE OF THE BEST GAMES OF ALL TIME.

AND WHAT WAS STOPPING THEM WAS THE MERE BELIEF THAT THE RIGOROUS, LIMITED MODEL THEY WERE USING BEFORE WAS "CORRECT." INSTEAD, THEY FREED THEMSELVES UP TO DO SO MUCH MORE. AND THEN WITH **MASS EFFECT 3** THEY WENT EVEN FURTHER AND CRAFTED A GAME WITH SUCH A STUNNING THEMATIC NARRATIVE DEVICE FOR THE ENDING THAT HULK THOUGHT THEY FINALLY BROUGHT MAINSTREAM TRIPLE A GAMING INTO THE REALM OF ART... THE PROBLEM IS HULK ISN'T SURE HOW WELL THAT PART TRANSLATED OR HOW MUCH PEOPLE WERE EVEN READY FOR IT.

BUT THE FACT THAT THEY LARGELY ABANDONED THAT HERO'S MODEL AND SUDDENLY STARTED CRAFTING NOT JUST GOOD GAMES, BUT THE BEST DAMN GAMES AROUND SAYS *EVERYTHING*.

HULK BROUGHT ALL THIS BIOWARE/VIDEO GAME STUFF IN BECAUSE IT WAS JUST THE BEST POSSIBLE EXAMPLE OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY GONE HORRIBLY, HORRIBLY WRONG AND THEN HOW THE ABANDONING OF IT ALLOWED THINGS TO GO WONDERFULLY, WONDERFULLY RIGHT. BUT MAYBE YOU THINK HULK IS BEING TOO HARD ON THE HERO'S JOURNEY. THAT HULK IS SEEING TOO MANY PROBLEMS WITH MOVIES STRIVING FOR SIMILARITY. WELL, HULK ARGUES MOST MOVIES FALL VICTIM TO THE SAME EXACT THINKING THAT BIOWARE DID. SOOOOOO MANY MOVIES.

TO WIT, LET HULK FOCUS ON POPULAR MOVIE TROPES AND EXPLAIN THE SEVEN FUN WAYS PEOPLE USE THE HERO'S JOURNEY TO RUIN STORIES:

1) – DON'T MAKE PEOPLE HEROES SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY ARE THE MAIN CHARACTERS AND THEY ARE GETTING CALLED TO AN ADVENTURE! OR SOMETHING.

WHAT MAKES SOMEONE WORTHY OF BEING A HERO? THERE SEEMS TO BE SOME CONFUSION OVER THE MATTER. WE KNOW ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS ABOUT HEROISM IS THAT A HERO COULD LITERALLY BE ANYONE, EVEN YOU! IT'S A NICE THOUGHT AND HAS SIGNIFICANT NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC VALUE, BUT THE PROBLEM IS THAT WE MISTAKE THE NATURE OF THIS ASSESSMENT AND SAY THEREFORE THAT ANY OLD HUMAN QUALITIES WILL DO FOR OUR HEROIC CHARACTER... EVEN "NONE." IT'S THE FALSEHOOD OF WHAT AN EVERYMAN MEANS. WE DO THIS APPARENTLY TO ENSURE THAT THE MAIN CHARACTER IS A CONDUIT THAT THE AUDIENCE DESIRES, BUT AS A RESULT WE ARE CREATING MAIN CHARACTERS WHO ARE JUST VACUOUS, BLANK SLATES. SOMETIMES IT'S FAR LAZIER THAN THAT AND THESE CHARACTERS ARE PICKED TO BE HEROES FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN "WELL, THAT'S WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN IN ORDER TO TELL A HERO STORY." AGAIN, THE OBLIGATORY NATURE OF HAVING TO HIT THESE BEATS AND TROPES REARS ITS UGLY HEAD.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE END OF **RATATOUILLE** WHERE THE CRITIC CHARACTER ANTON EGO SURMISES THAT HE WAS MISTAKEN ABOUT SOMETHING OF GRAVE IMPORTANCE: IT'S NOT THAT ANYONE CAN COOK BUT THAT A GREAT COOK CAN TRULY COME FROM ANYWHERE? IT DIRECTLY SPEAKS TO THIS ISSUE. IT'S NOT THAT ANYONE CAN BE A HERO, BUT THAT A HERO CAN COME FROM ANYWHERE. BUT THE KEY IS THAT THEY HAVE TO HAVE SOMETHING INSIDE THEM. A SPARK. A SENSE OF MORALITY. A YEARNING. REMY THE RAT WAS SOMEONE WITH AN INNATE ABILITY (SMELL), AN INTEREST (APPRECIATION OF THE TASTE OF FOOD), AND A DESIRE TO GO FAR BEYOND HIMSELF. HE NEVER HAD A SENSE OF BELONGING. THE POINT IS THAT REMY WAS TRULY DYNAMIC.

EVERYONE LIKES TO POINT TO LUKE SKYWALKER AS WHY THE VANILLA HERO IS WHAT WORKS “BEST” BECAUSE OF THE SUCCESS OF **STAR WARS**, BUT REMEMBER CORRELATION DOES NOT MEAN CAUSE. HE JUST SEEMS VANILLA BECAUSE HE’S OFTEN STANDING NEXT TO ONE OF THE GREATEST SCOUNDRELS OF ALL TIME IN HAN SOLO. MEANWHILE, LUKE WAS STILL A STRONG, FORCEFUL PERSONALITY WITH THE SAME HUMAN YEARNING FOR ADVENTURE BEYOND HIS FARM. HE WAS ALSO HUMAN, FRUSTRATED, AND FLAWED. HE SOON CAME TO KNOW TRAGEDY AND TRAUMA. AND YET WE CONSTANTLY MISAPPLY THIS “ANYONE CAN BE A HERO” TROPE TO MEAN THAT ANYONE WITH A VACUOUS PERSONALITY CAN BECOME A HERO/MAIN CHARACTER SIMPLY BECAUSE SOME OLD MAN SHOWS UP AND HANDS THEM A MAGIC THINGAMAJIG. AS A RESULT, WE ARE TREATED TO HERO AFTER HERO YOU COULD BASICALLY RENAME MILQUETOAST MCBLANDERSON.

SO NOW HULK IS GOING TO DO ONE OF HULK’S FAVORITE THINGS AND BRING IT BACK TO INDIANA FUCKING JONES!

THE GREAT THING ABOUT INDY IS THAT HE’S A HERO AND YET THE DUDE’S A *FUCKING CHARACTER*. FUNNY, SMART, FLAWED, GOOFY, TROUBLESOME, AND AWESOME. YES, YOU WANT YOUR MAIN CHARACTER TO WORK AS A CONDUIT, BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN THEY HAVE TO BE AN EMPTY SHELL - IT MEANS THEY ARE A FLESH AND BLOOD PERSON WHO WE CAN *BE HUMAN WITH*, NOT *HUMAN FOR*. DO YOU SEE THE CRUCIAL DIFFERENCE? IF THE PROJECTION OF OUR DESIRE TO BE IN THE SAME SITUATION AS THE HERO IS OUR ONLY MEANS OF IDENTIFICATION WITH THEM, THEN THE CHARACTER IS A COMPLETE FAILURE. THERE *HAS TO BE A REASON WE WANT TO BE LIKE THEM* OR EMPATHIZE WITH THEM OTHER THAN CONTEXT. THEREFORE, THEY SHOULD HAVE A DAMN PERSONALITY. SO DON’T BE AFRAID TO THROW IN SOME DRAMA INTO THAT CONDUIT! DON’T WASTE YOUR PERSONALITY ON SECONDARY CHARACTERS JUST BECAUSE YOU THINK YOU SHOULD (THOUGH THEY SHOULD OBVIOUSLY HAVE GOOD STUFF GOING ON TOO). DON’T USE YOUR MAIN CHARACTER AS SOMEONE WHO IS ONLY FUNCTIONAL IN TERMS OF PLOTTING. AND OOH, OOH, AND DON’T FORGET! WHEN WRITING HEROIC CHARACTERS ALWAYS REMEMBER: EXASPERATED = GOOD! BUT WHINING = BAD! SO TOE THE LINE!

II) – DON’T HAVE THE CHARACTERS REFUSE THE CALL FOR THE ENTIRE DURATION OF THE MOVIE

COUGH **GREEN LANTERN** COUGH. SO HOW MANY MOVIES, IN AN EFFORT TO SLAVISHLY STICK TO THE HERO’S JOURNEY MODEL, THROW IN AN OBLIGATORY AND WHOLLY UNNECESSARY SCENE(S) WHERE THE CHARACTER DENIES ANSWERING THE CALL FOR NO GOOD REASON WHATSOEVER? IT IS THIS HULK’S OPINION THAT THERE IS NO MORE A HOLLOW EXERCISE IN WRITING.

SO WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN SO MUCH? EITHER BECAUSE (A) THEY ARE FOLLOWING THE HERO’S JOURNEY AND THINK THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO, OR (B) BECAUSE THE WRITER THINKS IT WILL MANUFACTURE DRAMA, WHEN REALLY THEY ARE GIVING US NO SET UP FOR THIS BEHAVIOR WHATSOEVER. CUE IMAGINARY **GREEN LANTERN** DISCUSSION:

GUY: “*We need a new lantern! C’mon ring, pick the most fearless guy on this planet!*”

OTHER GUY: “*But this guy is secretly afraid of everything and kind of moany and shit!*”

GUY: “*Right, we can’t just have him kick ass immediately because he has to fit in the hero model and deny the call! So have him deny what he can obviously do, because... um, some reason... that... doesn’t... make sense, but who cares! We need the character to have the illusion of growth!*”

OTHER GUY: “*Oh okay, but does this seriously have to be the plot of the entire movie?*”

GUY: “*Yes!*”

AUDIENCE: “... *SHIT.*”

OKAY, OKAY, THIS ISN’T HOW IT WORKS FOR EVERY MOVIE. OCCASIONALLY, A MOVIE CAN HANDLE THE REFUSAL IN AN OKAY WAY AND GIVE LEGITIMATE REASONS WHY THE MAIN CHARACTER WOULDN’T WANT TO JUST ABANDON THEIR LIFE AND GO TO THIS CRAZY ADVENTURE, BUT THOSE OCCASIONS ARE FAR RARER THAN YOU’D THINK. BECAUSE USUALLY THE REASONS EXPRESSED

ARE: “I CAN’T GO WITH YOU, IT’S CRAZY! THIS IS WEIRD!” OR SOMETHING. HINT: IT’S NOT WEIRD. IN FACT, YOUR AUDIENCE WILL ALREADY KNOW THAT THIS IS EXACTLY WHERE IT IS GOING SO EMBRACE ECONOMY AND GET IT ON WITH IT

REMEMBER, ONE OF THE DELIGHTFUL THINGS THAT NO ONE SEEMS TO REALIZE IS THAT IN **STAR WARS**, LUKE SKYWALKER REFUSES THE CALL FOR APPROXIMATELY 38 SECONDS OF TOTAL SCREEN TIME. SERIOUSLY. WATCH THE FUCKING MOVIE. HE SAYS NO TO BEN KENOBI, AND THEN IN THEIR NEXT SCENE HE IMMEDIATELY REALIZES HIS AUNT AND UNCLE ARE IN DANGER, SO HE RUNS HOME AND SEES THEIR CHARRED CORPSES AND SAYS, “There is nothing for me here now.” AND HE MAKES THE DECISION TO GO WITH BEN TO ALDERAAN TO BECOME A JEDI LIKE HIS FATHER. IT’S LIKE, 38 SECONDS OF LOGICAL A, B, C STORYTELLING, DONE WITH ECONOMY. AND IT DOES WONDERS, FOLKS.

SO WHY ARE WE TURNING THAT LITTLE BIT OF NEEDED DOUBT AND TINY CONFLICT INTO ENTIRE “ACT TWOS” WHEREIN NOTHING HAPPENS BUT A CHARACTER’S INACTION? IT IS SO MISGUIDED. AND SO MANY PEOPLE TRY TO DEVELOP THEIR MAIN CHARACTER WITH ONE SINGULAR REFUSAL TOO, AS IF ANSWERING THE CALL IS THE SOLUTION TO ALL THEIR PROBLEMS. DEVELOP THEIR CHARACTER EVOLUTION INCREMENTALLY AND BASED ON OTHER ISSUES, WHETHER PERSONAL, MORAL, OR RELATIONSHIP BOUND INSTEAD! THERE SHOULD BE SO MUCH MORE GOING ON THAN JUST THE WILLINGNESS TO BE A HERO!

III) – DON’T OVER-RELY ON THE WISE OLD CRONE

OBI-WAN KENOBI AND YODA. WONDERFUL CHARACTERS. AND NOW EVERY MOVIE HAS THEIR NOT-NEARLY-AS-GOOD VERSION OF THEM. WORSE, THE THINGS THEY ARE REALLY GOOD AT HAVE NOW BECOME THEIR SOLE, GRATING DUTY IN MOVIES: THEY’VE BASICALLY BECOME EXPOSITION MACHINES. BEING A MOVIE’S “YODA” HAS ACTUALLY BECOME SHORTHAND FOR AUDIENCES. OF COURSE ANYTIME THIS IS TOO PAINFULLY OBVIOUS, WE DO THE EQUALLY OBVIOUS THING AND TRY TO BRUSH OFF THIS LAZY WRITING WITH A DUMB JOKE: “Do this thing. It’s your destiny.” / “Hey, easy, Yoda!” ... SERIOUSLY, THAT WAS AN ACTUAL INTERACTION FROM **SPAWN**.

YOU KNOW, THAT ACTUALLY BRINGS UP A GOOD LITTLE TANGENT: HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU SAID TO YOURSELF “I’LL FORGIVE THIS BLATANT APING OF [INSERT POPULAR MOVIE] BECAUSE AT LEAST IT IS SELF-AWARE BLATANT APING!” ... HULK’S GONNA WAGER NOT A LOT. OF COURSE, THIS DOES NOT INCLUDE FILMS THAT DIRECTLY USE THESE TOUCHSTONES TO INVERT THE MEANINGS FOR COMEDY PURPOSES AND YET STILL INFORM THEIR OWN STORIES. THINK OF EMPEROR ZERG’S “I AM YOUR FATHER” MOMENT FROM **TOY STORY 2** OR THE **POINT BREAK** SCREAM-AND-FIRE-YOUR-GUN-INTO-THE-AIR REFERENCE IN **HOT FUZZ**. THOSE HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF GROUNDING AND PURPOSE. BUT SO OFTEN, IT FEELS LIKE A CHEAP SHORTCUT. THERE ARE WAYS TO DO EVERYTHING, BUT GUILF AND INTENTION ARE KEY. YOUR USE OF THESE DEVICES AND FIGURES NEED EITHER TACT OR INVISIBILITY.

HULK CAN USUALLY TELL THE EXACT MOMENT EACH ONE THESE CRONE MENTORS WILL BE KILLED OFF TO SEND THE MAIN HERO ON HIS WAY ALONE (JUST BECAUSE THEY’RE SUPPOSED TO AND THAT’S WHAT **STAR WARS** DID). LOOK, HULK DOESN’T MEAN TO IMPLY THAT USING A CRONE FIGURE IN YOUR STORY ISN’T SUPER-USEFUL, BUT FOR PETE’S SAKE, TRY TO HIDE WHAT YOU’RE DOING. TRY TO UNDERSTAND THE FUNCTION OF THAT ACTION AND WHAT IT DID FOR THE CHARACTERS. DO NOT JUST USE A YODA FOR YODA’S SAKE.

IN CASE HULK HAS TO KEEP REMINDING YOU, THOSE CHARACTERS IN **STAR WARS** WEREN’T SOLELY EXPOSITION MACHINES, EITHER. REMEMBER THAT YODA WAS FIRST INTRODUCED TO US NOT AS YODA BUT AS A BATSHIT INSANE LITTLE ANIMAL, AND THE EVOLUTION TO OUR UNDERSTANDING WORKED BEAUTIFULLY. SO IN YOUR OWN STORIES GIVE THEM INTERESTING AND UNIQUE STUFF TO DO. GO FAR BEYOND EXPOSITION AND AN OCCASIONAL JOKE. DON’T BE META, EITHER. GIVE THEM A ROLE IN THE STORY’S FUNCTION *BESIDES* BEING THE CRONE. ASK YOURSELF, “HOW CAN I MAKE THIS CRONE UNIQUE?” OR EVEN FURTHER, “HOW CAN I MAKE THEM NOT FEEL LIKE A CRONE AT ALL?”

IV) – DON’T MISTAKE THE NOTION OF “THE TRIALS” FOR “THE HERO FIGHTING A BUNCH OF

THINGS”

HULK HOPES THIS ONE IS PRETTY SELF-EVIDENT, BUT HERE GOES: THE TRIALS ARE JUST NOT A SERIES OF FIGHTS.

THIS IS NOT TO IMPLY THAT THE TRIALS CANNOT *CONTAIN* A SERIES OF FIGHTS. IN FACT, A SERIES OF FIGHTS IS USUALLY A PRETTY SWEET THING, CINEMATICALLY SPEAKING. BUT WHAT EACH FIGHT SHOULD DO IS HAVE SOME SORT OF THEMATIC RESONANCE AND REFLECT ON A PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAIN CHARACTER. FOR EXAMPLE, ONE FIGHT COULD ADDRESS HIS PRIDE. ONE FIGHT COULD ADDRESS HIS LUST (IN GENERAL, THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS WORK WELL FOR THESE PERSONALITY-MADE-PHYSICAL BRAND OF OBSTACLES). ONE COULD ADDRESS HIS ACCEPTANCE OF DEFEAT, TEACH HIM/HER LOSS, HUMILITY, OR WHATEVER THEY MAY NEED TO GO FORWARD AS A BETTER, MORE COMPLETE PERSON.

THE POINT IS THAT THE TRIALS CANNOT BE EMPTY EXERCISES IN NEAT-O ACTION. THIS IS A STORY AND STORIES *DEVELOP*. GOING BACK TO **STAR WARS**, REMEMBER HOW FUCKING PSYCHOLOGICAL LUKE’S TRIALS WERE DURING HIS TIME ON DAGOBAH? THERE’S, LIKE, NO ACTUAL FIGHTING. AND THAT’S WHEN IT HITS YOU: HE’S BATTLING HIS PERSONALITY AND HIS MIND. HE’S TRYING TO MOVE ROCKS AND GAIN SELF-CONTROL. IT’S CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT MADE LITERAL AND IT’S ALL SO INCREDIBLY FANTASTIC. SO REALLY EACH TRIAL SHOULD BE TREATED AS ITS OWN MINI-STORY ADDRESSING THE CHARACTER COMPONENTS OF THE LARGER JOURNEY... AND YES YOU CAN USE ACTION TO DO THAT, BUT INTEGRATE THEM TOGETHER.

V) – DON’T JUST FALL BACK ON MEETING THE GODDESS / WOMAN AS TEMPTRESS FOR YOUR FEMALE ROLES

Hulk, you got your feminism in my hero’s journey chapter! DARN TOOTIN’ HULK DID. DEAL WITH IT CAUSE IT’S IMPORTANT.

WHILE WRITING THEIR STORIES SO MANY PEOPLE LOOK AT THE HERO JOURNEY MODEL AND GO: “WELL, WHEN IT COMES TO OUR WOMEN FIGURES WE CAN JUST WRITE THEM AS THE GODDESS/TEMPTRESS! (READ: MADONNA/WHORE), BECAUSE THAT’S HOW WE’VE BEEN DOING IT FOREVER. SWEET! THANKS MONOMYTH!” SERIOUSLY, THAT’S THE SUM TOTAL OF FEMALE APPROXIMATION WHEN LOOKING AT THE CHART (CAMPBELL’S BOOK ACTUALLY HAS A LOT OF GOOD MATERNAL AND SACRED FEMININE STUFF IN THE BACK ONCE YOU GET PAST THE MODEL THING. WHAT? NO ONE READS THAT FAR? OH, OKAY.)

UGH. HONESTLY, THESE TROPES ARE AS OLD AS THE DAWN OF TIME BECAUSE A LOT OF MEN HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO GET OVER THIS DYNAMIC SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME. AND PLEASE KNOW HULK IS NOT DERIDING THIS BAD HABIT OUT OF SOME MODERN, REVISIONIST P.C. INCLINATION. AS HULK SAID IN POINT #20, THE TRUTH IS THAT WRITING DYNAMIC WOMEN JUST MAKES FOR BETTER PLOTS AND BETTER MOVIES.

PLUS, THE OTHER TRUTH IS THAT THERE HAVE BEEN INTERESTING, HUMAN DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN SINCE JUST ABOUT FOREVER, TOO (PROOF? ATALANTA FOR ONE, NOT A MISSPELLED CITY BUT THAT FIGURE OF GREEK MYTH. ALSO SEMIRAMIS, AND AS FAR AS ACTUAL GODDESS CONDUITS GO HATHOR WAS PRETTY COOL). HULK ARGUES THAT THE GODDESS/TEMPTRESS MODEL HAS ALWAYS BEEN OUTDATED. IT’S ALWAYS BEEN A MALE-CENTRIC, ARCHAIC VIEW OF GENDER AND IT’S ALL ABOUT WHAT “WOMEN CAN DO TO MEN” AND NOT “WHAT WOMEN CAN DO.” SO IF YOU’RE STILL WRITING WOMEN WITH ONLY THESE BASIC MADONNA / WHORE ARCHETYPES IN MIND, JUST STOP IT ALREADY. IT WON’T MAKE YOUR WRITING BETTER.

AGAIN, GOING BACK TO **STAR WARS**, THAT MOVIE ACTUALLY DID A FINE JOB OF AVOIDING THAT SHIT. WELL...OKAY, THERE’S ONLY LEIA AND IT’S NOT LIKE SHE’S THE PERFECT EXAMPLE OF FEMINISM, BUT AS HULK TALKED ABOUT BEFORE SHE’S AT LEAST PRETTY DAMN GOOD. SHE’S A FULLY-FORMED AND INTERESTING CHARACTER WHO HAS HER OWN STUFF GOING ON AND A WHOLE RANGE OF PERSONALITY. AND BEST OF ALL, SHE WASN’T INTERESTED IN BEING EITHER GODDESS OR TEMPTRESS, BUT SHE STILL HAD THE INNATE CAPACITY TO BE STRONG, MATERNAL, AND SEXUAL. WHICH MADE HER, YOU KNOW, A HUMAN BEING. AND SHE JUST SO HAPPENED TO

TRANSCEND THE ENTIRE AWFUL DYNAMIC. AGAIN, SHE'S NOT PERFECT, BUT COMPARED TO WHAT THE CAMPBELL MODEL DICTATES, HULK WOULD GO SO FAR TO SAY THAT LEIA STANDS AS A DIRECT ATTACK ON THE VALUES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY AND IS SYMBOLIC OF SO MANY ATTRIBUTES THAT THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT VALUED IN THE SEVENTIES.

AND DESPITE LEIA'S NEAR UNANIMOUS POPULARITY, THE MADONNA/WHORE DYNAMIC IS STILL EVERYWHERE THESE DAYS. YES, A LOT OF TIMES IT'S BECAUSE THE MALE WRITER CAN'T HELP BUT VIEW WOMEN WITH THIS INHUMAN DYNAMIC, BUT HULK'S HUGE PROBLEM IS THAT MOST OF THE TIME IT'S UNINTENTIONAL! WHY DOES THAT HAPPEN? BECAUSE EITHER THAT'S WHAT THE HERO'S JOURNEY SAYS TO DO OR BECAUSE WRITERS JUST HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO DO ANYTHING ELSE. SO WHENEVER HULK READS THIS UNINTENTIONAL MADONNA / WHORE STUFF, HULK ALWAYS GIVES PEOPLE THE SAME ADVICE: "FUCK IT, JUST WRITE HER LIKE LEIA." IT SOUND SO STUPID AND SIMPLE, BUT THE PERSON WHO CLAIMS TO HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO WRITE WOMEN WILL THEN INSTANTLY GET IT EVERY TIME. LEIA IS THAT MUCH A CENTRAL AND POSITIVE FIGURE IN OUR ERA. THIS TRICK ISN'T SOME MAGIC CURE-ALL OR ANYTHING, BUT YOU'D BE SHOCKED HOW MUCH IT INSTANTLY MAKES A LOT OF YOUNG MEN'S FEMALE CHARACTERS, LIKE, 50% BETTER.

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THAT HULK KEEPS BRINGING UP **STAR WARS** AND HULK IS DOING SO FOR A REASON. IT'S OUR MAIN CULTURAL TOUCHSTONE FOR THE HERO'S JOURNEY, THE ONE THAT WHOLLY POPULARIZED IT, AND YET WE CAN'T EVEN SEEM TO IMITATE IT PROPERLY. WE'RE LOOKING AT THE MOST BASIC CONTENT AND MOTIFS AND COPYING THOSE ELEMENTS. BUT WE'RE NOT COPYING THE MECHANISMS AND ENGINES THAT *REALLY* DROVE ITS SUCCESS. STRUCTURALLY, WE'RE NOT COPYING ITS SENSE OF ECONOMY, ITS UNDERSTANDING OF DRAMA, THE POWER OF ITS CHARACTERIZATION, THE HUMOR OF ITS CRONES, THE PSYCHOLOGY AT PLAY IN THE TRIALS, AND ITS STRONG FEMALE LEAD. WE'RE LITERALLY MISSING THE BEST STUFF ABOUT **STAR WARS** BECAUSE WE'RE TOO BUSY LOOKING AT HOW IT FITS THE HERO'S JOURNEY ALONG WITH *EVERYTHING ELSE* WE DIGEST.

WELL, GUESS WHAT FOLKS? **THE SEEKER: THE DARK IS RISING** FITS THE HERO'S JOURNEY *EVEN BETTER THAN STAR WARS DOES*, BUT DOES THAT FILM'S STRUCTURE AND SENSE OF DRAMA AND EXCITEMENT RESONATE WITH US? NO. BECAUSE THE FILM IS NOT VERY GOOD AT ALL, WHICH MEANS NO ONE IS INTERESTED IN COPYING *THAT*.

WHAT MAKES THE ORIGINAL **STAR WARS** TRILOGY SO AWESOME AFTER ALL THESE YEARS IS NOT HOW IT'S THE SAME AS EVERY CLASSIC HERO STORY, BUT HOW IT'S STILL TRULY *DIFFERENT*.

VI) – DON'T BLATANTLY USE THE ELIXIR REMEDY / DEUS EX MACHINA

THIS ONE SORT OF DEALS WITH THE "RETURN WITH ELIXIR" COMPONENT, BUT BASICALLY HULK JUST WANTS TO POINT OUT THAT WAY TOO MANY STORYLINES RESOLVE WITH DEUS EX MACHINA. LET HULK PUT IT LIKE THIS: ANYTIME YOUR BIG HERO STORY SOLVES PROBLEMS THE WAY **ENTOURAGE** DOES, YOU SHOULD PROBABLY JUST STOP DOING THAT.

LOOK. DEUS EX MACHINA IS FUCKING HARD. NO TWO BONES ABOUT IT. HULK RECOMMENDS THAT EVEN MOST INTERMEDIATE WRITERS SHOULD STAY AWAY (HULK INCLUDES HULK-SELF IN THIS). THAT IS BECAUSE CHANCES ARE YOU WILL DO IT IN MEDIOCRE FASHION AND WILL THUS FAIL. BUT THAT'S OKAY. DO SOMETHING ELSE. ALMOST EVERY OTHER KIND OF PLOTTING IS A BETTER WAY TO SOLVE STORY PROBLEMS.

BUT IS THERE A WAY TO DO DEUS EX MACHINA? OF COURSE! BUT YOU HAVE TO EITHER DIRECTLY ENGAGE THE THEME (WHICH HULK WILL ILLUSTRATE LATER) OR YOU HAVE TO DISGUISE THE DEVICE IN A WAY THAT TOTALLY MAKES SENSE: GROUNDING IT IN CHARACTER PURPOSE AND DRAMA.

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM OF WHICH IS THAT THERE IS NO DEVICE IN POPULAR STORYTELLING THAT, WHEN USED POORLY, CAN FEEL SO DAMN CHEAP TO EVEN THE MOST UNAWARE OF AUDIENCES. CONVENTIONAL PLOTTING IS DEPENDENT ON SET-UP AND DELIVERY. AND NOTHING MAKES THE AUDIENCE MORE AWARE OF A LACK OF SET-UP THEN THE SUDDEN SAVING OF A CHARACTER FROM SOME MEANS THAT SEEM FOREIGN TO THEM. BUT IF YOU SET IT UP? AND NOT JUST WITH SOME

MAGICAL DO-HICKEY, BUT IN TERMS OF CHARACTER CATHARSIS? WHEN YOU GEAR IT AROUND DRAMATIC FUNCTION? HOOO BOY, DOES IT WORK.

LET'S GO BACK TO THAT SAME MOVIE YET AGAIN: REMEMBER THE HAN SOLO "YEEE HAW KID! NOW LET'S BLOW THIS JOINT!" MOMENT FROM **STAR WARS**? OF COURSE YOU DO. IT WORKS BECAUSE THEY SPEND THE ENTIRE MOVIE SHOWING THAT HAN DOESN'T *DO STUFF LIKE THAT* AND HAVE THE CHARACTERS TUG AT HIS HEART STRINGS TRYING TO *GET HIM TO DO STUFF LIKE THAT*. THE LAST MOMENT OF LUKE ASKING FOR HELP SETS IT UP SO PERFECTLY, AS HE SHUFFLES AWAY WITH ALL HIS MONEY GRUMBLING TO A RELUCTANT CHEWY "I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING." THEN THE FILM THEN SPENDS *THE EXACT RIGHT* AMOUNT OF TIME AWAY FROM HAN SO YOU COMPLETELY FORGET ABOUT HIM, UNTIL THE VERY SECOND HE STREAMS IN, STARLIGHT-BEHIND-FALCON, AND SAVES LUKE!

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL, GORGEOUS MOMENT, BUT IT WORKS BECAUSE OF ALL THE GREAT CHARACTER SET-UP. IT WORKS AS A MOMENT THAT IS DEUS EX MACHINA ONLY... BUT IT'S NOT DEUS EX MACHINA AT ALL. IN THAT MOMENT IT IS A SUDDEN SURPRISE, BUT REALLY IT'S THE RESULT OF A CAREFULLY CONSTRUCTED CHARACTER ARC, NOT SOMETHING AS ETHEREAL OR RANDOM AS "FATE" OR "INTERFERENCE OF THE GODS." IT'S HUMAN. AND AS A RESULT IT WORKS SO DAMN WELL FOR THE AUDIENCE... IT'S AMAZING HOW MUCH LUCAS TOOK THAT DEUS EX MACHINA MOMENT AND MADE IT SOMETHING SO DIFFERENT AND MORE FUNCTIONAL. GOSH. HULK KEEPS WRITING ABOUT **STAR WARS** AND KINDA FALLING IN LOVE WITH IT AGAIN... THIS AFTER HULK WAS GOING TO SWEAR IT OFF. OH WELL, THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WITH GOOD THINGS.

THEY ALWAYS GIVE YOU A REASON TO LOVE THEM.

VII) – DON'T THINK "THE RETURN" ONLY MEANS THAT CHARACTERS SHOULD COME HOME AT THE END

PERHAPS WE CAN BLAME **THE ODYSSEY** FOR THIS ONE, BUT THERE IS A DEFINITE LACK OF UNDERSTANDING FOR WHAT "THE RETURN" ACTUALLY MEANS AND IT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR DOZENS OF HYPER-POINTLESS ENDINGS. WRITERS GET IT STUCK IN THEIR HEAD THAT WE SOMEHOW HAVE TO RETURN HOME AND THIS MAGICALLY BRINGS THINGS FULL CIRCLE... YEAH. THE RETURN ACTUALLY IMPLIES A THEMATIC OR PSYCHOLOGICAL RETURN, NOT A LITERAL ONE. AND YET WE SEE MOVIES THAT LITERALIZE THAT RETURNING TO "HOME" AND THINK THAT *INHERENTLY* IMPLIES SOME KIND OF MEANING. AND UNLESS YOU GIVE THE RETURN SOME THEMATIC RESONANCE, UNLESS YOU HAVE BUILT UP THE MEANING OF THAT RETURN AND HAVE TRULY CHANGED THE CHARACTER, THEN IT MEANS *ABSOLUTELY NOTHING*.

HULK'S PERSONAL FAVORITE EXAMPLE OF THE NONSENSICAL LITERAL RETURN OCCURS IN A SERIES OF FILMS WHICH ARE THE COMPLETE OPPOSITE OF THE ORIGINAL **STAR WARS** TRILOGY...

HULK IS TALKING ABOUT THE PREQUELS.

THOSE MOVIES ARE ALL TERRIBLE FOR HUNDREDS OF REASONS, BUT IN THIS SPECIFIC CASE: THE LITERAL RETURN TO NABOO IN **THE PHANTOM MENACE** IS DOWNRIGHT BIZARRE. THAT IS BECAUSE, ASIDE FROM PICKING UP A LITTLE ANAKIN SKYWALKER, THEIR JOURNEY TO CORUSCANT YIELDS ABSOLUTELY ZERO RESULTS THAT AFFECT THE PLOT, SITUATION, OR CHARACTER. SERIOUSLY. THEY RETURN BECAUSE THEY HAVE NOTHING LEFT TO FAIL AT. ABSOLUTELY NOTHING IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THEIR SITUATION WITH THE TRADE FEDERATION, OR THEIR PERSONAL SITUATIONS OR THEIR CHARACTER GROWTH. THEY'RE JUST IN A DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHIC PLACE. EVEN WHEN PADME SHOWED UP IN THE SENATE AND PLEADS HER CASE, THE SENATE IS BASICALLY LIKE "WHAT!? NO! OF COURSE NOT. YOU CAME ALL THE WAY HERE TO ASK THAT? WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?" WHICH ODDLY ENOUGH IS SOMETHING THAT COULD BE MADE INTO AN INTERESTING POLITICAL STATEMENT ABOUT DEMOCRACY, BUT THEY IGNORE THAT CONTEXT TOO, SHRUG THEIR SHOULDERS, AND GO HOME TO REALLY START DEALING WITH THE ISSUE AT HAND. AGAIN. DOWNRIGHT BIZARRE.

THE LAST THING HULK WANTS TO DO IS TURN THIS INTO A FAN-FIC SESSION, BUT SINCE THIS IS A SCREENWRITING BOOK HULK FEELS IT IS OKAY TO TALK ABOUT DIFFERENT STORY OPTIONS AND WHAT THEY COULD HAVE DONE BETTER IN THE PREQUELS. THERE ARE A MILLION THINGS THEY

COULD HAVE DONE TO FIX IT, BUT HERE'S ONE SMALL CHANGE THAT COULD HAVE IMPROVED SO MUCH: PADME SHOULD HAVE STAYED ON NABOO AND DEALT WITH THE FACT HER PLANET WAS UNDER FUCKING ATTACK. QUI-GON SHOULD HAVE LEFT OBI-WAN THERE TO PROTECT HER AND THUS PADME AND OBI-WAN COULD HAVE DEVELOPED A FRIENDSHIP AND SHE COULD HAVE HAD A SCHOOLGIRL CRUSH. MEANWHILE, QUI-GON WOULD HAVE BEEN THE ONLY ONE TO GO BACK TO THE SENATE AND GET STRANDED ALONG THE WAY ON TATOOINE. THERE HE FINDS A NEW, BETTER PADAWAN IN YOUNG ANAKIN. HE COULD HAVE FREED HIM THE SAME WAY AND THEIR STUPID MISSION TO CORUSCANT STILL COULD HAVE FAILED. BUT HERE'S THE REAL KEY, WHEN THEY RETURNED IT COULD HAVE ALL COME TOGETHER IN A WAY THAT ACTUALLY MADE SENSE. ANAKIN ENTERS AS THE DARK STRANGER WHO INSTANTLY LOVES PADME, THE OBI-WAN CRUSH EVAPORATES, OBI-WAN IS PISSED THERE'S A NEW PADAWAN AND EVERYONE WOULD HAVE REAL MOTIVATIONS AND EMOTIONS. THIS "RETURN" WOULD HAVE REAL, SERIOUS CONSEQUENCE. BUT INSTEAD THEY ALL GOT TO TRAVEL TOGETHER IN A BIG, USELESS GROUP WHERE EVERYONE STANDS AROUND WHILE OTHER PEOPLE GET TO HAVE ACTUAL STORIES. ALSO HULK WOULD HAVE GOTTEN RID OF JAR JAR. ALSO THEY SHOULD HAVE... DONE A MILLION OTHER THINGS. WAIT, WHY THE HELL IS HULK EVEN DOING THIS? YOU CAN'T POLISH A TURD. ASSUMING THERE IS A SINGULAR FIX TO THE PROBLEMS OF THE PREQUELS IS LIKE SWATTING A MOSQUITO AND ASSUMING THEY ARE EXTINCT. HULK JUST WANTED TO SHOW A WAY THAT THERE COULD HAVE BEEN AN ACTUAL POINT AND CONSEQUENCE TO THE RETURN.

WHICH IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE WE SEE THE EMPTY, LITERAL RETURN ALL THE TIME. SO AT THIS POINT HULK URGES YOU TO NOT EVEN BOTHER WITH IT. IT DOESN'T FIT WITH MOST STORIES ANYWAY, EVEN FOR SOME BIG EPICS. NOT TO GET TOO LITERAL, BUT IT MAKES WAY MORE SENSE IN CLASSIC MYTH OR AN INTERGALACTIC COMMUNITY OR SOMETHING, WHERE GOING ON ANY KIND OF JOURNEY IS SOME GIANT UNDERTAKING. BUT WE NOW LIVE IN A TRANSIENT, NOMADIC, AND WHOLLY INTERCONNECTED SOCIETY SO HULK ARGUES THAT THE EFFECT OF SPATIAL SEPARATION IS LESS RESONANT (EVEN THOUGH IT STILL WORKS DAMN WELL CINEMATICALLY). BUT MODERN SOCIETY IS INTERCONNECTED *ALL THE TIME*. SO THAT MEANS THE THEMATIC POINT OF THE RETURN, TO HAVE A CHARACTER STUCK IN TWO WORLDS SO TO SPEAK, IS ACTUALLY OUR MODERN CONSTANT. IT'S ALL SORT OF CONFLICTING AND WE DON'T EXACTLY KNOW WHAT IT MEANS.

SO IN THE MEANTIME, WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR ENDING, JUST HAMMER HOME YOUR DAMN THEMES. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHERE THE CHARACTERS ARE ACTUALLY LOCATED. JUST BE SURE ALL YOUR CHARACTERS HAVE HIT THE BEATS THEY NEED TO HIT FOR THEIR STORIES TO WORK, AND BE SURE THAT HAS BEEN EXECUTED IN THE NAME OF DRAMA. ECONOMY AND FOCUS, FOLKS. THE RETURN IS A THEMATIC ONE. COMING HOME SHOULD MEAN COMING TO CATHARSIS.

VIII) – DON'T USE "CUZ DESTINY!"

THIS ONE ISN'T NECESSARILY SOMETHING CAMPBELL TALKED ABOUT A LOT, BUT WE HAVE ABSOLUTELY ADOPTED IT INTO THE HERO MYTHOS. IN FACT, WE'VE ADOPTED IT INTO A SHIT LOAD OF MYTHOSES. DESTINY HAS GOTTEN ALL UP IN, NOT JUST OUR HERO STORIES, BUT STORYTELLING IN GENERAL.

AND HULK DOES NOT LIKE IT ONE BIT.

IT'S NOT THAT A STORYLINE ABOUT DESTINY CANNOT BE WELL-EXECUTED, IT'S JUST THAT AS A CHOICE IT TENDS TO BREED A LOT OF LAZY DRAMA. THE FIRST PROBLEM IS THAT BY TAKING THE REASON THINGS HAPPEN IN A NARRATIVE AND CHALKING THEM UP TO DESTINY, YOU INHERENTLY REMOVE BOTH PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS AND CONTEXTUAL CONFLICT. AND THAT'S GIVING YOURSELF A HUGE DRAMATIC OBSTACLE. HMMMM. HOW TO EXPLAIN IT...

YOU REMEMBER WHEN HULK TALKED ABOUT ACT BREAKS BEING GEARED AROUND A CHARACTER'S CHOICE? WELL WE CAN THEN ASSUME THAT CHARACTER ARCS ARE GEARED AROUND A CHARACTER'S ENTIRE SERIES OF CHOICES. AND INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF "DESTINY" INSTANTLY REMOVES THE NOTION (OR ILLUSION) OF CHOICE FROM THE CHARACTER ALTOGETHER. IT EFFECTIVELY GIVES AWAY THE END TO THE AUDIENCE, NOT IN TERMS OF THE STORY OF THE LOGICAL "HOW," BUT MOST CERTAINLY IN TERMS OF DRAMA. AND DRAMA IS ALL ABOUT HOW THE NARRATIVE THREATENS US VISCERALLY SO THAT *WE FORGET* THAT THE HERO

WILL SUCCEED OR EVEN BECOME A HERO IN THE FIRST PLACE (AGAIN, INDIANA JONES WORKS SO BECAUSE HE'S CONSTANTLY REMINDING YOU OF HIS ABILITY TO FAIL). AND USING DESTINY AS A DEVICE *PREVENTS US* FROM EVER FORGETTING. IT MAY MAKE "STORY SENSE," BUT IT RUINS THE FUNCTION OF DRAMA.

THE IRONY OF ALL THIS IS THAT ALMOST ALL OF OUR ANCIENT DRAMAS WERE COMPLETELY GEARED AROUND THE CONCEPT OF DESTINY; ALBEIT THE KEY DIFFERENCE BEING THAT THEIR USE OF THE DEVICE WAS USED MOSTLY IN TRAGEDIES. IT WAS A COMMENTARY ON THE NATURE OF CHOICE, SPECIFICALLY IN REGARDS TO THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH. WHY DID THEY USE IT THAT WAY? WELL, OLD-SCHOOL LIFE USED TO BE FUCKING HARD, FOLKS. MOST OF THE TIME YOU JUST, LIKE, DIED. LIFE WAS INFINITELY MORE RANDOM THAN IT IS NOW. A GOOD COLD WOULD KILL YOU. WOMEN USUALLY DIDN'T SURVIVE CHILDBIRTH. FAMINE. WAR. MURDER. ALL PRESENT. THUS THE IDEA THAT FATE, AKA DEATH, WAS GOING TO HAPPEN IN OUR LIVES, REGARDLESS OF OUR OWN GOODNESS OR IMPORT, WAS A MUCH MORE PERSISTENT REALITY. DEATH WAS A CONSTANT (IT STILL IS NOW, ACTUALLY). AND THUS EVERY MYTH WAS DIRECTLY TRYING TO ENGAGE THAT CENTRAL REALITY OF LIFE. SO MUCH SO THAT IT BECAME THE BACKBONE OF GREEK DRAMA: CHALLENGING THE FATES, WHEREIN THE NOTION OF TRYING TO CHEAT DEATH WAS ACTUALLY PERCEIVED AS A CHARACTER FLAW.

BUT NOW WE WHOLLY FORGET THAT PART OF THE EQUATION. PROBABLY BECAUSE NOW WE ACTIVELY REWARD A CHARACTER WHO IS TRYING TO CHEAT DEATH. HECK, WE ARE TAUGHT TO VALUE IT AS A VIRTUE. WE RALLY AROUND CHARACTERS THAT EMBRACE INVINCIBILITY. BUT BACK IN THE DAY? ACHILLES. PERSEUS. GILGAMESH. OUR HERO TALES USED TO BE CAUTIONARY. NOW, THOSE FLAWS ARE UPHELD AS SACRED VIRTUES. BELIEVING YOU ARE INVINCIBLE IS A FORM OF HEROISM. BUT HEY, PERHAPS IT'S JUST A SIGN OF OUR PROSPEROUS AGE. *DAMN THE FATES* THEY SAY. WHICH IF WE ARE GOING TO BE HONEST ABOUT OUR CULTURE IS PROBABLY THEMATICALLY UNDERSTANDABLE ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

THE REAL PROBLEM, NARRATIVELY SPEAKING, IS THAT WE TOOK THIS VERY SPECIFIC PLOTTING DEVICE, WHICH WAS USUALLY USED FOR THE ONE INEVITABLE CONSTANT IN LIFE (DEATH), AND TURNED IT INTO THIS CHEAP VEHICLE FOR READY-MADE PLOTTING AND OBJECTIVE-SATISFYING. MEANING TO USE IT AS WE DO NOW IS A COMPLETE MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE MECHANISM AND PURPOSE OF THAT DEVICE. NOW WE USE DESTINY TO MAKE US THINK WE'RE BORN TO BE STARS. TO BE HEROES. TO GET EVERYTHING IN LIFE *BESIDES* DEATH. IT'S AN OUTRIGHT PERVERSION OF THE INTENTION OF DESTINY. NOW WE USE THE WITCHES FROM **MACBETH** TO TELL OUR HEROES ALL THE AWESOME THINGS THEY'RE GOING TO BE AND THEN JUST SIT BACK AND WATCH THEM AS THEY SUPPOSEDLY OVERCOME THEIR MINOR BULLSHIT AND FINALLY DO IT. THERE'S NO FABLE. THERE'S NO LESSON. OUR STORIES JUST HAVE THE STARS IN THEIR EYES, FREE OF CONSEQUENCE.

WHICH HULK GUESSES JUST PROVES THE THESIS OF **MACBETH** RIGHT IN A WAY?

UGH. THE WORST PART IS SO MANY WRITERS DON'T THINK ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF THESE MECHANISMS. PEOPLE JUST DO IT BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT DRAMA IS AND THEY INJECT THESE TROPES INTO STORYTELLING BECAUSE "THAT'S WHAT MOVIES DO." AGAIN, IT'S OBLIGATORY. THERE WAS A RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT OF A "YOUNG HAN SOLO" MOVIE (OOF) AND BADASS DIGEST'S OWN DEVIN FARACI WROTE A GREAT LITTLE SATIRICAL PIECE ON WHY A) THIS WAS LIKELY A TERRIBLE IDEA AND B) THE WAY THESE TERRIBLE TROPES WE SEE MORE AND MORE IN MOVIES OVERTLY EXPLAIN INTERCONNECTIONS WITHOUT MAKING THEM DRAMATIC. THIS PART WAS GREAT:

"We Will See The Origins of the Millenium Falcon. No, not just the thrilling card game where Han won the ship from Lando (although that will be in the movie and will be included in some wacky, unexpected way, like Han and Lando are playing cards in Jabba's dungeon or something). We will actually see the Falcon being built. A young Han - four or five years old - will be transfixed by the ship under construction.... ALMOST AS IF IT'S HIS DESTINY."

YUP. THAT'S THE ETHOS OF OUR WHOLE APPROACH TO STORYTELLING RIGHT THERE. IT'S MISTAKING THE NOTION OF SET-UP AND DELIVERY FOR HAVING OBLIGATORY DESTINATIONS. IT'S MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN POINTS OF A TIMELINE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING ALL THE CONCEPTS WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT IN THIS ENTIRE BOOK. THERE'S NO PROPULSION AND NO

CHARACTER CHOICES. HAN HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE TO COME BACK TO RESCUE LUKE. AND THIS KIND OF DESTINY THINKING? IT'S A HOLLOW IMITATION OF STORYTELLING AND IT'S BECOME SUCH A CRUTCH. IT'S: "HERE'S THE THING YOU WERE MEANT TO DO! GO DO IT BY THE END OF THE MOVIE AND IT WILL SEEM LIKE A JOURNEY!" BUT IT'S NOT A JOURNEY... IT'S A NOTHING.

SO HERE'S SOME ADVICE TO EVERY SCREENWRITER OUT THERE. REMOVE "DESTINY" FROM YOUR PLOTTING OF ANYTHING YOU EVER DO. EVER. NOT BECAUSE IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO DO WELL. HECK **THE WIRE** TURNED THE NOTION OF CHALLENGING THE FATES (READ: MODERN INSTITUTIONS) INTO THE BEST TELEVISION EVER OFFERED TO US. NO, IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE USING IT FOR TRADITIONAL DRAMATIC STORYTELLING WITHOUT REALIZING YOU'RE USING THE DRAMATIC EQUIVALENT OF:

"WHY?" / "BECAUSE!"

SO JUST AVOID THE TRAP UNTIL YOU CAN LEARN TO NAVIGATE THE OTHER ARENAS OF STORY.

IX) - WRAPPING IT ALL UP

YOU KNOW... PERHAPS A BETTER TITLE FOR THIS CHAPTER WOULD HAVE BEEN "A BETTER WAY OF APPROACHING THE HERO'S JOURNEY" BUT AGAIN, HULK REALLY WANTED YOU TO UNLEARN THE STORY MODEL. WE JUST HAVE TO LOOSEN UP THE WAY WE DEAL WITH THESE STRUCTURAL MATTERS BECAUSE THIS WEIRD SENSE OF FORMALISM IS CRIPPLING OUR ABILITY TO FOCUS ON MORE PRODUCTIVE MECHANISMS OF STORYTELLING.

STILL, KEEPING WITH HULK'S THEME OF BALANCE: ADOPTING LESS RIGID MODELS DOES NOT GIVE US CARTE BLANCHE TO DEVOLVE OUR MOVIES INTO A STORY-LESS, BAY-ESQUE MALAISE OF ACTION, BUT ARE INSTEAD THERE TO HELP US CRAFT TIGHT AND DRAMATIC STORIES THAT FIT WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO. REMEMBER, THERE'S NO "REFUSING THE CALL" IN **INDIANA JONES** AND HE'S STILL A DAMN HERO. HE'S SIMPLY LIKE "THE ARK OF THE COVENANT? FUCK YEAH, I'M IN." AND EVERYONE WAS *TOTALLY COOL WITH THAT*.

BEYOND THAT, IT IS IMPORTANT AS A CULTURE TO CONSTANTLY EVALUATE OUR TRIED AND TRUE SYSTEMS. THIS IS NOT AN INVITATION TO DISAPPEAR UP OUR OWN ASSHOLES WITH REFLEXIVE ACADEMIC TALK, BUT WE HAVE TO BE MORE PERCEPTIVE TO WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS US DO THINGS. AND THE POPULARIZATION OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY IS SIGNIFICANT TO OUR CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING, BUT NOW OUR OVER-RELIANCE ON IT FOR PRAGMATIC STORYTELLING HAS REACHED A KIND OF CRITICAL MASS.

DIDN'T YOU EVER FIND IT CURIOUS THAT THE HERO'S JOURNEY TELLS YOU THE SPECIFIC BEATS IN A GENERAL ORDER ***BUT IT GIVES YOU NO IDEA HOW TO LINK THEM???*** WOULDN'T THAT BE AN IMPORTANT PART OF ANY STORYTELLING MODEL?

THAT'S BECAUSE THE HERO'S JOURNEY IS NOT A STORYTELLING MODEL. WHICH MEANS IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT SO MANY OF THESE MODERN POST-**STAR WARS** FILMS WHO BASE THEIR STORIES ON IT COME OFF LIKE SEGMENTED NONSENSE, WITH CHARACTERS HITTING OBVIOUS AND REPEATED BEATS WITH NO FLOW FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN DESTINY AND COSMIC INTERFERENCE. THE BOOK HAS ONLY BEEN AROUND FOR 60 YEARS AND WE WERE TELLING AMAZING HERO STORIES WITHOUT IT JUST FINE BEFOREHAND. ACTUALLY, WE WERE DOING IT A LOT BETTER BECAUSE WE WEREN'T TRYING TO REDUCE IT DOWN TO THE HERO'S FORMULA. EVEN THE GREAT **STAR WARS**, WHICH USED THE HERO'S JOURNEY AS AN INFLUENCE, DID NOT SEE IT AS STRUCTURAL MODEL, BUT INSTEAD A WAY TO BUILD SOMETHING THEMATICALLY RESONANT. LUCAS'S STORY, MEANWHILE, WAS INSTEAD BUILT BY DRAMA AND PROPULSION.

LINKING THINGS TOGETHER IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN CRAFTING A WELL-TOLD STORY. THIS IS WHAT HULK MEANS BY "FLOW." IT'S LIKE CLIMBING STAIRS: EACH SCENE SHOULD LEAD TO THE NEXT AND SO ON IN A WAY THAT ADVANCES THE PLOT, CHARACTER, OR THEME. EVERY PLACE SHOULD MAKE SENSE. AND THEN IT SHOULD UNIFY INTO A *SINGLE STORY* WITH TIGHT, ECONOMICAL WRITING THAT IS GOOD FOR *YOUR IDEAS*, RATHER THAN AUGMENTING YOUR STORY TO FIT SOMETHING THAT IS THE EQUIVALENT OF A TWO-THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD CLIFF'S NOTES ANALYSIS, WHICH AGAIN, WAS REALLY SOMETHING THAT WAS MADE TO INVESTIGATE WHY WE CREATED MYTH AND NOT INTENDED AS HOW-TO INSTRUCTION.

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S **THE DARK KNIGHT** IS 1) ABOUT A SUPERHERO 2) ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED AND SUCCESSFUL SUPERHERO FILMS EVER AND 3) AND IT DOESN'T EVEN REALLY TOUCH THE CAMPBELL MODEL IN ANY STRONG WAY. INSTEAD, IT'S BUILT AROUND MOMENT-TO-MOMENT PROPULSION OF STORY. IT GROUNDS ITS CHARACTERIZATION IN THEME AND KEEPS THINGS GOING IN A FAR MORE INVOLVING AND MODERN WAY. SO, IF BY COMPARISON, YOU ARE TAKING WHATEVER IDEAS YOU HAVE AND JUST PLUGGING THEM INTO THE HERO'S JOURNEY THEN HULK WOULD ARGUE YOU ARE MOST DEFINITELY DOING IT WRONG. IN A WAY, YOU ARE ACTUALLY BUTCHERING THE PURPOSE AND INTENT OF JOSEPH CAMPBELL'S INCREDIBLE ACADEMIC WORK.

AT THIS POINT HULK WOULD LIKE TO APOLOGIZE FOR THE LENGTH OF POINTS #25-#26, BUT YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO UNLEARN THESE TWO POPULAR STORYTELLING MODELS AND DOING SO TAKES A LOT OF WORK AND ANALYSIS.

THE REWARD? YOU NOW HAVE ACCESS TO THE VAST NUMBER OF OTHER STORYTELLING MODELS THAT WILL BE FAR MORE HELPFUL IN HELPING YOU WRITE.

SO LET'S LOOK AT THEM, SHALL WE?

27. THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH

THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH IS MORE DETAILED THAN WHAT FOLLOWS, BUT IT BASICALLY AMOUNTS TO "SIT DOWN AND START WRITING THE STORY LOGICALLY FROM POINT A TO POINT B, BEGINNING TO ENDING."

... YEAH... THIS IS A HORRIBLE WAY TO WRITE SCREENPLAYS. ESPECIALLY, IF YOU'VE NEVER WRITTEN ONE BEFORE.

CHANCES ARE IT WILL CREATE A RUN-ON, PURPOSELESS STORY. IT WILL SHOW A LACK OF FORTHOUGHT. IDEAS WILL BE LOST AND THE STORY WILL SIMPLY MEANDER TO PLACES WHERE IT DOESN'T BELONG. HULK SEES SCRIPTS THAT WERE CLEARLY WRITTEN THIS WAY TIME AND TIME AGAIN, WHERE THE STORY JUST PLAIN RUNS OUT OF STEAM WITH NO REAL SENSE OF HOW TO RESOLVE IT.

BUT THE VALUE OF THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH BECOMES STARTLINGLY APPARENT LATER ON IN YOUR DEVELOPMENT. ONCE YOU'VE ALREADY HAD A GOOD DEAL OF EXPERIENCE WITH STRUCTURE AND HEAVY OUTLINING, THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH CAN RE-INTRODUCE THE MOST BASIC FORM OF LOGICAL WRITING:

CAUSE AND EFFECT STORYTELLING.

THIS HAPPENS SO THIS HAPPENS. CAUSE AND EFFECT. THERE'S NOTHING MORE PROPULSIVE TO A STORY IN THE WORLD. AND YET YOU SEE SO MANY INTERMEDIATE WRITERS GET CAUGHT UP IN THE GAME OF BEATS AND STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER POINTS AND ARRANGING ALL THEIR LITTLE CHUNKS THAT THEY'LL END UP WRITING THESE DISCONNECTED SCENES. THE STORY IS JUST THIS SCENE AND THEN IT'S THAT SCENE, ETC. AND THEY'LL EACH WORK LIKE THEIR OWN LITTLE PLAYS. AND IT MAY ULTIMATELY FIT TOGETHER IN A LOGICAL WAY, BUT IT CAN BE PROBLEMATIC.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT IT WORKS IN TERMS OF MAKING YOUR OUTLINE LOOK GOOD AND WELL-REALIZED, BUT OVER-RELYING ON THOSE METHODS ALSO HURTS THE OVERALL FLOW. BECAUSE NO MATTER WHAT, MOST OVERTLY STRUCTURAL OUTLINES CREATE FLOW PROBLEMS. THEY JUST DO. AND IN COMPARISON, THE LOGICAL PROCESS OF WRITING SEQUENTIALLY CAN BE SO HELPFUL WHEN YOU FINISH A SCENE AND SAY "*Well now I go here of course!*"

IT'S ALL ABOUT DRAMATIC TRANSITIONS, Y'ALL!

THAT'S WHAT CREATES PROPULSION IN A SCRIPT. EVERY TIME YOU HAVE TO ENTER A NEW SCENE WHERE YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT'S GOING ON, THE AUDIENCE'S BRAIN WILL HAVE TO "RESET" FOR

A MOMENT. AND SO WHEN YOU GIVE INFORMATION IN ONE SCENE ABOUT WHERE IT'S GOING NEXT AND THEN A TRANSITION MAKES IT CLEAR THAT IT'S HAPPENING AND THEN YOU LET THE DRAMA PLAY OUT, THE AUDIENCE WILL BE RAPT WITH ATTENTION. IT'S A, B, C STORYTELLING AND IT WORKS. AND WITH IT, YOU CAN MAKE A 3 HOUR MOVIE FEEL LIKE IT PASSES BY IN MINUTES. STILL, SOMETIMES IT'S IMPOSSIBLE. SOMETIMES YOU NEED TO INTERRUPT TO BRING UP IMPORTANT INFORMATION OR A VIABLE TANGENT, BUT NEVER FORGET THAT TRANSITIONAL STORYTELLING WITH CLEAR BEATS IS THE HEART OF STRUCTURAL PROPULSION. AND IF YOU CAN TIE THOSE TRANSITIONS IN WITH THE EVOLUTION OF YOUR CHARACTER? THE SKY IS THE LIMIT.

SO HOW DO YOU COMBINE THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH WITH A MORE RIGID FORM OF OUTLINING? THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH IS BEST USED AS A KIND OF INTERMITTENT TOOL. START WITH HEAVILY PLANNED ARCS, BUT DON'T BE AFRAID TO MOMENTARILY LOSE YOURSELF IN THE FLOW OF THE WRITING (PARTICULARLY IF IT'S THE FIRST DRAFT). THEN JUST ALWAYS TAKE PIT STOPS TO REFOCUS. BE SURE THAT WHERE YOU'RE GOING FITS IN WITH THE SPIRIT OF THE OUTLINE, BUT IT'S NOT THE LETTER OF THE LAW. GO BACK AND FORTH. NEGOTIATE WITH YOURSELF. SEE WHAT REALLY WORKS. BUT NEVER BE AFRAID TO GIVE INTO WHAT THE SCENE ITSELF DICTATES MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT.

AND ONCE YOU'RE DONE, YOU STILL KEEP GOING BACK WORKING IT INTO YOUR BEATS. THE WHOLE PROCESS OF WRITING IS A DIFFICULT BALANCING ACT (AND ONCE HULK EXPLAINS THE NEXT FEW BEATS, ACHIEVING THIS BALANCE WILL MAKE MUCH MORE SENSE), BUT THE REALLY IMPORTANT THING IS TO REALIZE THAT STORY FLOW AND TRANSITIONS ARE ALWAYS CRITICAL TO CREATING AN ORGANIC SENSE OF PROPULSION.

BUT A GOOD QUESTION REMAINS: HOW DO YOU KNOW WHICH TRANSITIONS AND BEATS ACTUALLY MAKE SENSE FOR THAT FLOW?

28. TREY PARKER + MATT STONE'S "THEREFORE / BUTS" NOT "ANDS"

TREY PARKER AND MATT STONE ARE PERHAPS BEST KNOWN AS THE **SOUTH PARK** GUYS. A FEW YEARS AGO, THEY UNEXPECTEDLY SHOWED UP IN AN NYU SCREENWRITING CLASS AND DROPPED SOME KNOWLEDGE BOMBS. THERE WAS A LITTLE TWO MINUTE VIDEO OF THE HIGHLIGHTS, BUT HERE'S THE BEST SECTION:

TREY: "... [WE SAY] well this would be a funny scene if we had this. Each individual scene has to work as a funny sketch. You don't want to have one scene and go 'well, what was the point of that scene?' So we found out this rule that maybe you guys have all heard before, but it took us a long time to learn it. But we can take these beats, which are basically the beats of your outline. And if the words 'and then' belong between those beats... you're fucked. Basically. You got something pretty boring. What should happen between every beat that you've written down is either the word "therefore" or "but," right? So what I'm saying is that you come up with an idea and it's like 'okay, this happens' and then 'THIS happens.' No no no. It should be 'this happens' and THEREFORE 'this happens.' BUT 'this happens' THEREFORE 'this happens.' ... And sometimes we will literally write it out to make sure we're doing it. We'll have our beats and we'll say okay 'this happens' but 'then this happens' and that affects this and that does to that and that's why you get a show that feels okay ... and there's so many scripts we read from new writers and things that we see--"

MATT: "FUCK that, we see movies that do it! It's just like 'this happened and then this happened' and that's when you're 'the fuck I'm watching this movie for???' That's not a movie. Therefore/buts give you the causation. And that's a story."

OKAY... IT COMES ACROSS MUCH MORE CLEARLY IN VIDEO FORM, BUT THIS IS EFFECTIVELY ONE OF THE MOST SUCCINCT AND HELPFUL THINGS THAT HULK HAS EVER COME ACROSS IN EXPLAINING THE PROCESS OF STRUCTURAL WRITING. SINCE FINDING IT, HULK HAS NOT ONLY SPREAD THE GOSPEL OF ITS MESSAGE, BUT USED THE CONCEPT TIME AND TIME AGAIN IN HULK'S OWN WRITING. IT WAS SOMETHING HULK INSTINCTUALLY UNDERSTOOD FOR A LONG TIME, BUT THIS NEWFOUND CLARITY JUST GAVE IT SUCH BETTER FOCUS. AND HULK REALLY DOESN'T EVEN NEED TO EXPAND ON IT BECAUSE IT IS JUST SO FREAKING CLEAR. IT EVEN ADDRESSES THE SINGLE MOST RELEVANT PROBLEM IN TODAY'S WRITING AND THAT IS A *LACK OF NARRATIVE PURPOSE TO THE ACTION ONE IS*

SEEING ONSCREEN.

SIMPLY PUT: "THEREFORES" AND "BUTS" CREATE THE SENSE OF PROPULSION.

THE "AND THENS" STOP THE NARRATIVE COLD.

IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT THE **SOUTH PARK** GUYS HAVE BECOME BETTER WRITERS WITH EVERY PASSING SEASON OF THE SHOW. THEY HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FUNNY AND SMART, BUT AFTER A DECADE AND A HALF THEY HAVE FINALLY LEARNED TO SHAPE THEIR STORYTELLING. MEANING THE SHOW HAS GONE FROM BEING FLIPPANT AND FUNNY, TO BECOMING SOMETHING DOWNRIGHT RESONANT. IT'S A SHOW FROM A PUNK-ROCK MENTALITY THAT CAN NOW TELL STORIES FOR THE MIND, BODY, AND SOUL. AND THAT'S REALLY SOMETHING. IT DOESN'T SEEM TO BE AN ACCIDENT THAT **THE BOOK OF MORMON** HAS GONE ON TO WIN EVERY AWARD IMAGINABLE AND IT IS WITHOUT A DOUBT THEIR BEST PURE STORY WORK TO DATE. THE GUYS ARE ON TO SOMETHING THERE.

SO LOOK AT YOUR OWN STORIES. LOOK AT EVERY SCENE. IF THE ONLY WAY TO LINE UP THE BEATS IS WITH "AND THEN" THEN YOU'RE IN TROUBLE. SO FIND YOUR "THEREFORES" AND "BUTS" AND START RESHAPING YOUR PURPOSE!

29. DAN HARMON'S CIRCLES

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, FAR MORE COMPLEX MODELS TO CREATE A SENSE OF PROPULSION. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO ONLY BE CAUSALITY. EARLIER HULK TALKED ABOUT THE VALUE OF HAVING YOUR CHARACTERS EVOLVE AND GROW, AND NOWHERE IS THAT MORE CLEAR THAN WITH DAN HARMON'S "CIRCLES."

THERE WAS A RECENT **WIRED** ARTICLE WHERE THE INCREDIBLE MR. HARMON, CREATOR OF **COMMUNITY**, DELVED INTO HIS STRUCTURAL APPROACH FOR WRITING THE SHOW. THE FUNNY THING IS THAT HIS STRUCTURAL MODEL IS ACTUALLY VERY MUCH INSPIRED BY THE HERO'S JOURNEY, WHICH IS SOMETHING THAT YOU MAY THINK SETS OFF ALARM BELLS GIVEN WHAT HULK SAID ABOUT IT EARLIER, BUT INSTEAD IT IS WONDERFUL. AND THAT'S BECAUSE IT INSPIRED *HIS* OWN METHODOLOGY. HE TOOK WHAT HE LIKED ABOUT THE HERO JOURNEY AND AUGMENTED AND APPLIED IT TO A DIFFERENT SITUATION THAT WAS NOT ONLY BETTER FOR THE KINDS OF STORIES HE WAS TELLING, BUT INCORPORATED THE TRIGGERS OF PLOTTING AND CONFLICT, NOT JUST THE ICONOGRAPHY AND TROPES. HE MADE IT HIS OWN. AND THAT'S EXACTLY HOW IT *SHOULD* WORK!

NOW THIS MODEL HAS A VERY SPECIFIC PURPOSE TO THE EPISODIC-YET-SOMEWHAT-SERIALIZED NATURE OF TV SITCOMS, BUT IT DOES SOME TRULY NEAT THINGS THAT CAN BE APPLIED TO MANY OTHER FORMS OF STORYTELLING. THE SHORT VERSION OF HIS CHARACTER-CONFLICT-CIRCLES LOOK LIKE THIS:

1. A CHARACTER IS IN A ZONE OF COMFORT
2. BUT THEY WANT SOMETHING
3. THEY ENTER AN UNFAMILIAR SITUATION
4. ADAPT TO IT
5. GET WHAT THEY WANT
6. PAY A HEAVY PRICE FOR IT
7. THEN RETURN TO THEIR FAMILIAR SITUATION
8. HAVING CHANGED

IT IS A WONDERFUL WAY TO LOOK AT STORYTELLING BECAUSE IT IS A DIRECT MODEL FOR SHOWING HOW A CHARACTER CHANGES AND LEARNS, BASED ON THEIR WANTS AND NEEDS.

THAT'S RIGHT! WE'RE GOING BACK TO HULK'S CHARACTER TREES, WHEREIN WE BUILT PSYCHOLOGY AND CATHARSIS. SO BY APPROACHING STORY STRUCTURE FROM THIS CHARACTER-CENTRIC ANGLE, HARMON IS ACTUALLY GIVING YOU A PERFECT MODEL *FOR HOW TO ACHIEVE CATHARSIS*.

ISN'T THAT REALLY COOL?

THE OTHER GREAT THING ABOUT THIS MODEL IS IT NOT ONLY FOSTERS GOOD CHARACTERIZATION, NOT ONLY GETS INTO GREAT DYNAMICS OF HUMAN NATURE, BUT ALSO HELPS PRODUCE TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE PROPULSION AND PURPOSE TO EACH SCENE. NOTICE HOW ALL THOSE 8 BEATS CAN BE LINKED WITH "THEREFORES" AND "BUTS"? ISN'T THAT ALSO COOL? MEANING YOU NOW HAVE 8 LITTLE CHARACTER BEATS THAT CAN BE MANIFESTED OVER A WHOLE MOVIE, AN EPISODE OF TELEVISION, 8 SCENES IN A NOVEL, 8 SCENES OUTSIDE OF THAT CONTEXT, 8 LITTLE MOMENTS, OR EVEN, IF YOU'RE REALLY GOOD, YOU CAN GET THOSE 8 BEATS OUT IN A SINGLE BRIEF INTERACTION (TARANTINO AND THE COENS ARE THE MASTERS OF GOING THROUGH THIS FULL CYCLE IN A SINGLE SERIES OF EXCHANGES).

STILL, HARMON TALKS A LOT ABOUT HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO ALWAYS MAKE THE CIRCLES WORK OR COME OFF ORGANICALLY. BUT WHEN IT DOES WORK? IT'S RESPONSIBLE FOR SOME OF THE BEST EPISODES OF TELEVISION EVER PRODUCED (IN THIS HULK'S HUMBLE OPINION).

SEE, THE COMPLEXITY OF HARMON'S SYSTEM IS THAT IT REQUIRES A LOT OF PLOTTING BUILT OUTWARD FROM CHARACTER INSTEAD OF EVER ALLOWING FOR VICE-VERSA. WHICH IS PROBABLY GOOD FOR YOUR WRITING OVERALL, BUT HULK ASSURES YOU THAT YOU WILL RUN INTO PLENTY OF TIMES WHERE IT'S HARD TO ENGINEER THESE CHARACTER BEATS INTO THE PLOT THAT YOU'RE TRYING TO EXECUTE, WHICH MAY NEED TO BE A CERTAIN WAY FOR A HOST OF OTHER REASONS. THIS IS WHERE FLEXIBILITY COMES IN. DAN HARMON TOOK THE HERO'S JOURNEY AND FOUND A WAY TO APPLY IT TO HIS SITCOM WRITING, WHEREIN CHARACTERS HAVE TO CHANGE AND YET ESTABLISH RECONCILIATION TIME AND TIME AGAIN FOR AN EPISODIC FORMAT. SO YOU CAN TAKE DAN'S CIRCLES AND FIND A WAY TO APPLY THEM TO OTHER STRUCTURAL MODELS. PARTICULARLY REGARDING CHARACTER CATHARSIS, IT MAY JUST HELP YOU SOLVE A WHOLE BUNCH OF PROBLEMS IN YOUR SCRIPTS.

BUT PERHAPS THE REAL LESSON TO TAKE FROM DAN HARMON'S CIRCLES IS HOW MUCH WORK AND THOUGHT HE PUTS INTO HIS CHARACTER ARCS, AND HOW HARD HE WORKS AT GETTING HIS STORIES TO BREAK TO THEM. WHICHEVER STRUCTURAL METHODS YOU END UP INCORPORATING, YOU SHOULD BE WORKING JUST AS HARD.

MOVING ON!

30. VLADIMIR PROPPISMS!

LET'S TALK ABOUT FAIRY TALES, Y'ALL! SO VLADIMIR PROPP IS PROBABLY HULK'S FAVORITE STORY ANALYST. HE WAS A RUSSIAN GUY WHO DID A LOT OF RUSSIAN THINGS, BUT HE ALSO TOOK A LOOK AT RUSSIAN FOLK TALES AND LABELED 31 POSSIBLE FUNCTIONS. NOW, IT SHOULD BE MENTIONED THAT ONCE AGAIN EVERYONE TOOK PROPP'S FUNCTIONS AND APPLIED THEM IN THE WRONG WAY, ASSUMING THIS WAS A FREAKING HOW-TO FOR STORY STRUCTURE, INSTEAD OF JUST ALL THE POSSIBLE ANGLES FOR THEMATIC ANALYSIS, BUT OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS SHOULD BE WELL-VERSED AT THIS POINT.

CASE IN POINT: MODES OF DEDUCTION ARE NOT THE SAME AS MODES OF CONSTRUCTION. IN FACT, PROPP ALWAYS SAID HE WAS TRYING TO GET TO THEIR "IRREDUCIBLE ELEMENTS," WHICH IS A GREAT WAY OF PUTTING IT BECAUSE WHEN CRAFTING YOUR STORY YOU WANT IT TO BE THE OPPOSITE OF IRREDUCIBLE. YOU WANT IT BE THICK AND SUMPTUOUS AND COMPLICATED AND ORGANIC.

BUT STILL, THIS CAN BE UBER-HELPFUL NOT IN TERMS OF CREATING CUT AND PASTE DYNAMICS, BUT FOR GIVING YOU 31 IDEAS ON THE KINDS OF CONFLICTS YOU CAN CREATE! SO MUCH MORE PLOT-DYNAMIC SPECIFIC THAN THE HERO'S JOURNEY.

“1. ABSENTATION: a member of a family leaves the security of the home environment. This may be the hero or some other member of the family that the hero will later need to rescue. This division of the cohesive family injects initial tension into the storyline. The hero may also be introduced here, often being shown as an ordinary person.

2. INTERDICTION: an interdiction is addressed to the hero ('don't go there', 'don't do this'). The hero is warned against some action (given an 'interdiction').

3. VIOLATION OF INTERDICTION: the interdiction is violated (villain enters the tale). This generally proves to be a bad move and the villain enters the story, although not necessarily confronting the hero. Perhaps they are just a lurking presence or perhaps they attack the family whilst the hero is away.

4. RECONNAISSANCE: the villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance (either villain tries to find the children/jewels etc.; or intended victim questions the villain). The villain (often in disguise) makes an active attempt at seeking information, for example searching for something valuable or trying to actively capture someone. They may speak with a member of the family who innocently divulges information. They may also seek to meet the hero, perhaps knowing already the hero is special in some way.

5. DELIVERY : the villain gains information about the victim. The villain's seeking now pays off and he or she now acquires some form of information, often about the hero or victim. Other information can be gained, for example about a map or treasure location.

6. TRICKERY: the villain attempts to deceive the victim to take possession of victim or victim's belongings (trickery; villain disguised, tries to win confidence of victim). The villain now presses further, often using the information gained in seeking to deceive the hero or victim in some way, perhaps appearing in disguise. This may include capture of the victim, getting the hero to give the villain something or persuading them that the villain is actually a friend and thereby gaining collaboration.

7. COMPLICITY: victim taken in by deception, unwittingly helping the enemy. The trickery of the villain now works and the hero or victim naively acts in a way that helps the villain. This may range from providing the villain with something (perhaps a map or magical weapon) to actively working against good people (perhaps the villain has persuaded the hero that these other people are actually bad).

8. VILLAINY OR LACK: villain causes harm/injury to family member (by abduction, theft of magical agent, spoiling crops, plunders in other forms, causes a disappearance, expels someone, casts spell on someone, substitutes child etc., commits murder, imprisons/detains someone, threatens forced marriage, provides nightly torments); alternatively, a member of family lacks something or desires something (magical potion etc.). There are two options for this function, either or both of which may appear in the story. In the first option, the villain causes some kind of harm, for example carrying away a victim or the desired magical object (which must be then be retrieved). In the second option, a sense of lack is identified, for example in the hero's family or within a community, whereby something is identified as lost or something becomes desirable for some reason, for example a magical object that will save people in some way.

9. MEDITATION: misfortune or lack is made known, (hero is dispatched, hears call for help etc./ alternative is that victimized hero is sent away, freed from imprisonment). The hero now discovers the act of villainy or lack, perhaps finding their family or community devastated or caught up in a state of anguish and woe.

10. BEGINNING ACTION SEEKER: seeker agrees to, or decides upon counter-action. The hero now decides to act in a way that will resolve the lack, for example finding a needed magical item, rescuing those who are captured or otherwise defeating the villain. This is a defining moment for the hero as this is the decision that sets the course of future actions and by which a previously ordinary person takes on the mantle of heroism.

11. DEPARTURE: hero leaves home;

12. FIRST FUNCTION OF THE DONOR: hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc., preparing the way for his/her receiving magical agent or helper (donor);

13. HERO'S REACTION: hero reacts to actions of future donor (withstands/fails the test, frees captive, reconciles disputants, performs service, uses adversary's powers against him);

14. RECEIPT OF MAGICAL AGENT: hero acquires use of a magical agent (directly transferred, located, purchased, prepared, spontaneously appears, eaten/drunken, help offered by other characters);
 15. GUIDANCE: hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts of an object of the search;
 16. STRUGGLE: hero and villain join in direct combat;
 17. BRANDING: hero is branded (wounded/marked, receives ring or scarf);
 18. VICTORY: villain is defeated (killed in combat, defeated in contest, killed while asleep, banished);
 19. LIQUIDATION: initial misfortune or lack is resolved (object of search distributed, spell broken, slain person revived, captive freed);
 20. RETURN: hero returns;
 21. PURSUIT: hero is pursued (pursuer tries to kill, eat, undermine the hero);
 22. RESCUE: hero is rescued from pursuit (obstacles delay pursuer, hero hides or is hidden, hero transforms unrecognizably, hero saved from attempt on his/her life);
 23. UNRECOGNIZED ARRIVAL: hero unrecognized, arrives home or in another country;
 24. UNFOUNDED CLAIMS: false hero presents unfounded claims;
 25. DIFFICULT TASK: difficult task proposed to the hero (trial by ordeal, riddles, test of strength/endurance, other tasks);
 26. SOLUTION: task is resolved;
 27. RECOGNITION: hero is recognized (by mark, brand, or thing given to him/her);
 28. EXPOSURE: false hero or villain is exposed;
 29. TRANSFIGURATION: hero is given a new appearance (is made whole, handsome, new garments etc.);
 30. PUNISHMENT: villain is punished;
 31. WEDDING: hero marries and ascends the throne (is rewarded/promoted).
- Occasionally, some of these functions are inverted, as when the hero receives something whilst still at home, the function of a donor occurring early. More often, a function is negated twice, so that it must be repeated three times in western cultures.”

TO RESTATE: THIS LIST IS NOT A HOW-TO ON STORY STRUCTURE. IN FACT, YOU DO NOT NEED TO HAVE THESE BEATS IN YOUR STORY WHATSOEVER. WHAT HULK SIMPLY WANTS YOU TO DO IS LOOK AT THE KINDS OF CAUSE AND EFFECT THAT THESE ACTIONS HAVE ON THE STORY. MEANING WHAT HULK WANTS YOU TO ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND IS THE MECHANISM OF THESE STORY DEVICES, NOT JUST THE SURFACE DESCRIPTION. FOR THE VALUE OF THESE DEVICES LIES IN THE FACT THAT THEY CREATE CERTAIN DRAMATIC REACTIONS IN THE AUDIENCE AND CREATE CERTAIN MEANINGS TOWARD THE THEMES, NOT IN THEIR MERE PRESENCE. AND THUS THE EXPRESSION OF THE NOTIONS THEMSELVES, HERE REPRESENTED IN THEIR “IRREDUCIBLE ELEMENTS,” ARE MEANT FOR SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY.

NOW, YOU MAY BE CURIOUS: WHY FAIRY AND FOLK TALES?

WHY ARE THEY SO IMPORTANT? AFTER ALL, WHEN WE THINK “FAIRY TALE” WE THINK OF SOMETHING LIKE CINDERELLA, WITH HANDSOME PRINCES AND DREAMS COMING TRUE. THE TRUTH IS THAT WE’RE REALLY TALKING ABOUT IS AN EVEN SIMPLER VERSION OF STORYTELLING THAN

THAT: FABLES. REMEMBER WHEN HULK TALKED ABOUT THEM WAY BACK IN 7.1? FABLES ARE SO IMPORTANT.

LOOK AT HOW MANY OF THOSE PROPPISMS HOLD UP THE BASIC VALUE OF FABLES. LOOK AT HOW MANY OF THESE STORY FUNCTIONS LINK TOGETHER OFF CAUSE AND EFFECT. LOOK AT HOW MANY FUNCTION IN TERMS OF THEREFORE / BUTS. ISN'T IT AMAZING?

SO IF YOU WANT TO UPHOLD THAT SAME PURPOSE YOU SHOULD TAKE THOSE 31 MECHANISMS FROM MR. PROPP AND USE THEM TO SUIT YOUR OWN PURPOSES. MAKE THEM FEEL MODERN. INVERT THE GENDERS. APPLY IT TO A SITUATION OUTSIDE OF GOOD AND EVIL. ADDRESS TOPICAL CONCERNS. MAKE THEM NUANCED. EVERY STORY NEEDS MEDIATION. OR COMPLICITY. USE YOUR INGENUITY TO MAKE THEM APPLY TO SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT. DAVID SIMON USED GREEK DRAMA (CHALLENGING THE FATES, ETC) AS THE CONFLICT METHODOLOGY OF HIS UBER-MODERN TELEVISION SHOW **THE WIRE**, AND ENDED UP REVOLUTIONIZING THE WAY THOSE CONSTRUCTS FELT.

SO WHY CAN'T YOU DO THE SAME WITH THE 31 PROPPISMS?

BE BOLD. BE PURPOSEFUL.

ALSO LOOKING OVER THAT LIST... IS HULK CRAZY, OR WAS VLADIMIR PROPP THE MAIN INSPIRATION BEHIND THE **SCOOBY DOO** CARTOONS?

... SORRY, LET'S MOVE ON.

31. THE SNOWFLAKE METHOD

A LOT OF TIMES, PARTICULARLY WHEN APPROACHING LONGER STORIES LIKE SEASON-LONG TV ARCS OR NOVELS, PEOPLE WILL HAVE TROUBLE FINDING WAYS TO ENRICH THE STORY WITH DETAIL WHILE STILL REMAINING RELEVANT TO THE INITIAL OR CENTRAL CONCEIT. SURE, WE HAVE POINT #10'S CHARACTER TREES TO HELP US FLESH THINGS OUT, BUT THAT'S DOESN'T SOLVE A LOT OF LONG-FORM STRUCTURE PROBLEMS.

THAT'S WHEN HULK FINDS THE SNOWFLAKE METHOD HELPFUL.

THE TERMINOLOGY COMES FROM THE IDEA THAT SNOWFLAKE STARTS DENSE IN THE CENTER OF CONDENSATION AND CONTINUES TO CRYSTALLIZE OUTWARD FORMING NEW, MORE DETAILED SHAPES. THUS, THE STORY IS DEVELOPED THE SAME WAY. HERE'S AN EXCERPT FROM ADVANCEDFICTIONWRITING.COM THAT HULK HAS TRUNCATED TO MAKE MORE PALATABLE FOR THIS BOOK:

“Step 1) Take an hour and write a one-sentence summary of your novel...

Step 2) Take another hour and expand that sentence to a full paragraph describing the story setup, major disasters, and ending of the novel...

Step 3) The above gives you a high-level view of your novel. Now you need something similar for the storylines of each of your characters. Characters are the most important part of any novel, and the time you invest in designing them up front will pay off ten-fold when you start writing. For each of your major characters, take an hour and write a one-page summary sheet that tells:

- The character's name
- A one-sentence summary of the character's storyline
- The character's motivation (what does he/she want abstractly?)
- The character's goal (what does he/she want concretely?)
- The character's conflict (what prevents him/her from reaching this goal?)
- The character's epiphany (what will he/she learn, how will he/she change?)
- A one-paragraph summary of the character's storyline...

Step 4) By this stage, you should have a good idea of the large-scale structure of your novel, and you have only spent a day or two. Well, truthfully, you may have spent as much as a week, but it doesn't matter. If the story is broken, you know it now, rather than after investing 500 hours in a rambling first draft. So now just keep growing the story. Take several hours and expand each sentence of your summary paragraph into a full paragraph. All but the last paragraph should end in a disaster. The final paragraph should tell how the book ends...

Step 5) Take a day or two and write up a one-page description of each major character and a half-page description of the other important characters. These "character synopses" should tell the story from the point of view of each character. As always, feel free to cycle back to the earlier steps and make revisions as you learn cool stuff about your characters...

Step 6) By now, you have a solid story and several story-threads, one for each character. Now take a week and expand the one-page plot synopsis of the novel to a four-page synopsis. Basically, you will again be expanding each paragraph from step (4) into a full page...

Step 7) Take another week and expand your character descriptions into full-fledged character charts detailing everything there is to know about each character. The standard stuff such as birthdate, description, history, motivation, goal, etc. Most importantly, how will this character change by the end of the novel?...

Step 8) You may or may not take a hiatus here, waiting for the book to sell. At some point, you've got to actually write the novel. Before you do that, there are a couple of things you can do to make that traumatic first draft easier. The first thing to do is to take that four-page synopsis and make a list of all the scenes that you'll need to turn the story into a novel. And the easiest way to make that list is . . . with a spreadsheet....

Step 9) (Optional. I don't do this step anymore.) Switch back to your word processor and begin writing a narrative description of the story. Take each line of the spreadsheet and expand it to a multi-paragraph description of the scene. Put in any cool lines of dialogue you think of, and sketch out the essential conflict of that scene. If there's no conflict, you'll know it here and you should either add conflict or scrub the scene...

Step 10) At this point, just sit down and start pounding out the real first draft of the novel..."

NOW IF THIS RIGOROUS METHODOLOGY SEEMS LIKE YOUR SORT OF THING THEN HULK RECOMMENDS YOU DO MORE RESEARCH ON THE SNOWFLAKE METHOD. THE THING HULK LIKES ABOUT THIS APPROACH IS THAT IT REALLY HELPS YOU FLESH OUT THE IDEAS IN THROUGH-LINES FOR *EVERY SINGLE FACET* OF THE STORY CONSTRUCTION. IT REALLY CAN BE A FASCINATING EXERCISE IN TAKING YOUR CORE IDEA (THE ONE SENTENCE OF WHAT YOUR NOVEL IS ABOUT) AND EXTRAPOLATING IT INTO THE SINGULAR DETAILS THAT MAKE UP THE STORY. YOU BASICALLY ASK YOURSELF:

"What are the scenarios in which my core idea would best manifest itself?"

IT'S ALL COMING BACK TO YOU, ISN'T IT? THE CORE IDEA. THE IDEA THAT COMPELS YOU. THE SOURCE OF INSPIRATION. ALL THIS TIME LATER, WE'RE LOOKING AT THE MOST DETAILED STRUCTURAL MODEL TO DATE AND IT BRINGS US RIGHT BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF THE BOOK. IT BRINGS US TO WHY WE WANTED TO TELL THE STORY IN THE FIRST PLACE!

LET'S ALSO GO BACK TO OUR AWESOME **SIX FEET UNDER** EXAMPLE, AS IT REALLY SEEMS TO HAMMER HOME THE COOL, PRACTICAL USE OF THE SNOWFLAKE METHOD. WE ESTABLISHED THAT ALAN BALL ASKED HIMSELF: IN WHAT SCENARIOS WOULD CONFRONTING MORTALITY BEST MANIFEST ITSELF? AND HE FOUND ANSWERS: WORKING IN A FUNERAL HOME, FATHER DYING, CONSTANTLY TAKING IN DEAD BODIES, DEALING WITH GRIEVING LOVED ONES, EVEN HAVING IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DEAD. OF COURSE, HULK HAS NO IDEA IF BALL IS A SNOWFLAKE-METHOD GUY OR WHAT, BUT WHEN HULK LOOKS AT HIS WORK IT SURE SEEMS LIKE IT. ALL OF HIS CENTRAL THEMES ARE DIRECTLY EXTRAPOLATED INTO PLOTTING, CHARACTER, AND SINGULAR DETAILS.

EVEN IF YOU DON'T USE THE METHODOLOGY, THE IDEA AT THE CENTER OF THE SNOWFLAKE METHOD IS GOLD, FOLKS!

32. INDIVIDUALITY AND HULK'S "MULTI-ACT FLOW STRUCTURE"

OKAY... TIME TO GET SERIOUS.

AT THIS JUNCTURE, YOU MAY HAVE REALIZED THAT HULK HAS BROUGHT UP A WHOLE BUNCH OF DIFFERENT POSSIBLE STRUCTURAL TAKES. THE WHOLE POINT OF DOING SO IS TO HAVE AS MANY DIFFERENT WAYS OF ATTACKING DIFFERENT KINDS OF STORY PROBLEMS, WHICH IS PERFECT BECAUSE WRITING IS LARGELY ABOUT PROBLEM SOLVING.

FIRST WE *UNLEARNED* 3 ACT STRUCTURE AND THE HERO'S JOURNEY, BECAUSE THEY TEND TO LEAD TO MORE BAD HABITS THAN GOOD WRITING. THEN WE BUILT OUR OWN DEFINITION OF WHAT CONSTITUTES AN ACT. THEN WE TURNED TO THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH TO HELP US UNDERSTAND LOGICAL A, B, C STORYTELLING. THEN WE LEARNED HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE WAY TO CONNECT THOSE A'S B'S AND C'S BY TURNING TO TREY PARKER AND MATT STONE FOR THE "THEREFORES AND BUTS" THEY USE IN TRANSITIONAL PLOTTING. WE THEN TURNED TO DAN HARMON TO UNDERSTAND HOW PLOTTING SHOULD CENTER AROUND CHARACTER MOTIVE AND CATHARSIS. WE THEN TURNED TO VLADIMIR PROPP TO BEST UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF STORY MECHANISMS THAT BEST EXPRESS THOSE CONFLICTS. WE THEN TURNED TO THE SEQUENTIAL APPROACH TO FULLY FLESH OUT OUR DETAILS, WHILE STILL KEEPING THEM GROUNDED IN THE CONCEIT OF STORY, THE ORIGINAL NUGGET OF INSPIRATION.

IT MAKES SENSE, BUT THEY ALL SEEM SO DIFFERENT DON'T THEY? HOW WOULD YOU EVER CONDENSE ALL THAT?

ONCE YOU HIT A CERTAIN LEVEL OF EXPERTISE, WHEN YOU'VE REALLY WORKED OUT A LOT OF THIS STUFF AND USED THE METHODOLOGY MANY TIMES OVER (AND YOU REALLY HAVE TO HAVE DONE THIS: NO CHEATING), THEN YOU NEED TO EVOLVE INTO SOMETHING DIFFERENT. AFTER ALL, THE PROCESS OF ACTUALLY WRITING IS RATHER DIFFERENT. OFTEN TIMES, YOU JUST WRITE. IT JUST SPRINGS FORTH FROM YOUR BRAIN AND EVERYTHING SEEMS GREAT. THEN YOU HIT A SNAG. AND YOU TRY AND FIGURE IT OUT. IT'S PROBLEM SOLVING.

SO WHAT KIND OF METHOD BEST ACCOUNTS FOR THAT PROCESS? WHAT KIND OF METHOD BEST ACCOUNTS FOR ALL THE STRUCTURAL MODELS WE'VE SEEN SO FAR?

FOR THAT, WE TURN TO HULK'S FAVORITE METHOD OF STORY-BREAKING BECAUSE... WELL, HULK KIND OF INVENTED IT. THE TERM "INVENTING IT" SOUNDS REALLY OFFICIAL, DOESN'T IT? WE COULD ALSO JUST GO WITH "HULK MADE IT UP!"

ANYCRAP, IT'S CALLED "MULTI ACT FLOW STRUCTURE" (HULK WILL USE M.A.F.S. FOR SHORT) AND HULK FINDS IT TO BE THE BEST WAY TO KEEP THINGS PROPULSIVE WHILE STILL TRYING TO JUGGLE ALL THE RESPECTIVE ARCS OF PLOT, CHARACTER, AND THEME.

AT ITS CORE: MULTI-ACT FLOW STRUCTURE IS PREDICATED ON THE IDEA THAT *EACH SCENE* WORKS BEST AS SORT OF ITS OWN MINI-ACT, COMPLETE WITH A MINI-ACT BREAK. EARLIER, WE DEFINED THE END OF A TRUE ACT AS BEING A MOMENT WHERE CHARACTERS CAN NO LONGER "GO BACK." AND THIS IS A SLIGHTLY MORE LENIENT VERSION OF THAT. THE IDEA IS THAT EACH SCENE SHOULD REALLY ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING THAT CHANGES THE NARRATIVE, EITHER ON A CHARACTER, PLOT, OR THEMATIC LEVEL. IT DOESN'T ALWAYS HAVE TO BE A MAJOR THING, BUT EACH SCENE SHOULD FEEL LIKE THE WORLD OF YOUR FILM IS NOW SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT.

DOES IT HAVE TO BE 100% TRUE FOR EVERY SCENE? OF COURSE NOT, BUT THE MORE CENTRAL IT IS TO YOUR OPERATION THE MORE PROPULSIVE AND MEANINGFUL A FILM YOU WILL CREATE.

AS TO HOW TO EXECUTE IT? IT'S REALLY A TWO PART PROCESS...

33. M.A.F.S. PART 1 - BREAKING INTO CONCURRENT ARCS

ONE OF THE BEST PLACES TO START REALLY ORGANIZING YOUR STRUCTURE IS TO LOOK AT ALL THE ARCS IN YOUR STORY AND LAY THEM OUT AS *INDIVIDUAL STORIES*.

NOW... HULK COULD COME UP WITH A FUN ANALYSIS OF A MOVIE THAT WE ALL KNOW AND COULD WORK WITH, BUT BECAUSE HULK KEEPS TALKING ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF REVERSE ENGINEERING, LET'S GO IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION INSTEAD. HULK WILL NOW COME UP WITH A MADE-UP STORY RIGHT HERE ON THE SPOT... HULK SWEARS THIS IS WHAT HULK IS DOING AND IT PROBABLY ISN'T GOING TO BE VERY GOOD. HULK EVEN SWEARS HULK WON'T REFINE THE IDEA SO YOU CAN SEE THE SPARK OF STORY GENERATION AS IT HAPPENS IN REAL-TIME. THIS IS THE VALUE OF THE ORGANIC PROCESS:

UM... SO, LIKE, A DOCTOR HAS JOURNEYED TO A SMALL AIDS HOSPITAL IN AFRICA, TO REBUILD HIS LIFE AFTER A PAINFUL DIVORCE... YOU KNOW THIS KINDA STORY. IT MAKES UP THE WORLD OF MELODRAMA AND SUCH. SO IN THIS STORY, THE DOCTOR HAS TO FACE HIS OWN PAST AND PAIN AND YADDA YADDA YADDA, YOU GET IT, BUT ALSO, THERE'S A BOSS WHO RUNS THE HOSPITAL IN A VERY COUNTERINTUITIVE WAY THAT IS DIFFERENT FROM THE DOCTOR'S OWN EXPERIENCE. AND THIS IS NOT JUST IN TERMS OF MEDICAL LOGISTICS, BUT REGARD FOR HUMAN LIFE AND WHAT IS BEST FOR EVERYONE. THE BOSS WON'T TAKE CERTAIN RISKS AND WILL ONLY DO WHAT THEY CAN DO TO KEEP THE SYSTEM IN BALANCE. AND THERE IS ALSO ANOTHER MAIN CHARACTER AND SHE IS A CO-WORKER AT THE HOSPITAL AND LOVE INTEREST TO HELP HIM REBUILD HIS LIFE. THAT SOUNDS LIKE THREE GOOD PLACES TO START.

NOW... HULK'S NOT JUST INTERESTED IN SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS THOSE CHARACTER ARCHETYPES. HULK REALLY WANTS TO EXPLORE THE REAL-LIFE CONCEPTS OF COMPASSION VS. PRACTICALITY IN A BUREAUCRACY. PLUS, HULK'S REALLY INTERESTED IN THE STATE OF HEALTH AND POLITICS IN AFRICA. SO NOW WE HAVE SOME THEMES HULK FINDS COMPELLING. SO THE MAIN CHARACTER AND THE BOSS WILL HAVE A DISAGREEMENT OVER THE PROPER TREATMENT OF AIDS, WHERE THE MAIN CHARACTER IS PRO-PRACTICALITY WITH SAFE SEX AND THE BOSS IS RELIGIOUS WITH THE OLD STANCE OF ABSTINENCE. BUT HULK DOESN'T WANT IT TO BE THIS SIMPLE GOOD / BAD DYNAMIC. LET'S REVERSE IT THEN. THE BOSS WILL ALSO HAVE A VERY PRACTICAL APPROACH TO NOT HELPING FOLKS WHO CAN'T BE HELPED, BELIEVING IT WILL ONLY GET OTHERS SICK, WHEREAS THE MAIN CHARACTER SEES THAT AS LACKING COMPASSION. THEY BOTH HAVE THEIR IDEALS, AND THEY BOTH HAVE THEIR SENSE OF PRACTICALITY. OKAY, COOL.

SO HULK BEGINS TO WORK WITH THESE IDEAS, BUT AT A CERTAIN POINT IN THE BRAINSTORMING PROCESS HULK WOULD SIT DOWN TO MAP OUT THE THREE CONCURRENT ARCS:

- RELATIONSHIP WITH BOSS
- RELATIONSHIP WITH CO-WORKER
- RELATIONSHIP WITH HIMSELF / HIS PAST

AND FOR EACH OF THESE ARCS HULK WOULD PLAN OUT A STORY THAT MAKES SENSE ON ITS OWN. THEY WOULD NOT SIMPLY BE "ELEMENTS" OF A LARGER STORY, BUT THEIR OWN COMPLETE STORIES, INDEPENDENT OF ANYTHING ELSE. ALSO, HULK WOULD NOT WASTE ANYTHING. HULK WOULD LIST OUT EACH SCENE, WHICH WOULD COMPRISE EACH BEAT OF THE STORY. THIS WOULD ALLOW HULK TO BE SURE THAT EACH BEAT REALLY ACCOMPLISHED SOMETHING.

HULK WON'T DO IT FOR ALL OF THEM, AS IT WOULD JUST BE A WASTE OF YOUR READING TIME, BUT HERE'S A QUICK + DIRTY TREATMENT (THAT AGAIN IS UNEDITED) OF WHAT THE STORY BEATS WOULD LOOK LIKE FOR ONE OF THOSE CONCURRENT ARCS.

RELATIONSHIP WITH BOSS:

-THE DOCTOR MEETS BOSS AND NOTICES THEIR DIFFERENT LIFE APPROACHES.
-THE DOCTOR FEELS ALIENATED.
-THE DOCTOR THEN SEES THE BOSS'S PRAGMATIC UNCOMPASSIONATE STYLE IN ACTION AND IT GIVES HIM ETHICAL CONCERN
-SO THEY COME INTO A CONFLICT OVER IT.
-THE DOCTOR STICKS TO HIS GUNS ON A DIFFERENT CASE AND SAVES A PATIENT WHO IS A DANGER TO OTHERS.
-IT IS A SUCCESS AND EVERYONE ELSE IS FINE, MUCH TO THE DISMAY OF THE BOSS.
-THE MAIN DOCTOR FEELS EMBOLDENED BY THIS SUCCESS, SO THE NEXT TIME THE DOCTOR DOES THIS SAME THING, IT IS LESS SUCCESSFUL.
-HIS EMBOLDENED ATTITUDE WAS MISPLACED SO HE THEN SEES NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS DECISION.
-THE DECISION CAUSES OTHERS TO GET SICK, THE DOCTOR SEES HOW HIS EMBOLDENED ATTITUDE HAS UNDERMINED THE BOSS'S ABILITY TO RUN THE HOSPITAL.
-THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES SPIRAL, THE PROBLEMS ARE RIGHTED BY THE TWO APPRECIATING ONE OTHER AND COMING TO WORK TOGETHER.

NOW THIS EXAMPLE ISN'T THAT GOOD OR FOCUSED, AND IN FACT IT IS THE KIND OF HOSPITAL PLOT LINE WE'VE SEEN A MILLION TIMES BEFORE, BUT THAT'S JUST MAKES IT PERFECT FOR OUR PURPOSES. SINCE THEY ARE ALL FAMILIAR STORY BEATS YOU IMPLICITLY "GET" THE BARE BONES OF THE STORY AND THE MECHANISMS, AND WE CAN NOW TALK ABOUT WHERE IT CAN PROPERLY GO.

THE FIRST STEP WOULD BE THAT THESE BEATS NEED TO BE FLESHED OUT IN AN ORGANIC AND ACCURATE MANNER. THE STORY, LIKE ANY STORY, COULD EASILY FEEL FORCED. BUT THE BEATS COULD FEEL NATURAL AS ANYTHING TOO. EITHER WAY, WE HAVE WHAT WE NEED. WE DON'T NEED ANY MORE SCENES THAN WHAT IS CONVEYED IN THAT DESCRIPTION OF THE ARC. SO WE HAVE ECONOMY. NOTICE HULK DOES NOT DOUBLE UP ON CONFLICTS WHICH SAY THE SAME THING. THERE IS AN INCIDENT THAT SHOWS A GOOD REACTION. AND INCIDENT THAT SHOWS A BAD REACTION. WE DON'T NEED ANY MORE THAN THAT. THOSE TWO CASES ALONE WILL PROPEL THE STORY WHERE IT NEEDS TO GO.

NEXT. HULK WOULD DO THIS FOR THE OTHER ARC WITH THE COWORKER RELATIONSHIP AND THE ARC WITH HIS PAST / SELF. AGAIN, WE DO THIS TO BE SURE EACH ELEMENT IS A SINGULAR, COMPLETE STORY.

... BUT THESE ARE NOT THREE SEPARATE STORIES, ARE THEY? NOT AT ALL. THIS IS A MOVIE, OR A TV SHOW, OR A NOVEL, OR WHATEVER. AND AS SUCH IT IS *ONE THING*. WHICH MEANS THE ARCS NEED TO BE INGRAINED INTO A SINGULAR STORY.

THIS IS WHERE YOU DO THE SECOND PART OF THE BREAKING PROCESS:

34. M.A.F.S. PART 2 - MERGE INTO CONFLICTING ARCS

HULK COULD JUST LAUNCH RIGHT INTO THE EXAMPLE WE JUST USED, BUT HULK ACTUALLY WANTS TO USE A REAL-MOVIE EXAMPLE TO SHOW WHAT "CONFLICTING ARCS" ACTUALLY MEANS. WHAT'S FUNNY IS THAT HULK USES THE FOLLOWING MOVIE ALL THE TIME WHEN TALKING ABOUT SCREENWRITING, NOT BECAUSE IT'S A STUNNING EXAMPLE OF INNOVATION AND LYRICAL PROSE, BUT BECAUSE IT ONLY TRIES TO DO THE MOST BASIC THINGS RIGHT.... AND BOY IT GETS THEM SO, SO RIGHT.

THE MOVIE IS **KUNG FU PANDA**.

REALLY? YES.

THE THING HULK LOVES ABOUT THE FILM IS HOW IT BALANCES THE RELATIONSHIPS AND PLOT MECHANICS TO KEEP THEM ALL VERY UNIFIED. THERE IS PO, THE DIM-WITTED PANDA CHOSEN TO

BE THE DRAGON WARRIOR BY MASTER OOGWAY AND MEANT TO UNLOCK THE POWER OF THE DRAGON SCROLL. THERE IS TIGRESS, THE ONE WHO WAS IN LINE TO BE THE DRAGON WARRIOR AND IS NOW DEEPLY DISAPPOINTED AT NOT BEING CHOSEN. THERE IS TAI LUNG, THE VILLAINOUS FORMER PUPIL WHO WANTS TO UNLOCK THE POWER OF THE DRAGON SCROLL FOR HIMSELF. AND ALL THREE ARE LINKED TO MASTER SHIFU WHO FAILED IN TRAINING TAI LUNG BECAUSE HE LOVED HIM TOO MUCH AND GAVE INTO ALL OF TAI LUNG'S INDULGENT BEHAVIORS. TO CORRECT HIS MISTAKES, SHIFU WAS THEN FAR TOO HARD ON HIS NEXT PUPIL, TIGRESS, FROM WHOM HE IS DETACHED, WHICH IN TURN IMBUES HER WITH FAR TOO MUCH DESIRE TO PLEASE HIM. AND THEN SHIFU IS FACED WITH TRAINING THE IDIOTIC BUT WELL-MEANING PO, A TASK HE DOES NOT WANT OR UNDERSTAND, ESPECIALLY BECAUSE THE DRAGON SCROLL WAS MEANT FOR TIGRESS. AND THEN GUIDING OVER ALL OF THEM, PARTICULARLY SHIFU'S FRUSTRATIONS, IS MASTER OOGWAY, THE ONE WHO CHOSE PO AS DRAGON WARRIOR AND GUIDES ALL FIVE OF THESE CHARACTERS WITH A QUIET SENSE OF ZEN AND DESTINY.

5 MAIN CHARACTERS. 5 DIFFERENT SETS OF RELATIONSHIPS. THEY ALL HAVE MOTIVES TO RELATE TO EACH OTHER. THEY ALL HAVE REASONS TO DISLIKE EACH OTHER AND PROVIDE CONFLICT. BUT BEST OF ALL THEY ARE ALL "INTERESTED PARTIES" IN THE MAIN PLOT OF OBTAINING THE DRAGON SCROLL. MEANING THEY ALL HAVE REAL STAKES IN THE STORY AND ACTION. THEY ARE NOT CHARACTERS SIMPLY MADE TO BE FOILS FOR EACH OTHER. THEY ARE ALL REAL CHARACTERS WITH THEIR OWN WANTS AND NEEDS. THE FILM DOES NOT WASTE ANY OF THESE GREAT DYNAMICS EITHER. WHEN THE DRAGON SCROLL IS UNLOCKED, IN A SINGULAR MOMENT OF CONVERGING PLOT, IT REALLY ALLOWS EACH CHARACTER TO COME TO A REAL CATHARSIS ABOUT THE UNDERSTANDING OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO ONE ANOTHER, WHETHER IT'S PO'S EMBRACING OF HIS OWN ZEN-LIKE ABILITIES, TIGRESS'S WILL TO ACCEPT PO AS DRAGON WARRIOR, SHIFU'S REALIZATION OF HIS BLINDING PRE-JUDGMENT OF PO, AND EVEN IN THE CASE OF REVEALING TAI LUNG'S OWN PRIDE AND VANITY AS HIS CORE WEAKNESS. THE MOVIE COMES TOGETHER FOR EVERY CHARACTER ARC AND EVERY RELATIONSHIP, ALL IN A SINGULAR NARRATIVE MOMENT.

HULK JUST HAS TO SAY IT: ON THE SURFACE, **KUNG FU PANDA** IS A SOMEWHAT FUNNY MOVIE WITH SOME REALLY GOOD KUNG FU ANIMATION... BUT IN TERMS OF THE BASIC MECHANICS OF HOW THIS FILM INTEGRATES PLOTTING AND CHARACTER... IT'S FUCKING PERFECT.

YOU HEAR THAT? *PERFECT*.

SO GO AND WATCH IT AGAIN WITH ALL THOSE THINGS MIND! CONSTANTLY BE AWARE OF THE RELATIONSHIPS AND HOW THE WANTS AND NEEDS OF EACH CHARACTER ADJUST WITH EVERY TURN OF PLOT. NOTICE THE WAY EVERYTHING IS IN CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER, OFTEN AT ONCE. IT'S A SPECTACULAR LEARNING TOOL!

SO NOW THAT WE'VE ESTABLISHED A GREAT EXAMPLE OF WHAT "MERGING INTO CONFLICTING ARCS" ACTUALLY MEANS LET'S RETURN TO HULK'S SILLY AFRICAN DOCTOR MOVIE THAT WE JUST MADE UP AND IS NOWHERE NEAR AS GOOD. WE DON'T WANT IT FEEL LIKE THREE SEPARATE MOVIES, WE WANT TO GO ALL **KUNG FU PANDA** ON THIS SHIT. WE WANT IT TO CONVERGE.

SO WE ESSENTIALLY "START OVER" WITH THE MULTIPLE ARCS. THAT'S RIGHT, WE DON'T JUST AUGMENT WHAT IS ALREADY THERE TO MAKE IT WORK. THAT WOULD BE HALF-ASSED AND ULTIMATELY MAKE THINGS STILL FEEL DISCONNECTED. WE NEED TO START OVER. WE NEED TO CONVERGE THE RELATIONSHIPS. WE NEED INTERESTED PARTIES. WE NEED STAKES AND DIFFERENT WANTS ALL CENTERING AROUND THE CENTRAL SETTING AND NARRATIVE. WE NEED TO FIND OUR UNIFYING CONCEPT OF A "DRAGON SCROLL," EVEN THOUGH IT PROBABLY WON'T BE A TANGIBLE OBJECT AND INSTEAD SOME CONCEPT OR THEME THAT IS FAR MORE ETHEREAL.

WE NEED TO MAKE IT *ONE STORY*.

WHICH MEANS ALL THOSE ARCS WE JUST MADE IN POINT #33? THEY DON'T MATTER. THEY WERE A ROUGH DRAFT TO HELP US BE SURE WE DIDN'T SKIRT ANYONE'S RELATIONSHIPS. NOW IS THE TIME TO COMPLETELY ASSIMILATE THEM TOGETHER BY STARTING OVER.

FOR INSTANCE, THE TAI LUNG EXAMPLE ABOVE MADE HULK THINK ABOUT ADDING ANOTHER CHARACTER TO THE MIX WHO WOULD COMPLICATE THE WHOLE THING AND ADD ANOTHER LAYER OF CONFLICT. THEY COULD BE ANOTHER CO-WORKER IN THE HOSPITAL. THEY COULD CREATE A LOVE TRIANGLE AND HAVE A RADICALLY DIFFERENT, INHUMANE IDEA OF HOW THE HOSPITAL SHOULD BE RUN, ONE THAT WOULD SURELY SINK THE HOSPITAL'S DIRECTION. THE INCLUSION OF THIS CHARACTER WOULD BE PRODUCTIVE. IT WOULD MAKE FOR A CLEAR FOIL IN THE SCENARIO. IT WOULD PROVIDE THE AUDIENCE WITH EMPATHY FOR THE OTHER MAIN CHARACTERS AND HATE FOR THIS JERK-FACE. IT WOULD BASICALLY SET UP THE DEFAULT ROOTING SCENARIOS WE WANT IN THE FILM. IT WOULD BE TOTALLY EFFECTIVE AND WORTHWHILE.

... IT IS ALSO NOT THE KIND OF HUMAN STORY HULK'S INTERESTED IN TELLING.

FOR ONE, IT'S JUST TOO DAMN MANIPULATIVE. HULK KNOWS THIS MELODRAMATIC STORY LIKELY CAN'T BE TURNED INTO HIGH ART OR ANYTHING, BUT HULK'S PARTICULAR INCLINATION WOULD BE TO MAKE THIS SCRIPT MORE QUIET, NUANCED, AND WELL-OBSERVED. AND THAT MEANS NO ABJECT VILLAINS. BUT SINCE WE STILL WANT THE SENSE OF CONFLICT AND DRAMA THAT THE VILLAIN PROVIDES, IT WOULD THEN MAKE SENSE TO TAKE SOME OF THOSE SAME 3RD PARTY CLASHING MOTIVES, AND GIVE IT TO A NON-EVIL CHARACTER. LIKE... HOW ABOUT THE LOVE INTEREST CO-WORKER?

THIS WOULD BE GOOD BECAUSE BEFORE THIS HULK HADN'T REALLY A STRONG IDEA OF THE CHARACTER'S FAULTS. SADLY, SHE WAS JUST ONE OF THOSE FOILS WHO COULD MAKE THE DOCTOR REALIZE HE NEEDS LOVE OR SOMETHING STUPID LIKE THAT (THUS VIOLATING HULK'S RULE ABOUT NOT WRITING WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF MEN), BUT INSTEAD WE SHOULD GIVE HER A CONTENTION AND DIFFERING VIEW POINT ON WHAT DIRECTION THE HOSPITAL SHOULD GO IN. DOING THIS WILL PROVIDE STAKES AND CONFLICT. IT WOULD MAKE HER RELEVANT TO THE STORY AND NOT JUST RELEVANT TO THE MAIN DOCTOR'S CATHARSIS. IT WOULD HELP MAKE HER TEXTURED AND REAL. WE WOULD GET THE SAME CONFLICT THE VILLAIN WOULD HAVE PROVIDED, BUT IN THIS VERSION HER HUMANITY WOULD MAKE HER VIEW SEEM MORE HUMAN.

BUT WHAT COULD THIS THIRD DIRECTION FOR THE HOSPITAL ACTUALLY BE? WELL, HULK'S VERY INTERESTED IN THE POLITICS OF AFRICA AS WELL, SO MAYBE THE 3RD CHARACTER SHOULD WANT TO REACH OUT TO THE LOCAL ARMY OR DESPOT WHO, DESPITE THEIR ATROCITIES, HAVE RESOURCES THAT COULD HELP. BOTH THE BOSS AND THE MAIN CHARACTER SHOULD WANT TO STICK TO THE HOSPITAL'S CRUCIAL INDEPENDENCE. IT WOULD MAKE FOR A STORY IN WHICH ALL 3 MAIN CHARACTERS HAD SIGNIFICANT INTEREST IN THE DIRECTION OF THE HOSPITAL (I.E. THE PLOT, WHICH IS A DIRECT COMMENTARY ON U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN AFRICAN POLITICS), BUT ALSO THE MAIN THEME OF IDEALISM VS. PRACTICALITY. IT WOULD GIVE ALL THREE CHARACTERS DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER. PLUS BY ADDING THIS ARMY/DESPOT CHARACTER WE WOULD THEN HAVE AN OUTSIDE FORCE, WHICH HELPS US AUTOMATICALLY EMPATHIZE WITH EVERYONE WITHIN THE HOSPITAL'S TEAM. BUT AGAIN, NONE OF THIS WOULD BE SO CUT AND DRIED BY THE END. THEY WOULD ALL COME TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER'S' VIEW OF IDEALISM VS. PRACTICALITY.

IT IS THE MERGING OF CONFLICTING ARCS. AND IT IS HOW ONE WRITES ONE SINGULAR STORY.

BUT GUESS WHAT? HULK'S AFRICAN DOCTOR MOVIE IS STILL NOT DONE TALKING ABOUT THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN FILM. HULK IS STOPPING FOR A MOMENT TO ASK QUESTIONS OF THE STATE OF THE STORY. FOR INSTANCE, YOU'LL NOTICE HULK IMMEDIATELY WENT TO THE "DEFAULT MALE PROTAGONIST" AND ALSO THE DEFAULT "FEMALE SUPPORT FIGURE." NEITHER OF THESE OPTIONS MAKES A GOOD FIRST INCLINATION. YOU MAY EVEN REALIZE THAT THIS STORY, WITH ALL ITS CAPACITY FOR MELODRAMA AND BY TOTAL ADMISSION A SOMEWHAT **GREY'S ANATOMY**-LIKE PLOT, REALLY MAKES MORE SENSE IF THE MAIN CHARACTER WAS FEMALE, RIGHT? HULK TOTALLY AGREES... THAT'S EVEN A GOOD SELL FOR THIS MOVIE... BUT HERE'S WHERE IT GETS REFLEXIVE! BECAUSE THE TONE OF THE STORY COULD FEEL SO MUCH LIKE FODDER FOR A KIND OF EXPLOITATIVE FEMALE STORY (SOMETHING ALMOST LIFETIME-ESQUE), HULK COULD ALSO TRY TO PUSH IT IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION AND EMBRACE AN ATRADITIONAL TONAL APPROACH. IT

WOULD BE A MALE DOCTOR IN TOUCH WITH HIS EMOTIONS AND A SIMPLE RELATABLE STORY.

HULK WOULDN'T WANT IT TO BE AIMED AT AN AUDIENCE BUT SOMETHING AIMED AT EVERYONE. IT COULD BE A CASE WHERE HULK WOULD GO THE OPPOSITE OF HIS INTUITION FOR THE MAIN CHARACTER'S GENDER, BUT ALL FOR A VERY SPECIFIC EFFECT OF THEMATIC GENDER COMMENTARY. STILL, THERE ARE WAYS THAT WHAT HAPPENS COULD PLAY AS POSITIVE AND WAYS IT COULD PLAY NEGATIVE. HULK REALLY HAS TO THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT WHAT HULK WANTS TO SAY ABOUT GENDER IN THIS SCENARIO AND IT'S ALTERING HULK'S ENTIRE SENSE OF PLOT AND CHARACTER.

THIS IS WHAT HULK MEANS WHEN TALKING ABOUT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUTHOR AND TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHAT YOUR FILMS SAY. HULK WANTS YOU TO THINK ABOUT THESE KINDS OF INTERPRETATIVE MATTERS AND THEMATIC EFFECTS CONSTANTLY. DOING SO WILL TOTALLY INFORM YOUR STORIES AND IMPLICATIONS IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY. AGAIN, IT'S NOT ABOUT HAVING YOUR CHARACTERS AVOID ANYTHING HAPHAZARD. IT'S NOT ABOUT UPHOLDING THE PARAGON OF GENDER IDENTITIES. IT'S ABOUT AWARENESS. AND WITH THAT AWARENESS YOU HAVE ROOM TO MAKE A MILLION DECISIONS. JUST LIKE HOW HULK WOULD EASILY BE OPEN TO SWITCHING BACK THE SEXES OF THE TWO COWORKERS, SO THAT THE FEMALE WAS THE PROTAGONIST. HULK WOULDN'T WORRY ABOUT DOING THAT IN THE SLIGHTEST. DO YOU KNOW WHY?

BECAUSE THEY'RE PEOPLE. NOT GENDERS. AND WRITING THEM AS PEOPLE MAKES FOR BETTER CHARACTERIZATION. YOU CAN SWITCH GENDERS IN SCRIPTS ALL THE TIME AND UNLESS YOU'RE MAKING PENIS AND VAGINA JOKES OR SOMETHING (WHICH IS SOMETHING HULK WOULD TOTALLY DO), THE EFFECTS AREN'T THAT BIG A DEAL. GENDER MATTERS, BUT IT OFTEN DOESN'T MATTER IN THE WAY YOU THINK IT DOES. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHEN IT COMES TO WHO SHOULD BE DOING WHAT OR WHO WOULD REACH OUT TO THE DICTATOR OR HOW "MEN ARE LIKE THIS AND WOMEN ARE LIKE THAT." SO DON'T WORRY SO MUCH ABOUT WRITING THEM AS A TYPIFIED GENDER. BECAUSE IN THE END, THEY WILL EITHER BE PLAYED BY AN ACTOR OR AN ACTRESS SO THE AUDIENCE WILL BE ABLE TO TELL WHAT SEX THEY ARE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO WRITE IT TO TELL THEM.

BUT EVEN AS HULK ESCHEWS GENDER LINES AND ESPOUSES ON THE PRINCIPALS OF MELODRAMA HERE, THE IMPORTANT THING HULK WANTS YOU TAKE FROM MULTI-ACT FLOW STRUCTURE IS THAT IT REALLY, TRULY HAS THE ABILITY TO BE AUGMENTED.

BECAUSE IT IS CONCERNED WITH FUNCTIONALITY AND CONFLICTING PURPOSE, IT DOES NOT HOLD YOU TO RIGID IDEALS OF DOING CERTAIN THINGS BY CERTAIN PAGES. IT DOESN'T SAY YOUR CHARACTER HAS TO BE LIKE THIS, OR THEY HAVE TO DO THAT.

IT TAKES A LOOK AT THE WHOLE OF STORYTELLING AND FOCUSES ON THE MAIN FIVE TENETS: PURPOSE, CHARACTER, CONFLICT, DRAMA, AND THEME AND MAKES YOU BREAK A STORY IN A WAY THAT VALUES ECONOMY, PROPULSION, AND AUDIENCE INVESTMENT.

MULTI-ACT FLOW STRUCTURE GIVES YOU THE TOOLS YOU NEED TO DO WHAT YOU WANT TO DO, AND GIVES YOU THE FLEXIBILITY TO CHANGE ON THE FLY DEPENDING ON YOUR PURPOSE AND INTENT.

EVERY KIND OF STORY IS DIFFERENT. EVERY ONE OF THEM WORKS WITH A CERTAIN SET OF EXPECTATIONS AND CATHARSIS. AND PART OF BEING ABLE TO WRITE ANY KIND OF STORY MEANS YOU SHOULD KNOW HOW TO WRITE EVERY KIND OF STORY. AND FORGIVE THE ROUGH TRANSITION HERE, BUT THAT'S WHY YOU REALLY SHOULD:

35. LEARN YOUR GENRE CONVENTIONS!

DO YOU REALIZE HOW MANY MYSTERIES AND PROCEDURALS HULK READS WHERE IT IS COMPLETELY CLEAR THAT THE AUTHOR HAS NEVER ACTUALLY STUDIED MYSTERIES? AS IN THEY

DON'T SEEM TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PROPELS A MYSTERY AND MAKES IT WORK? AND ARE POSSIBLY / TOTALLY JUST COPYING WHAT THEY SEE ON TV? IT IS HONESTLY ABOUT HALF THE TIME. ALL HULK WANTS IS FOR THEM TO PICK UP ANY DAMN BOOK ON THE SUBJECT AND LEARN THE CONVENTIONS OF NOIR OR MYSTERY OR DETECTIVE WORK OR WHATEVER THE HECK THEY'RE WRITING, JUST TO HAVE A LITTLE MORE FUNCTIONALITY. NOT SO THEY CAN APE ALL THE "CORRECT" BEATS.

THERE IS SOME MISGUIDED BELIEF THAT DOING THIS WILL CREATE REGURGITATED STORIES. TO BE FAIR, THAT'S EXACTLY HOW WE GOT IN THE HERO JOURNEY MESS, BUT IF YOU KEEP YOUR HEAD ON YOUR SHOULDERS THIS SOOOOOOOO WILL NOT BE TRUE. WHAT STUDYING THE GENRE WILL ALLOW YOU TO DO IS UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISMS THAT PROPEL MYSTERY OR INTRIGUE OR WHATEVER KIND OF MOOD EACH GENRE IS INTENDING TO CREATE. AND WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISMS? WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND HOW MYSTERY WORKS?

THEN YOU CAN USE IT ANY WAY YOU SEE FIT.

THINK OF IT LIKE COOKING. HULK COULD GIVE YOU A REALLY TRICKY RECIPE AND YOU COULD PRACTICE IT 50 TIMES UNTIL YOU GOT IT PERFECT AND IT WOULD TOTALLY SEEM LIKE YOU ARE A GREAT COOK. BUT DOES THAT MAKE YOU A GREAT COOK? DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS? WOULD YOU UNDERSTAND THAT COOKING IS ESSENTIALLY DEHYDRATION? OR WHY THE SEARING OF MEAT IS IMPORTANT TO TASTE? WOULD YOU BE ABLE TO APPLY THOSE BASIC CONCEPTS TO OTHER DISHES? WOULD YOU BE ABLE TO MAKE SUBSTITUTIONS TO THE DISH IF YOU NEEDED TO? NOPE!

AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHY UNDERSTANDING WHAT'S REALLY PROPELLING THINGS IS THE KEY TO INNOVATION. IT'S TRUE OF EVERY SCIENTIFIC ARENA. IT'S TRUE OF EVERY ART. WITH CINEMA, AN ARTIST LIKE DAVID LYNCH IS ABLE TO CREATE THE MOST INTERESTING, VIVID, AND ORIGINAL MOVIES ON THE PLANET BECAUSE HE UNDERSTANDS GENRE AND CAN APPLY GENRE MECHANISMS AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE TO GET AN IMMEDIATE VISCERAL EFFECT ON THE VIEWER. NOTICE HULK DIDN'T SAY "STYLE" EITHER. BUT *MECHANISMS*. LOOK AT THE FILMS OF EDGAR WRIGHT, WHICH ARE OFTEN LAUDED FOR THE WAY THEY WILL SUDDENLY BECOME "DIFFERENT MOVIES" AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE AND YOU'LL SEE THAT HE'S NOT JUST USING THE STYLE OF THOSE GENRES, BUT USING *THE PURPOSE*. IT ALWAYS INFORMS A CHARACTER'S DECISIONS OR A CHANGE IN THE PLOT.

IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT THE EFFECT ON THE VIEWER. UNDERSTANDING GENRES ALLOWS YOU PLAY WITH THEM IN A WAY THAT WILL HELP YOU CREATE NEW MEANINGS AND WORLDS. QUENTIN TARANTINO IS THE CLEAR MASTER OF THIS, WHERE HE TAKES ALL THESE CINEMATIC WORLDS AND USES THEM TO CONSTRUCT SOMETHING VIBRANT AND ORIGINAL.

MEANWHILE, HULK CAN SPOT A GENRE XEROX INSTANTLY. IT MAY LOOK LIKE THE GENRE AT HAND. IT MAY SOUND LIKE THE GENRE AT HAND, BUT UNLESS IT UNDERSTANDS THE PURPOSE IT GOES NOWHERE. THAT'S THE EXACT REASON THERE ARE SO MANY BAD PROCEDURALS OUT THERE IN SCRIPT LAND. BUT IT'S ALSO THE REASON THAT GOOD PROCEDURALS ARE SO MUCH FUN. THERE'S A WAY THE PLOTTING JUST WORKS, DAMMIT.

BUT WHAT ARE ALL THE PROCEDURAL CONVENTIONS? WHAT ARE ALL THE CONVENTIONS OF MYSTERY?

THE TRUTH IS THAT TO EVEN BEGIN TRYING TO DISCUSS ALL THE RULES OF GENRE CONVENTIONS WOULD ENTAIL WRITING A GIANT BOOK ABOUT EACH GENRE SEPARATELY. WHICH DOESN'T MEAN THAT IT'S AN INSURMOUNTABLE AMOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE FOR YOU TO ACQUIRE. HECK, YOU ALREADY HAVE A LIFETIME'S WORTH OF MOVIES YOU'VE WATCHED. YOU INSTINCTUALLY UNDERSTAND IT. BUT INSTEAD OF COPYING THE ICONOGRAPHY, YOU REALLY SHOULD ASK YOURSELF A DIFFERENT SET OF QUESTIONS: HOW IS THIS AFFECTING ME? WHY IS IT WORKING? WHAT IS THIS PLOT SAYING? WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR ME? WHAT AM I GETTING OUT OF THIS?

IF YOU WRITING A WESTERN, IT SHOULD SEEM LIKE YOU UNDERSTAND THE EFFECT OF WESTERNS. HULK DOESN'T MEAN TO TAKE A CHEAP SHOT AT **COWBOYS AND ALIENS**, BUT IT REALLY DIDN'T

SEEM LIKE IT KNEW THE FIRST THING ABOUT HOW THE GENRE ACTUALLY WORKED ON A DRAMATIC LEVEL. WHICH MIGHT SEEM ODD, GIVEN THAT IT WAS MADE BY A BUNCH OF SMART PEOPLE WHO APPARENTLY WATCHED A LOT OF WESTERNS AS RESEARCH (AND YOU CAN SEE ALL THE REFERENCES ON THE SCREEN), BUT INSTEAD OF UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF THE GENRE CONVENTIONS, THEY INSTEAD JUST APED TROPES AND ICONOGRAPHY. THEN IT TOOK THOSE TROPES AND ASSEMBLED THEM IN A WAY THAT DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HOW THEY WOULD RELATE TOGETHER ON THE PLOTTING LEVEL, NOR THE EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE!

FOR INSTANCE, DANIEL CRAIG'S CHARACTER IS CLEARLY INFLUENCED BY "THE MAN WITH NO NAME" ARCHETYPE THAT MADE CLINT EASTWOOD FAMOUS. THAT CHARACTER HAD NO PAST AND WAS A TOTAL MYSTERY, BUT HERE'S THE THING... *THAT'S NOT WHAT THE FILMS WERE ABOUT*. HIS HISTORY DIDN'T MATTER. THE CONVENTION ALLOWED THE MAN WITH NO NAME TO ROLL INTO TOWN AS A DISCONNECTED ENTITY AND THEN THE PLOT WOULD CONNECT HIM, USUALLY BASED ON MORALITY AND ETHOS. BUT **COWBOYS AND ALIENS** TOOK DANIEL CRAIG'S CHARACTER HISTORY AND TURNED IT INTO THE BIG DRIVING MYSTERY AT THE CENTER OF THE PLOT.

WORSE, IT HAD NO IDEA HOW TO ACTUALLY DO THAT. HE'S ESSENTIALLY AN INVESTIGATOR, BUT HE HAS NO ACTUAL MEMORY... WHICH MEANS HE'S JUST WANDERING AROUND DOING STUFF AS MORE STUFF HAPPENS. BY COMBINING THE MAN WITH NO NAME WITH THE MAN WITH NO MEMORY AND THEN ALSO CHARACTERIZING HIM AS A SILENT, UNSTOPPABLE BADASS WITH NO AGENCY AND WHOSE CORE DETAILS (THAT WOULD MAKE YOU EMPATHIZE WITH HIM) DON'T COME AROUND UNTIL TWO-THIRDS OF THE WAY THROUGH THE MOVIE, WELL, THEY INADVERTENTLY CREATED ONE OF THE MOST DETACHED CHARACTERS EVER WRITTEN, AND BY GROUNDING THE FILM IN THAT CHARACTER THEY WROTE ONE OF THE LEAST EFFECTIVE STORYLINES EVER WRITTEN. THERE'S NO EMPATHY. THERE'S NOTHING TO FOLLOW. WE'RE JUST *WATCHING*. SADLY, EVERYONE STARTED CALLING IT CRAIG'S WORST PERFORMANCE, BUT OF COURSE IT WAS HIS WORST PERFORMANCE! HE HAD ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO AND WAS GIVEN NO PERSONALITY!

ALL THE LESSONS WE'VE TALKED ABOUT APPLY: THE FILM HAS NO AGENCY. WE DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING UNTIL LATER. EACH SCENE TRANSITIONS POORLY. THE ENTIRE MOVIE IS ONE BIG "AND THEN!" THE ENTIRE MOVIE IS HELL-BENT ON USING REVEALS AND NOT DRAMA. THE ENTIRE FILM EVEN MISUNDERSTANDS THE PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING. TAKE HARRISON FORD'S CHARACTER. THEY KNOW ALL THE TROPES HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE, BUT THEY MASH THEM TOGETHER INEFFECTIVELY AND WITHOUT THE NEEDED TRANSITIONS. AT FIRST, HE'S THE NASTY VILLAIN. THEN WHEN THE ALIENS SHOW UP HE JUST INSTANTLY STARTS ACTING LIKE AN ANTI-HERO. THEN HE'S TREATED TO A SCOUNDREL'S EVOLUTION AND IS SUDDENLY JUST A DECENT GUY FOR REASONS THAT DON'T EXPRESSLY WORK. MOSTLY BECAUSE THE WAY FORD EVENTUALLY CAME AROUND WAS NOT FIT FOR WHO THE CHARACTER WAS IN THE BEGINNING. AND THERE WEREN'T SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH EVENTS TO MAKE HIM CHANGE. REMEMBER EARLIER WHEN WE TALKED ABOUT HAN SOLO'S GREAT REDEEMING MOMENT AT THE END OF **STAR WARS**? IT WAS ABOUT THE WAY THAT MOMENT WAS SET UP AND USED FOR PERFECT DRAMATIC PURPOSE... AND THIS FILM DIDN'T KNOW THE PURPOSE.

EVEN WITH EVERY OTHER CHARACTER IN THE FILM, IT KNEW IT WANTED TO USE THE **STAGECOACH** MODEL OF GIVING SECONDARY CHARACTERS A LOT OF BACKGROUND AND SCREEN-TIME... BUT THE THING ABOUT **STAGECOACH** IS ALL THE ACTION WAS CENTRALIZED TOGETHER INTO THE SAME ONGOING PLOT OF THEIR JOURNEY. IT WAS LIKE **KUNG FU PANDA**, WHERE EVERYONE'S ACTION OR INACTION WAS CONTRIBUTING TO THE MAIN PLOT. IT KNEW HOW TO MERGE ALL THOSE ARCS INTO A CONFLICTING SINGULARITY. IN **COWBOYS AND ALIENS**? EVERY PLOT IS EFFECTIVELY ITS OWN MOVIE. NONE OF IT EVER SEEMS TO AFFECT ANYTHING ELSE AND BARELY EVEN INTERSECTS!

SORRY, HULK WILL STOP TALKING ABOUT THAT MOVIE. IT'S JUST SUCH A GREAT LEARNING EXAMPLE OF A FILM THAT DID ALL ITS RESEARCH, KNEW ITS ICONOGRAPHY, HAD SMART PEOPLE AND GOOD ACTORS BEHIND IT, BUT SO CLEARLY DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISMS OR THE PURPOSE BEHIND THE KINDS OF STORIES IT WAS TRYING TO USE. AND THAT'S EVERYTHING.

WHILE HULK ISN'T A DIEHARD FAN OF THE GENRE OR ANYTHING, ONE OF THE REASONS HULK

REALLY APPRECIATES HORROR FILMS IS THAT MOST OF THE FILMMAKERS REALLY DO UNDERSTAND THE CONVENTIONS AND PURPOSE OF THE GENRE. THEY UNDERSTAND THE MECHANICS OF A SCARE AND HOW TO LAY THE MECHANICS ON THICK OR LIGHT, DEPENDING ON THE TONE AND RHYTHM. THEY UNDERSTAND HOW TO UNNERVE AND BUILD DISTRUST. THEY PLAY RIGHT INTO YOUR VISCERAL EXPERIENCE AND THEY DO SO WITH AN IMPECCABLE SENSE OF CRAFT. THERE'S A REASON A LOT OF HORROR FILMMAKERS ARE SUSPICIOUS WHEN AN "OUTSIDER" FILMMAKER TRIES THEIR HAND AT THE GENRE AND SO OFTEN IT'S BECAUSE THEY DON'T DO IT ALL THAT WELL. THE OUTSIDER MAY LIKE THE EFFECT OF HORROR, BUT THEY OFTEN DON'T UNDERSTAND THE MECHANICS AND THE CRAFT. THEY WOULD RATHER BE ESOTERIC AND MOODY. BUT THERE'S AN ENTIRE RHYTHM TO HORROR FILMS AND YOU'D BE SHOCKED HOW OFTEN THE OUTSIDERS MISUSE AND ABUSE IT... OR DON'T EVEN UNDERSTAND IT.

HULK'S LOOKIN' AT YOU, **WICKER MAN** REMAKE!

BUT THE REAL REASON YOU NEED TO KNOW YOUR GENRE CONVENTIONS ISN'T JUST FOR THESE TONAL REASONS, BUT BECAUSE THEY EACH HAVE A PSYCHOLOGY TO HOW THEY WORK. MOST OF THE TIME IT IS ABOUT THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELEASE. FOR EXAMPLE, ALL GENRES AND FILMS USE SIMILAR CAUSE + EFFECT MODELS TO ACHIEVE SOME FORM OF ANTICIPATION AND RELEASE. EACH GENRE THEN LINES UP WITH A DIFFERENT EMOTION: HORROR FILMS USE THIS TWO WAYS. WHEN YOU ARE EXCITED FOR THE KILL, IT UTILIZES ANTICIPATION AND THEN USES A MOMENT OF SHOCK TO SEND YOU INTO ELATION. THE OTHER WAY IS FRIGHT, WHICH WANTS TO YOU *FEAR THE KILL* SO IT TRIES TO ESTABLISH TENSION FOLLOWED BY A MOMENT OF RELEASING THE AUDIENCE FROM TENSION, WHICH THEN MAKES IT "OKAY" TO WATCH THE FILM AGAIN. THE TWO PSYCHOLOGIES COMPLETELY INFORM HOW ONE SHOULD WRITE AND STAGE THE ACTION OF THE HORROR IN ANY GIVEN MOMENT. YOU HAVE TO ASK THE QUESTION, DOES THE AUDIENCE WANT THIS PARTICULAR CHARACTER TO DIE? OR NOT WANT THIS PARTICULAR CHARACTER TO DIE? AND GO FROM THERE. *THAT'S MECHANICS.*

OR IF YOU LOOK AT ACTION FILMS YOU WILL NOTICE THAT CAUSE AND EFFECT NEEDS TO MANIFEST ITSELF BY CREATING TENSION FOLLOWED BY A MOMENT OF ELATION AND IMPACT (*ARE THEY GOING TO DO IT?!?! YES!! THEY DID IT!!!*) EVEN THOUGH YOU KNOW THAT IN MOST ACTION FILMS, THE HEROES WILL SUCCEED, THAT DOESN'T ACTUALLY MATTER. THE FILM'S SUCCESS IS IN TRICKING THE AUDIENCE'S BRAIN, THROUGH WHOLLY VISCERAL FILMMAKING TECHNIQUES, TO FEEL THAT, JUST FOR A SPLIT SECOND, THE ACTION HERO MAYBE WON'T SURVIVE BECAUSE "THAT FALL IS TOO HIGH!" OR "THAT GUN IS POINTED RIGHT AT THEM!" AGAIN, IT SHOULDN'T BE ABOUT THE HERO BEING AN UNSTOPPABLE BADASS, BUT ABOUT ALL THE WAYS THE HERO IS IN DANGER. ALL OUR LESSONS APPLY. IT GOES BACK TO URGENCY AND DRAMA. THERE IS A REASON THAT ACTION FILMS WORK WELL WITH CLEAR STAKES AND COMPLETELY OBVIOUS PLOTTING. IT'S ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ABOUT THE VISCERAL EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE.

THESE CAUSE + EFFECT MODELS ARE PART OF EVERY KIND OF GENRE. EVEN MELODRAMA. AND TO UNDERSTAND THEM IS PARAMOUNT TO YOUR ABILITY TO WRITE. IT EVEN APPLIES TO THEMATIC MOTIFS, LIKE UNDERSTANDING HOW GOOD WESTERNS ARE OFTEN ABOUT THE END OF THINGS. OR THAT ROMANTIC COMEDIES DEPEND ON THE AUDIENCES FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE CHARACTERS BEFORE THE CHARACTERS DO WITH EACH OTHER. THERE'S A REASON THAT SO MANY ROMANTIC COMEDIES FAIL WHEN THE CHARACTERS SLEEP WITH EACH OTHER AND NOW THEY HAVE TO FIGURE IT OUT. IT DOESN'T PLAY INTO THE BASIC SENSE OF HOW THE CAUSE + EFFECT WORKS (**KNOCKED UP** NOTWITHSTANDING BECAUSE THAT MOVIE ACTUALLY GOES FOR OTHER AVENUES OF NARRATIVE RESONANCE AND SUCCEEDS BRILLIANTLY).

UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HOW A GENRE WORKS WILL GIVE YOU PRECISELY WHAT YOU NEED TO MAKE YOUR OWN INDIVIDUAL, CREATIVE, AND ORIGINAL FILM WORK.... AND YES, HULK BELIEVES THAT EVERY FILM IS, IN SOME WAY, TECHNICALLY A GENRE FILM.

SO GUESS WHAT, FOLKS? WE'VE COVERED THE "BREAKING STORIES" SECTION OF THIS BOOK! HURRAY! BUT NOW IT'S TIME TO ADDRESS A LITTLE TROUBLESHOOTING, AND TAKE A LOOK AT A

FEW, SMALL STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS AND ODD DEVICES THAT SHOW UP IN WRITING...

36. "PAGE 17"

THE TERM "PAGE 17" IS A STRANGE PHENOMENON REVEALED TO HULK BY AN OLD MENTOR.

HE SAID THAT IF YOU LOOK THROUGH MOST GOOD SCREENPLAYS, FOR SOME REASON THE MOVIE'S MAIN PLOT OR ACTION KICKS INTO PLACE ON EXACTLY PAGE 17... HE SPENT A CAREER LOOKING INTO IT... AND SINCE THEN, HULK CHECKED INTO IT TOO... HE'S PRETTY MUCH RIGHT.

IT'S ALMOST BIZARRE, BUT IF YOU READ A TON OF SCRIPTS THEN "PAGE 17" OF THESE 90-120+ PAGE SCREENPLAYS SEEMS TO BE THIS NATURALLY OCCURRING POINT IN THE MAIN PLOT WHERE THE STORY REALLY GETS GOING. EVEN SOMETHING AS NON-TRADITIONAL AS THE FIRST CHAPTER OF **INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS** IS 17.5 PAGES. IT'S LIKE THE SCREENWRITING PI OR SOMETHING. IT'S THIS NATURALLY OCCURRING PAGE NUMBER WHERE IT FEELS RIGHT TO REALLY START EMBARKING DOWN THE MAIN NARRATIVE PATH. IT'S LIKE IN THE SHAKESPEAREAN SECOND ACT WHERE THE MAIN CONFLICT KICKS INTO GEAR.

PERHAPS THIS IS APROPOS OF NOTHING, BUT HULK SEES IT AS YET ANOTHER TOOL AT YOUR DISPOSAL. HAVE YOU STARTED YOUR MAIN PLOT TOO FAST? HAVE YOU DELAYED IT FOR TOO LONG? IF IT'S PAGE 33 AND THE MAIN PLOT OF YOUR STORY HASN'T GOTTEN GOING YET, ALL BECAUSE YOU'RE STILL "SETTING THINGS UP," THEN CHANCES ARE THAT IT IS A BAD THING.

IT'S NOT AS IF YOU ABSOLUTELY *HAVE* TO GET YOUR MAIN STORY COOKING BY PAGE 17, BUT HULK WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST IF YOU'RE GOING MUCH EARLIER OR MUCH LATER THAN THAT PAGE NUMBER, THEN PERHAPS YOU SHOULD PROBABLY HAVE A REALLY GOOD REASON TO DO SO, THAT'S ALL. IT'S SIMPLY A QUESTION YOU CAN ASK YOURSELF IN TRYING TO DECIDE WHAT IT IS YOU WANT TO DO.

37. IF YOU USE CHARACTERS, THEY SHOULD LIKELY BE REUSED

AGAIN, THESE ARE GUIDELINES. BUT SO OFTEN WE ARE INTRODUCED TO CERTAIN CHARACTERS IN A STORY WHO ACHIEVE SOME TEMPORARY GOAL IN A SCENE. COMIC RELIEF. EXPOSITION. SPURRING FORTH A NEW PLOT. WHATEVER. AND OFTEN THEY WILL THEN DISAPPEAR... IT DOESN'T WORK THAT WELL FOR YOUR STORY ARCS, MOSTLY BECAUSE IT FAILS TO MEET OUR INHERENT STANDARDS FOR SET-UP / DELIVERY AND CAUSE + EFFECT.

HULK KNOWS HULK KEEPS PICKING ON THE MOVIE (PERHAPS FAIRLY SO), BUT IN **GREEN LANTERN** WE ARE INTRODUCED TO HAL JORDAN'S FAMILY IN AN OPENING SCENE. THEY CLEARLY DO IT TO MAKE HIM SEEM ALL HUMAN AND CARING AND STUFF. EVEN THEN, IT FEELS SO IMMEDIATELY, BLATANTLY MANIPULATIVE. BUT THEN... *WE PROMPTLY NEVER HEAR FROM THE FAMILY EVER AGAIN...*

SORRY, BUT IT WAS ONE OF THE MOST LAUGHABLE THINGS HULK'S EVER SEEN IN A GIANT FILM. NOT JUST FOR IN-MOVIE LOGIC TERMS, BUT IN TERMS OF CHARACTER CONSISTENCY TOO. YOU FIGURE HE'D CARE ABOUT HIS FAMILY WHEN ALL OF A SUDDEN SHIT STARTED GOING DOWN WITH THE CITY GETTING EATEN BY PARALLAX, BUT HEY WHATEVER, HE CAN SPEND THAT TIME MOPING. HULK GUESSES THERE'S FAR MORE BORING THINGS TO DO WHEN YOUR FAMILY IS IN TROUBLE. BUT HEY, IT'S JUST ONE OFFENSE FROM A TERRIBLE SCRIPT (WHO KNOWS THOUGH, MAYBE SOMETHING ENDED UP IN THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR AND IT WAS CUT BY THE STUDIO AND HULK IS JUST BEING MEAN. STILL, ALL WE CAN GO OFF OF IS THE FINISHED RESULT).

NOT ONLY DOES ABANDONING THE FAMILY FEEL LIKE WE LOSE A BOND WE MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN, BUT THE REAL REASON IT SUCKS IS THAT IT FEELS LIKE *WASTED NARRATIVE TIME*. THE AUDIENCE CAN INHERENTLY SENSE MESSY AND SCATTERED STORYTELLING. THEY SUBCONSCIOUSLY SENSE WHEN THINGS DON'T FEEL IMPORTANT OR NECESSARY. LIKE IN HULK'S EXAMPLE WITH HOW THE CHARACTERS IN **KUNG FU PANDA** CONVERGE AND HAVE STAKES IN EACH OTHER BECAUSE IT

MAKES FOR A RELEVANT STORY. SIMPLY PUT, THERE SHOULD BE REASONS CHARACTERS ARE PART OF THE STORY. THEY SHOULD SERVE PURPOSES BEYOND "I LIKE WHAT THEY DO FOR THE HERO IN THIS ONE PARTICULAR SCENE."

THE STORIES WE WEAVE ALWAYS HAVE CONNECTIONS. EVEN SOMETHING AS SILLY AS **ANIMAL HOUSE**, DOESN'T JUST BRING IN OTIS DAY AND THE KNIGHTS FOR A GOOD TIMES SEQUENCE, BUT LATER RETURNS TO THEM TO MAKE A VERY DIFFERENT IMPRESSION (COMPLETE WITH CRITICISM OF WHITE-ASSUMPTION, BUT ALSO SOME OLD-SCHOOL RACIST OVERTONES!... OKAY, REALLY IT'S THE "PRIMITIVE CULTURES" JOKE THAT IS TRULY DATED, BUT IT'S FUCKING AWFUL. MEANWHILE, THE REST OF THE MOVIE IS STILL PRETTY AMAZING. SORRY FOR THE TANGENT, BUT HULK CAN'T TALK ABOUT THAT MOVIE WITHOUT BRINGING UP THAT MEAN-AS-HELL LINE). ANYCRAP, THE POINT IS YOU SHOULD ALWAYS TRY TO LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE ALL THE CHARACTERS HAVE AS MUCH RELEVANCY TO THE STORY AS POSSIBLE.

AND THAT MEANS FINDING FUN AND INTERESTING WAYS TO BRING THEM BACK. AS A GREAT EXAMPLE, THINK ABOUT THE WAY **CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM** PLOTS ARE CONSTRUCTED WHERE EVERYTHING ALWAYS SEEMS TO COME BACK AND BE RELEVANT. WHETHER COMEDY, DRAMA, SHORT OR LONG-FORM NARRATIVE, FIND WAYS TO DO THAT. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE SO PERFECT AND HAVE LITTLE NEAT BOWS ON IT, BUT THERE IS SURELY AN ORGANIC WAY TO NOT WASTE CHARACTERS.

BECAUSE THE MORE CHARACTERS FEEL LIKE TANGENTS, *THE MORE THEY'LL FEEL LIKE TANGENTS.*

38. HOW TO ACTUALLY USE DEUS EX MACHINA!

DEUS EX MACHINA WORKS WHEN IT IS THE POINT.

WAIT, DIDN'T HULK ALREADY TALK ABOUT THIS??? YOU BETCHA, BUT IT'S THAT IMPORTANT. THERE ARE SO MANY STORIES WHERE AT THE LAST SECOND THE HAND OF "GOD" OR FATE OR WHATEVER COMES IN AND SAVES THE CHARACTERS FROM CERTAIN DOOM. THESE MOMENTS ARE SO OUT OF NOWHERE AND OFTEN UNDESERVED THAT EVEN THE MOST UNAWARE AUDIENCE MEMBER WILL BE TEMPTED TO YELL "BULLSHIT!" THERE ARE THE RITUAL WORST OFFENDERS OF THIS DEVICE (LIKE HULK MENTIONED WITH LAZY OLD **ENTOURAGE**), BUT THERE IS OF COURSE AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO USE IT. AS HULK ILLUSTRATED EARLIER WITH THE HAN SOLO SAVING LUKE MOMENT, THE LAST MINUTE "SAVING THROW" WORKS BEST WHEN IT IS GROUNDED IN CHARACTER AND PLOTTING.

BUT HULK WANTED TO TAKE AN EXTRA MOMENT AND TALK ABOUT A WAY TO MAKE DEUS EX MACHINA WORK BY ENGAGING THE THEME DIRECTLY.

AS HULK SAID ABOVE, DEUS EX MACHINA WORKS BEST IF IT IS THE POINT OF THE STORY. USUALLY THIS REQUIRES SOME SORT OF ENGAGEMENT OF THE IDEA OF FAITH. FOR EXAMPLE, A CHARACTER ESPOUSES SOME BELIEF THAT THE UNIVERSE IS TRYING TO GUIDE HIM, OR THAT HE TRUSTS HE WILL BE SAVED. FOR EXAMPLE, **LOST** WAS A SHOW THAT HAD AMAZING CHARACTERIZATION AND DEEP-TISSUE THEMATIC RESONANCE. THEY WERE ALSO QUITE GOOD IN HOW THEY HANDLED THIS PARTICULAR DEVICE. THE BEST EXAMPLE OF WHICH WAS IN A SEASON ONE EPISODE APPROPRIATELY TITLED "DEUS EX MACHINA." SPOILERS AND SUCH, BUT IN THAT EPISODE THE CHARACTER OF JOHN LOCKE, A MAN WHO HAS RECENTLY FOUND HIS FAITH THROUGH EXTRAORDINARY MEANS, ONCE AGAIN BEGINS TO QUESTION IT. A VISION HAD BROUGHT HIM TO A MYSTERIOUS HATCH ON THE ISLAND, ONE HE DESPERATELY HAS TRIED TO OPEN IN ORDER TO UNLOCK THE MYSTERIES WITHIN. OVER A GREAT DEAL OF TIME HE FINDS NO SUCCESS IN TRYING TO OPEN IT. HIS ANGER GROWS. AND ONE NIGHT HE STARES DOWN INTO THE HATCH AND SLAMS HIS FISTS AGAINST THE WINDOW. HE SCREAMS AND YELLS TO WHATEVER IS WITHIN. HE THEN YELLS OUT TO THE UNIVERSE: *WHY HAD THEY CURSED HIM WITH THE VISION? WHAT DID THE WORLD WANT FROM HIM? WHY WAS HE SUPPOSED TO OPEN THIS HATCH? WHY WOULD THE UNIVERSE BE SO CRUEL AS TO TAUNT HIM WITH THIS IMPOSSIBLE TASK?* HE SCREAMS AND CRIES INTO THE HATCH AS THE MUSIC SWELLS. HE IS AT HIS WITS END WITH HIS VERY SENSE OF FAITH SHATTERED... AND THEN...

EVER SO QUIETLY... A LIGHT COMES ON WITHIN THE HATCH... IT SHINES ON JOHN'S FACE AND UP INTO THE NIGHT SKY.... THE EPISODE ENDS.

AND IT'S ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENTS HULK HAS EVER SEEN ON TELEVISION.

AND THAT IS BECAUSE IT FINDS SUCH MEANING IN THIS TINIEST OF GESTURES, ONE THAT SPEAKS SO DEEPLY TO THE NARRATIVE AND THEMES AT PLAY. IT IS NOT A BIG GESTURE THAT MAKES IT CLEAR THE HEAVENS ARE INTERFERING... IT IS THE SIMPLE DEVICE OF A LIGHT TURNING ON, WHICH WE CAN READ AS WE WANT. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE DEVICE COMING INTO EVENTUAL PLAY IS THE FOCUS OF THE ENTIRE EPISODE. IT IS AN EPISODE ABOUT *THE VERY PURPOSE OF DEUS EX MACHINA ITSELF*. AND FOR THAT REASON THEY TURN THE DEVICE NOT JUST INTO SOMETHING THAT "WORKS" WITHIN THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT OF THE SHOW, BUT SOMETHING THAT SWELLS WITH MEANING AND RESONANCE. IT IS PERFECT WRITING.

SO WHEN YOU CONSIDER USING DEUS EX MACHINA IN YOUR OWN WORK, THINK OF THIS ONE STUNNING EXAMPLE. AND THINK OF THE HAN SOLO MOMENT. ASK YOURSELF: *WHY AM I USING THIS DEVICE? IS IT JUST AN EASY SOLUTION? IS THIS THE ONLY WAY I CAN SOLVE THE PROBLEM? DOES IT SAY ANYTHING ABOUT MY CHARACTERS OR CHANGE THEM? HAVE I QUESTIONED THE VERY NATURE OF THE CHARACTER'S BELIEFS OR THE NATURE OF FAITH? IS THERE ANY REASON I AM USING THIS? AND IF SO, THINK ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE DEVICE AND WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS ON A THEMATIC LEVEL.*

DEUS EX MACHINA WORKS WHEN IT IS THE POINT.

39. BEWARE THE OPENING FLASH-FORWARD

SO THIS ISN'T MORE **LOST** ANALYSIS BECAUSE THE FLASHBACK AND FLASH-FORWARD SYSTEM THEY USED WAS ACTUALLY PRETTY DAMN PURPOSEFUL ON THE WHOLE!

NO, THE KIND OF OPENING FLASH-FORWARD HULK'S TALKING HERE IS THE KIND YOU SEE ALL THE TIME IN MOVIES. HULK EVEN MENTIONED IT BRIEFLY BEFORE IN THE PREEXISTING CONFLICT CHAPTER. IT'S WHEN A MOVIE WILL START OFF WITH SOME MOMENT FROM THE CLIMAX OR A LATER SCENE, WHEN EVENTS ARE ALL HEIGHTENED AND DRAMATIC. IT'S LIKE THIS BIG TEASE, AND THEN THE MOVIE JUST STARTS AS NORMAL.

HULK HAS A SIMPLE QUESTION: WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

POSSIBLE (BAD) ANSWER: *BECAUSE IT LETS THE AUDIENCE KNOW THAT STUFF IS GOING TO GO DOWN IN THIS MOVIE! THAT IT WILL GET ALL SERIOUS! THAT THE PROTAGONIST WILL END UP IN SOME CRAZY SITUATION! THAT'S, YOU KNOW, FULL OF DRAMA AND STUFF! IT SHOWS CONFLICT AND IS EXCITING!*

HULK NOT-SO-POLITELY ASKS IN RETURN: SO THE FUCK WHAT?

WHAT IS THE REAL POINT OF DOING THAT? HOW MUCH ARE YOU ACTUALLY ACCOMPLISHING? HULK MEANS, 9 TIMES OUT OF 10, OF COURSE THE AUDIENCE KNOWS THAT THE MOVIE WILL GET EXCITING AND CLIMAXY BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT MOVIES DO. THAT'S PROBABLY WHY THEY BOUGHT A TICKET. HULK UNDERSTANDS THE DESIRE TO LET AN AUDIENCE KNOW WHAT KIND OF CRAZINESS IS IN STORE SO IT DOESN'T TAKE THEM OFF GUARD, BUT SO OFTEN THAT SORT OF FLASH-FORWARD IS UNNECESSARY. AND AFTER IT'S OVER, THE NARRATIVE WILL JUST JUMP BACK TO THE REAL BEGINNING OF THE STORY, SHOWCASING HOW UNIMPORTANT IT REALLY WAS. HULK SEES THE DEVICE USED SO DAMN MUCH THESE DAYS AND IT'S NOT ONLY EVERYWHERE, BUT ALSO POORLY DONE. IT'S A QUICK-SEEMING AND CHEAP SOLUTION TO IMBUING A FILM WITH THE ILLUSION OF CONFLICT.

AREN'T THERE SO MANY BETTER WAYS OF DOING THAT? TO INTRODUCE REAL AND ACTUAL CONFLICT? LIKE WITH THE WHOLE "PREEXISTING CONFLICT" THING HULK MENTIONED?

NOW THIS ISN'T TO MAKE IT SEEM LIKE THE DEVICE IS COMPLETELY UNUSABLE, AS THERE ARE SOME WAYS IT CAN WORK. FOR INSTANCE, IT WAS A COMMON DEVICE ON THE FIRST FEW SEASONS OF **BREAKING BAD** AND SOMETIMES IT WORKED SPECTACULARLY. THEY'D START WITH A FEW SCATTERED IMAGES WE BARELY UNDERSTAND. THEY WILL BUILD A COMPLETE SENSE OF MYSTERY AS TO WHAT WE'RE EVEN SEEING. AND SINCE THERE IS LITERALLY NO COMPREHENSION, IT WORKS LIKE A MYSTERY TO BE PIECED TOGETHER LATER. "OH, THAT'S THAT OBJECT FROM..." ETC. THE FLASH-FORWARDS WERE USED AS CLUES. IT'S NOT JUST JUMPING AHEAD, SHOWING OFF THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING AND THEN ASKING "HOW ARE THESE CHARACTERS GOING TO END UP IN THIS CRAZY SITUATION?" THE WAY SO MANY BAD SCRIPTS DO. AND THE FEW TIMES **BREAKING BAD** DID GIVE AWAY ACTUAL CONTEXT AND INFORMATION IN THE FLASH-FORWARD SCENE, IT WAS OFTEN TOTAL MISDIRECTION.

LIKE EVERYTHING, YOU HAVE TO BE SURE THERE'S A REASON FOR IT. IF YOUR MOVIE BEGINS WITH A LOT OF NORMALCY (AND HULK MEANS A LOT), THEN PERHAPS IT'S WORTH THINKING ABOUT. BUT IT SHOULD ALSO BE THERE TO EXPRESS SOME IDEA OF THE THEMES AT PLAY OR POSSIBLY TO CREATE A SENSE OF DRAMATIC IRONY. YOU HAVE TO BE SURE THERE'S A REASON. IT CAN'T JUST BE AN "AND THEN." YOU HAVE TO BE SURE YOU ARE NOT WASTING THE AUDIENCE'S TIME, NOR ROBBING YOUR CLIMAX OF IMPORTANT URGENCY.

BECAUSE SOMETIMES THE UNINTENDED EFFECT OF THE FLASH-FORWARD IS THAT YOU'RE SUBCONSCIOUSLY MAKING THE AUDIENCE FEEL LIKE THEY'RE JUST SITTING THERE WAITING TO GET TO THE CLIMAX AGAIN. IT CAN BECOME A STRANGELY HOLLOW EXERCISE. EVEN **BREAKING BAD**, WHO USED THE DEVICE WELL FOR TWO WHOLE YEARS, ENDED UP PHASING IT OUT. IT CAN BE A REAL PREVENTATIVE BURDEN. SO BE WARY.

HONESTLY, A LOT OF TIME HULK FEELS LIKE WRITERS USE THE OPENING FLASH-FORWARD BECAUSE "THAT'S WHAT MOVIES DO." HOW MANY TIMES CAN WE TALK ABOUT MOVIES THAT USE DEVICES, OR IMAGERY, OR STYLE THAT ARE DEVOID OF TACT AND UNDERSTANDING?

HOW OFTEN CAN HULK ARGUE IN THIS BOOK THAT THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IS THE COMMON MISAPPLICATION OF A STORY MECHANISM AND NOT THE MECHANISM ITSELF?

UNDERSTAND THE THING YOU ARE DOING. UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISM AND WHAT IT'S ACCOMPLISHING. DON'T ASSUME. ASK YOURSELF THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.

ASK: "WHAT IS THIS REALLY ACCOMPLISHING?"

40. DON'T TRY TO BE "COOL"

THE FOLLOWING IS HULK'S GENERAL PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT LIFE: IF YOU START ANY SENTENCE WITH "WOULDN'T IT BE COOL IF... ", DON'T DO IT. JUST DON'T DO IT.

THE WORD "COOL" IS SO TROUBLESOME AND HULK FINDS IT REALLY PROBLEMATIC IN STORYTELLING. A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY HULK MAKES SUCH A BIG FUSS ABOUT IT. IT'S JUST A WORD THAT IS SYNONYMOUS WITH "GOOD" TO THEM. BUT HULK DOESN'T SEE IT THAT WAY AT ALL. SO LET'S TRY A LITTLE EXPERIMENT.

DEFINE "COOL."

AGAIN, WE THINK OF IT AS BEING SYNONYMOUS WITH GOOD, BUT THAT'S NOT REALLY THE CASE, IS IT? THE THINGS WE THINK ARE "COOL" USUALLY RELATE TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY SOCIAL DYNAMICS. COOL PEOPLE AND COOL THINGS ARE OFTEN DETACHED, FLIPPANT, AND REBELLIOUS. AND WHILE THOSE TRAITS ARE CERTAINLY *ALLURING*, THE PROBLEM IS THAT IT'S NOT ALL THAT EMOTIONAL OR EMPATHETIC. HECK, THE REASON WE TRY TO BE LIKE THAT IS THAT EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS SCARE US. WE DON'T WANT TO GET HURT. WE DON'T WANT TO BE VULNERABLE. AND THAT'S WHY WE PROJECT COOLNESS. THAT'S WHY WE WANT TO SEEM LIKE WE DON'T GIVE A FUCK. WE THINK IT'S ALLURING, AND HEY, SOMETIMES IT IS.

BUT HULK'S PROBLEM IS NOT THAT BEING COOL IS ALLURING, IT'S THAT IT ISN'T EMOTIONAL. IT ISN'T DRAMATIC. AND IT ISN'T EMPATHETIC. MEANING: *IT ISN'T GOOD CINEMA*. THINK ABOUT THOSE WORDS: FLIPPANT AND DETACHED. IS THAT HOW YOU WANT YOUR MOVIE TO COME ACROSS? IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE INTERESTED IN MAKING? SOMETIMES PEOPLE ARE INTERESTED IN MAKING MOVIES LIKE THAT AND THEY'RE OFTEN TERRIBLE. THEY'RE ALOOF BITS OF SLICK CINEMA, COMPLETELY DISTANT AND UNEMOTIONAL, AND ALTOGETHER SHITTY. AND THE ONLY WAY THEY TEND TO BE SUCCESSFUL IS BY INDULGING THE AUDIENCE AND MAKING THEM WANT TO BE LIKE THOSE COOL THINGS THROUGH WISH-FULFILLMENT.

THE OTHER PROBLEM WITH "COOL" IS THAT IT'S OFTEN AN EVALUATIVE CONCEPT, NOT A VISCERAL ONE, WHICH ALSO MAKES FOR BAD CINEMA. WE JUST SIT THERE WITH OUR BRAINS AND WE DECIDE "OH THAT'S COOL" AND EVEN THEN IT'S NOT ALL THAT HELPFUL BECAUSE WE REGULARLY DISAGREE ON WHAT IS COOL OR WHAT MAKES THINGS COOL. IT'S SO DAMN EPHEMERAL AND THAT MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE TO CONSTRUCT! IT'S LIKE TRYING TO BOTTLE LIGHTNING.

ISN'T THAT SUCH AN IMPORTANT THING TO REALIZE? THAT COOLNESS IS SO TRANSITIVE THAT IT CHANGES CONSTANTLY AND CAN'T EVER BE CONSTANT? AND SOON AFTER IT IS EFFECTIVE IT WILL BE CONSIDERED PASSÉ? AND IF WE CAN'T DEFINE SUCH A NEBULOUS CONCEPT, THEN WE CAN ONLY RELY ON HOW WE *KNOW IT WHEN WE SEE IT*. WHICH BRINGS HULK TO ANOTHER IMPORTANT POINT, WHEN YOU ARE STILL WRITING AND CONSTRUCTING THE IDEA, THE IDEA DOESN'T EXIST YET.

YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO BE COOL.

AND YOU EVER SEE A GUY TRYING TOO HARD TO BE COOL? OOF. DO YOU WANT YOUR MOVIE TO BE LIKE THAT GUY? IT'S THE PARENTS WHO TRY TO KEEP UP WITH THEIR KIDS' MUSIC, NOT IN AN EFFORT TO CONNECT WITH THEIR CHILDREN, BUT TO ADOPT THEIR TASTES AS THEIR OWN AND TO STAY RELEVANT, TRYING TO BE COOL. IT'S THE GUY AT THE PARTY STILL WEARING THE SCORPION JACKET FROM **DRIVE**. TRYING TO BE COOL RESULTS IN TAKING BENEVOLENT, GOOD-GUY, ZEN LEADER OPTIMUS PRIME AND TURNING HIM INTO A GOVERNMENT-HATING BADASS HELL-BENT ON EXECUTING MOTHERFUCKERS. TRYING TO BE COOL IS HOW WE GOT PRETTY MUCH ALL OF THE EARLY '90S WITH CARTOON CHARACTERS IN SUNGLASSES.

IT IS THE POOCHIE-FICATION OF CINEMA.

IT JUST ALWAYS REEKS OF BLATANT AND FALSE INTENTION. IT SEEMS DESPERATE AND UNEARNED. MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT NEVER HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH BEING A VALID OPTION FOR THE STORY. IT WILL BE LIKE A MARKETING EXECUTIVE TRYING TO IDENTIFY WHAT THE HIP KIDS ARE INTO. IT'S TRUE. EVEN IF YOU REALLY ARE A COOL, FORWARD-THINKING, PROGRESSIVE PERSON, IT WILL FEEL CALCULATED AND COLD. IT WILL BE DISINGENUOUS.

SO HULK SWEARS TO YOU: THE SECOND YOU ARE TRYING TO BE COOL, YOU'RE IN TROUBLE.

PEOPLE THINK THAT TARANTINO IS ALWAYS TRYING TO BE COOL OR THAT HE MAKES "COOL" FILMS, BUT IF YOU ASK HULK THIS IS A SPECTACULAR MISDIAGNOSIS. YES, QUENTIN WANTS HIS FILMS TO BE COOL, BUT THAT'S NOT HOW HE ACTUALLY CONSTRUCTS THEM! SERIOUSLY! OFTENTIMES, HIS CHARACTERS ARE GROUNDED IN A KIND OF REGULARITY AND FOCUS ON THE MUNDANE. HE OBSESSES IN THE OBSCURE AND THE UNCOOL. MORE THAN THAT, HE CONSTRUCTS HIS FILMS IN TERMS OF FUNCTION: HIS LONG-FORM DIALOGUES ARE JUST AS MUCH ABOUT CLASSIC INNOVATIONS OF DRAMA AND BUILD UP AND TENSION. HE'S A GUY WHO KNOWS HIS CRAFT AND KNOWS *THE PURPOSE* OF EVERY SINGLE CINEMATIC MECHANISM HE'S EMPLOYING. THE REAL TRUTH IS THAT TARANTINO IS ACTUALLY SUPER DORKY. HE'S REFERENCING THE MOST OBSCURE NERDY THINGS, FAVORS FLIGHTS OF DIALOGUE FANCY OVER ACTION. HE MUCH PREFERS CAREFUL CHARACTERIZATION AND INTELLIGENCE OVER POSTURE. HE UNDERSTANDS THAT NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU DRESS STUFF UP IN AWESOMENESS...

CINEMA IS SECRETLY ABOUT BEING DORKY AND EARNEST.

AND THAT IS WHAT MAKES HIS FILMS SO *DAMN COOL*.

BUT THIS WHOLE PREDICAMENT BRINGS US TO OUR NEXT BIG “DON’T”...

41. DON'T FUCK WITH THE AUDIENCE JUST TO FUCK WITH THE AUDIENCE

STORIES SHOULD BE EARNEST.

EVEN IF THE STORY IS ABOUT A LACK OF EARNESTNESS. EVEN IF THE MATERIAL IS FRIVOLOUS OR SUPERFICIAL. EVEN IF IT'S THE MOST UN-SPIELBERG-IAN MATERIAL ON THE PLANET. THE STORYTELLING ITSELF, IN WHATEVER PATH YOU CHOOSE TO GO, SHOULD BE EARNEST. IT SHOULD COME FROM A PLACE OF GENUINE CONNECTION AND EMPATHY TO THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUR AUDIENCE. SO WHEN IT COMES TO CONSTRUCTING YOUR NARRATIVE, THERE IS A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WANTING TO BE INVENTIVE AND *JUST* TRYING TO BE DIFFERENT FOR DIFFERENT'S SAKE... DO THAT AND IT WILL JUST END UP SEEMING LIKE YOU'RE FUCKING WITH THE AUDIENCE.

AND THE AUDIENCE *DOES NOT* LIKE TO BE FUCKED WITH.

LOOK NO FURTHER THAN THE RECENT DEBACLE WITH THE ENDING OF **THE DEVIL INSIDE**. IN CASE YOU ARE UNFAMILIAR, THE FILMMAKERS / STUDIO SAID THEY WANTED TO DO SOMETHING "DIFFERENT" AND, IN MOMENT OF COMPLETE STUPIDITY, THEY DID SOMETHING THEY THOUGHT MIGHT BE COOL: YOU SEE, THE FILM ENDS ABRUPTLY WITH A CAR CRASH AND A CUT TO BLACK WITH A STORY CARD THAT TELLS THE AUDIENCE THAT THEY CAN CONTINUE THE STORY... ON A WEBSITE.

PEOPLE REACTED AS IF THE FILM HAD JUST LEAPT OFF THE SCREEN AND KILLED ALL THEIR MOTHERS.

LOOK. THE DECISION WAS ESSENTIALLY JUST A MISGUIDED ATTEMPT AT TRANS-MEDIA LAMENESS. BUT IN THE FILMMAKERS' DESIRE TO BE DIFFERENT, THEY DID NOT REALIZE THAT, NARRATIVELY SPEAKING, THEY WERE DOING THE MOST RIDICULOUS THING POSSIBLE. EVEN IF UNINTENTIONAL, THAT TITLE CARD MADE IT SEEM LIKE THEY WERE EFFECTIVELY CHEATING THE AUDIENCE OUT OF SEEING THE END OF THE FILM AND MAKING THEM CATCH UP LATER THROUGH ANOTHER FORM OF "PAYMENT." BUT THE POINT HULK REALLY WANTS TO HAMMER HOME IS THAT BY SHIFTING TO U.R.L. THE FILM WAS CALLING ATTENTION THE FACT THEY WERE CRAFTING AN *INCOMPLETE NARRATIVE*. EVEN IF THE STORY WAS COMPLETE (AND IT WASN'T), THEY WERE STILL IMPLYING THERE WAS A MORE IMPORTANT NARRATIVE TO BE HELD ELSEWHERE. THEY DID SOMETHING WORSE THAN JUST HAVING AN UNRESOLVED ENDING... THEY MADE IT SEEM LIKE THE NARRATIVE WAS PURPOSEFULLY *INCOMPLETE*.

HERE'S THE FILMMAKERS' EXPLANATION OF WHAT HAPPENED (VIA [BLOODY DISGUSTING](#)):

"Stories always have a very Hollywood ending. And we're doing the antithesis of that. I know some people love it and some people f*cking hate it but it gets people talking. We're just trying to make it realistic. Not every situation ends perfectly or the way you want it to end."

...

...

...WHAT?!?!?!? LIKE... SERIOUSLY?!?!?!?!?!?

OKAY PLEASE UNDERSTAND SOMETHING RIGHT NOW. HULK WANTS TO RUN OUT INTO THE STREETS AND START SMASHING CARS AND PUNCHING CHITAUARI... BUT INSTEAD OF HULK SMASHING THINGS, HULK WILL DO THE MORE CIVILIZED THING AND ANALYZE WHY THAT COMMENT MIGHT BE THE WORST THING EVER SAID BY A FILMMAKER.

THE FIRST PROBLEM IS THAT HE'S MAKING IT CLEAR HE'S JUST FUCKING WITH THE AUDIENCE TO GET A REACTION.

SECOND, "IT GETS PEOPLE TALKING" IS THE CHIEF PHRASE PEOPLE USE IN MARKETING. NOT STORYTELLING. AND IF THAT'S YOUR APPROACH TO STORYTELLING YOU CAN JUST GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE AND WORK IN MARKETING. WHICH IS FINE, BY THE WAY. HULK'S WORKED IN MARKETING. IT'S A SUPER-VALID BUSINESS, BUT IT WORKS IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WAY FROM STORYTELLING.

THIRD, WHAT THE HELL DOES GETTING PEOPLE TALKING AND CUTTING A STORY SHORT SO THEY CAN GO TO A WEBSITE HAVE TO DO WITH REALISM? NOTHING, THAT'S WHAT. IN FACT, ALL YOU DID WAS GET PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT HOW AWFUL THAT STORY DECISION WAS.

FOURTH, HE'S MISUNDERSTANDING WHAT "NOT EVERY SITUATION ENDS PERFECTLY OR THE WAY YOU WANT IT TO END" ACTUALLY MEANS IN HOW IT SHOULD AFFECT YOUR NARRATIVE. HIS WORDS IMPLY THAT WE'RE JUST MAD AT THE ENDING BECAUSE THE FILM DIDN'T END HOW WE WANTED IT TO, THUS IMPLYING WE'RE JUST A BUNCH OF HAPLESS DUMB-FARTS WHO NEED TO BE PLACATED.

GAHHHHHHH... THERE'S SO MUCH TO SAY HERE.

LET'S START WITH THE FACT HE'S OBVIOUSLY NOT TRYING TO TELL A STORY BUT JUST DO "THE OPPOSITE" OF STORYTELLING AS IF THAT BOTH MADE SENSE AND WAS SOMEHOW ENOUGH. HE SEEMS TO THINK THAT BY DOING SO, HE IS BEING ATTRACTIVE OR COOL OR BADASS OR WORSE, "ARTISTIC" (GO BACK TO HULK'S COMMENTS ON ART TO SEE HOW UNTRUE THAT ONE IS). AND IN THE END, IT IS JUST CONTRARIANISM IN SERVICE OF NOTHING. IT SHOWCASES EXACTLY WHAT HULK IS TALKING ABOUT WITH THE FALSE PURSUITS OF FUCKING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE AND DOING THE OPPOSITE FOR OPPOSITE'S SAKE.

BUT THE BIGGER PROBLEM WITH ALL THESE STATEMENTS IS THAT THERE IS CLEARLY NO UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT "NARRATIVE" EVEN MEANS. NONE. HIS "HOLLYWOOD ENDING" COMMENT SHOWS THAT HE ACTUALLY PERCEIVES NOTHING ABOUT HOW ENDINGS WORK. HE SEEMS TO THINK THAT ANYTHING WITH RESOLUTION IS AKIN TO HAVING THE CHARACTERS RIDE OFF INTO THE SUNSET HAND-IN-HAND. IT'S ASININE. REMEMBER WHAT HULK SAID EARLIER ABOUT HOW THE ENDING IS A CHANCE TO RAM HOME THEMES? WELL MOST FOUND FOOTAGE FILMS TEND TO END ABRUPTLY, BUT AT LEAST MOST OF THEM HAVE AN ENDING GESTURE LIKE THAT MANAGES TO, LIKE, DO SOMETHING. THIS ONE JUST ENDS ON ANOTHER ACTION BEAT INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM OTHER ACTION BEATS BEFORE. BOTH THE FILM AND HIS ENSUING COMMENTS ARE ENOUGH EVIDENCE TO SHOWCASE THAT THIS PERSON COULD NOT POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND LESS OF WHAT A STORY IS, HOW IT WORKS, OR WHY IT MATTERS.

IF "THE ENDING IS THE CONCEIT" THEN THIS FILM'S CONCEIT WAS TOTAL INEPTITUDE.

SO TO ALL OF YOU WRITERS OUT THERE, HULK WANTS YOU TO KNOW THAT STORYTELLING IS NOT SOME GAME WHERE YOU MESS WITH THE AUDIENCE. STORYTELLING IS AN ART THAT IS DEPENDENT ON YOUR SENSE OF CRAFT AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE. SO IF YOU ARE GOING TO THROW AN AUDIENCE OFF-KILTER OR IF YOU ARE GOING TO DO SOMETHING REBELLIOUS... YOU HAVE TO DO IT FOR A GOOD REASON. AND YOU HAVE TO KNOW HOW TO PULL IT OFF.

HULK HAS A QUESTION FOR YOU: WHEN ALFRED HITCHCOCK MADE **PSYCHO**, WAS HE JUST FUCKING WITH THE AUDIENCE?

IT'S AN IMPORTANT QUESTION. THE FILMMAKERS MAY HAVE HAD A DESIRE TO SHAKE THINGS UP, BUT THAT GREAT, REBELLIOUS MOMENT IN **PSYCHO** WORKS BECAUSE THE ENTIRE FILM IS CONSTRUCTED AROUND IT. WE GET A TOTAL CREEPY-AS-SHIT BUILD UP. THE FILM GIVES US EVERY REASON TO BELIEVE IT CAN HAPPEN. THE ONLY THING THAT STOPS US IN OUR TRACKS IS THAT, WELL, MARION WAS THE MAIN CHARACTER. AND THEN THE FILM DELIVERS A PURE A SHAKESPEAREAN THIRD ACT TURN THAT IS WORTHY OF CLIMAX. BUT THE WAY THE MOMENT

“WORKS” DOES NOT STOP WITH THE DEED ITSELF. THE EVENT HAS A TREMENDOUS FALL-OUT AND CONSEQUENCES TO THE NEW CHARACTERS. IT SPREADS OUT FAR BEYOND WHAT WE SEE.

HITCHCOCK AND HIS TEAM DIDN'T FUCK WITH THE AUDIENCE JUST TO FUCK WITH THE AUDIENCE, THEY CONSTRUCTED AN ENTIRE FILM AROUND THEIR INVENTIVE, UNCONVENTIONAL DECISION. THEY PLAYED WITH EXPECTATION AND THEN LOOKED AT WHAT THAT PLAYING-WITH-EXPECTATION ACTUALLY MEANT.

THE LESSON IS SIMPLE: IF YOU WANT TO GO IN BOLD NARRATIVE DIRECTIONS, YOU DO IT SMART. YOU START WITH THE FAMILIAR TROPES AND YOU CAREFULLY BRING THE AUDIENCE ON A JOURNEY, OFTEN TO PLACES THAT ARE UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT YOU DO SO WITH A GUIDING HAND. YOU CAN ALWAYS BRING AN AUDIENCE TO AN ANTAGONISTIC PLACE, BUT YOU CAN'T DO IT IN AN ANTAGONISTIC WAY. AND IF YOU DO? YOU BETTER BE DAMN SURE THAT AUDIENCE'S ANGERED REACTION IS THE EXACT RESULT YOU WANT (WHICH IS WHY IN ITS MOST BASIC SENSE, **HUMAN CENTIPEDE 2** "WORKS" FOR ITS FILMMAKER). AND THEN YOU HAVE TO FOLLOW IT THROUGH TO THE END. YOU HAVE TO SHOW THE CONSEQUENCES. YOU HAVE TO SHOW THE AUDIENCE THAT YOU MADE THIS UNCONVENTIONAL CHOICE FOR A REASON. YOU HAVE TO PROVE THAT YOU AREN'T JUST FUCKING WITH THEM. THAT YOUR DECISION HAD MEANING AND THEME AND IMPORT.

ANYTIME YOU BRANCH AWAY YOU HAVE TO HAVE A REASON. QUENTIN TARANTINO GETS AWAY WITH SCENES OF LONG-RUNNING DIALOGUE BECAUSE HE WRITES SOME OF THE BEST DIALOGUE ON THE PLANET. AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, HIS DIALOGUE IS FULL OF ITS OWN NARRATIVES AND STORIES AND DISPOSITIONS AND ALL THAT GOOD CINEMATIC STUFF. HIS CONVERSATIONS TAKE YOU ON A NARRATIVE JOURNEY. AND THEN HE UNDERSTANDS INSTINCTIVELY WHEN TO DIP RIGHT BACK INTO PURE VISCERAL CINEMA.

ESSENTIALLY, YOU HAVE TO NEGOTIATE. THE ABSENCE OF ONE ELEMENT OF GOOD NARRATIVE MEANS YOU SHOULD FULLY EMBRACE ONE OF THE OTHER ELEMENTS FROM OUR WORKING DEFINITION LISTED IN PART ONE. DROPPING THEME? IT BETTER MAKE PERFECT SENSE FOR THE TEXTURE, CHARACTER, OR REALITY. DROPPING NARRATIVE ECONOMY AND PROPULSION? BETTER MAKE PERFECT SENSE FOR YOUR THEME OR AN IMPORTANT CHARACTER POINT. AND YOU CAN'T JUST DO THAT IN EVERY SCENE. YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHEN YOU'RE PUSHING IT. YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHAT YOUR EFFECT WILL BE.

ONE OF THE BEST MOVIES TO TALK ABOUT IN TERMS OF INNOVATION AND EMBRACING OF UNCONVENTIONAL STORY IS THE ENDING OF **NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN**. THE FILM BEFORE THE ENDING QUALIFIES AS A REMARKABLY SUSPENSEFUL REVENGE FILM. IT'S PALPABLE. VISCERAL. TIGHT. AND CONTAINS WHAT IS QUITE PROBABLY THE BEST-FILMED ACTION THAT HULK HAS EVER SEEN. BUT WITH THE ENDING IT BECOMES SOMETHING SO MUCH MORE. IT SUBVERTS ITS GENRE NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS AND ACHIEVES THIS STUNNING THEMATIC RESONANCE. BY REMOVING THE SHACKLES OF NARRATIVE RESTRICTION, THE FILM IS FREE TO EXPLORE SOMETHING MORE ABSTRACT, EVEN DOWNRIGHT POETIC. IT GETS RIGHT TO THE HEART OF “WHAT THE FILM MEANS.” AND AS A RESULT, WHAT COULD HAVE JUST BEEN A TIGHT, WELL-REALIZED ACTION FILM, INSTEAD BECOMES ON ONE OF THE BEST FILMS OF ALL TIME.

AND IT DOESN'T DO THIS WILLY-NILLY. IT DOESN'T JUST DECIDE TO BECOME ARTISTIC FOR ARTISTIC'S SAKE. THE ENTIRE MOVIE WAS SECRETLY FULL OF THIS SAME KIND OF COMMENTARY. HECK, THE ENTIRE OPENING SECRETLY SETS US UP FOR ENDING. THE ONLY REAL PROBLEM IS THAT THE CONNECTIONS IT WAS MAKING AND THE PLACE THEY WERE GOING WORKS BETTER FOR PEOPLE WHO EMBRACE SUBTLETY AND THEMATIC STORYTELLING. AND FOR ALL THE PEOPLE WHO EITHER WEREN'T PERCEPTIVE TO THEMATIC STUFF OR JUST WERE NOT THAT INTO IT, THE ENDING OF **NO COUNTRY** REALLY RUBBED THEM THE WRONG WAY. AND IT'S BECAUSE IT ESCHEWED THE MOST BASIC EXPECTATIONS OF NARRATIVE. BUT SOMETIMES THAT'S THE PRICE YOU PAY FOR WORKING IN SUBTLETY (NOTICE THE STARK DIFFERENCE THOUGH, WHERE **THE DEVIL INSIDE** IS ANYTHING BUT SUBTLE AND JUST RUBS IT IN OUR FACE).

BUT THE COENS UNDERSTAND AND EXPECT THE LIMITATIONS OF THEIR CHOICES. THEY ALSO UNDERSTAND THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TO DEFTLY WEAVE IN AND OUT NARRATIVE IN ORDER TO

CREATE NEW THEMATIC MEANINGS. AND THEY DID A GOOD ENOUGH JOB OF IT TO MAKE ONE OF THE BEST-ACCLAIMED MOVIES OF ALL TIME.

THE POINT HULK WANTS YOU TO TAKE AWAY IS SIMPLE: THE COEN BROTHERS MAY DEFY EXPECTATIONS OF STORYTELLING CONVENTIONS CONSTANTLY, BUT THEY DO SO ONLY TO ENGAGE DEEPER QUESTIONS IN LIFE. THEY DO SO TO CREATE NEW VIVID MEANINGS AND MAKE TRULY INTERESTING STATEMENTS. EVEN THEIR MOST BIZARRE COMEDIC MOMENTS IN FILMS LIKE **THE BIG LEBOWSKI** ARE LACED WITH TOPICALITY AND SUBTEXT. THEY ARE MAKING ART. AND THEIR ART IS NOT BASED ON GETTING A MERE REACTION, BUT CRAFTING STATEMENTS.

OR LOOK TO THE GREATEST AMERICAN FILMMAKER EVER IN STANLEY KUBRICK, WHO ESCHEWED EVERY CONVENTION EVER, BUT DID SO IN THE NAME OF PURE ART. EVERY INVERTING GESTURE HAD A MEANING. EVERY BIT OF ODDLY STAGED PRODUCTION DESIGN HAD A SEMIOTICAL CONSTRUCT. EVERY WAY HIS CHARACTERS SHIED AWAY FROM EMPATHY AND CONNECTION WAS A PURPOSEFUL WAY OF GETTING YOU TO DISCONNECT SO YOU COULD ENGAGE IN AN IDEA. YOU MAY THINK HE WAS THUMBING HIS NOSE AT CONVENTIONAL STORYTELLING AND EMOTION, BUT ON THE FLIP-SIDE HE WAS ESSENTIALLY BEING THE MOST THEMATICALLY RESPONSIBLE FILMMAKER OF ALL TIME.

AND WHATEVER YOU THINK OF THE TACTICS OF THE COEN BROTHERS OR STANLEY KUBRICK, HULK CAN ASSURE YOU THEY DIDN'T SIT AROUND AND GO "WOULDN'T IT BE COOL IF?"

42. THE MODERN DIFFICULTY OF RELATIVISM

SO FOR AN ENTIRE BOOK HULK HAS TALKED A LOT ABOUT HAVING A PURPOSE WITH YOUR WRITING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SAYING SOMETHING WITH EACH GESTURE, AND ALL THE WHILE HULK HAS KEPT ADDING THE CAVEAT, "UNLESS NOT SAYING SOMETHING IS YOUR POINT," OR SOMETHING TO THAT EFFECT. HULK DIDN'T WANT TO SEEM AUTHORITARIAN OR LIKE A MORALIST. AFTER ALL, A LOT OF TIMES PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO ATTACK AN AUDIENCE WITH SOME AFTER-SCHOOL SPECIAL TACTICS OR ARCHAIC LESSONS OR MAKE A BIG ARTISTIC STATEMENT OR DO ANYTHING LIKE THAT.

THERE'S A REASON FOLKS ARE AVERSE TO DOING SO THIS DAY AND AGE, AND THAT'S BECAUSE IT SEEMS REDUCTIVE TO THE GREAT UNIVERSAL TRUTH THAT *NOTHING IS REALLY TRUE*. MOST OF THE FILMS THAT COUNTER THESE CONVENTIONAL VALUES OF NARRATIVE ARE INDEPENDENT AND / OR VALID ART FILMS AND TRYING TO REFLECT A CERTAIN UNDERSTANDING OF POST-MODERNISM, WHEREIN THERE IS AN EMPHASIS ON NOT BEING DIDACTIC. AND TO THAT PURPOSE HULK UNDERSTANDS WHY THEY TELL THEIR STORIES IN SUCH A WAY. BUT IT REALLY GOES BEYOND THAT. SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE THERE IS THIS UNSPOKEN VALUE AMONG ARTISTS THAT, REGARDLESS OF TACT, TRYING TO BE DIDACTIC IS THE WORST THING YOU CAN DO.

IT'S JUST... LOOK. HULK ISN'T HERE TO TELL YOU WHAT "COMPELS YOU." IF THAT KIND OF STATEMENT COMPELS YOU, THEN BY ALL MEANS YOU MUST FOLLOW YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS, BUT HULK'S GOING TO TAKE A FEW SECONDS TO TRY AND EXPLAIN WHY HULK ISN'T CRAZY ABOUT THE IDEA OR, AT LEAST, WHY YOU WANT TO BE CAREFUL WITH IT.

THE FIRST REASON IS SIMPLE: LOOK AT EVERYTHING WE'VE TALKED ABOUT IN THIS BOOK. ACT BREAKS ARE CHARACTER CHOICES. CHARACTER PSYCHOLOGIES ARE BASED ON WANTS AND NEEDS AND PROJECTION. INSPIRATION COMES FROM HAVING SOMETHING TO SAY. DRAMATIC ACTION. DRAMATIC FUNCTION. THE ENDING BEING THE CONCEIT. GOOD NARRATIVES HAVE PURPOSE TO EVERY MOMENT IN THEM, WHICH ALL JUST MEANS THAT GOOD NARRATIVES HAVE PURPOSE. AND THE PROBLEM OF SO MANY MOVIES WITH THE TRADITIONAL POST-MODERN BENT IS THAT IN TRYING TO UPHOLD THE REFLEXIVE VALUE OF ALL ACTIONS THEY ARE THEREBY ROBBING THOSE DRAMATIC FUNCTIONS OF THEIR IMPORTANCE.

IN OTHER WORDS, PURPOSEFULLY MAKING A FILM SEEM LIKE IT DOESN'T HAVE A POINT AT THE END JUST MAKES FOR BAD NARRATIVE. SAY NOTHING OF AMBIGUITY, SAY NOTHING OF TRYING TO

SAY A NUANCED THING, IT'S INSTEAD COMING FROM THAT PLACE OF NOT TRYING TO SAY ANYTHING. AND THINKING THAT OTHERS SHOULDN'T SAY ANYTHING EITHER IS, WELL, IT'S TRIVIALIZING.

THE TRUTH IS THAT MOST PEOPLE CRITICIZING THINGS AS BEING DIDACTIC NOT BECAUSE THE STORY HAS THE WILL TO CONVEY MEANING AND IDEAS, BUT BECAUSE SOME PEOPLE CAN SAY REALLY BROAD, STUPID THINGS WITH THAT DIDACTICISM. ONCE AGAIN, LET'S GO BACK TO **THE WIRE** AS A GREAT EXAMPLE WITH THE PROBLEMS OF THIS THINKING. EVERY SINGLE SCENE IN THAT SHOW IS 100% TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING AND CONVEY A VERY SPECIFIC LESSON ABOUT SOCIOLOGY. ONLY THE "WHAT" OF THAT LESSON IS EXTRAORDINARILY COMPLEX. IT'S OFTEN NUANCED AND HUMANE. AND IT BOUNCES OFF DOZENS OF OTHER MESSAGES AND CREATES AN ACCURATE PICTURE OF A SOCIETY IN CONFLICT. BUT IT'S ANYTHING BUT AMBIVALENT. IN FACT, IT'S HYPER-SPECIFIC ABOUT EVERYTHING IT WANTS TO SAY.

SO ONCE AGAIN WE HAVE A CRISIS OF LANGUAGE. HULK THINKS BEING DIDACTIC IS ONE OF THE CORE TENETS OF STORYTELLING GOING BACK TO FABLES, AND YET WE'VE BRED A GENERATION WHO IS AFRAID TO DO IT BECAUSE THEY CONFUSE THE WILL TO SAY SOMETHING WITH AFTER-SCHOOL-SPECIALISM.

AND AS A RESULT, HULK READS SCRIPTS ALL THE TIME WHERE PEOPLE ARE JUST SO DAMN AFRAID OF HAVING SOMETHING STRONG TO SAY. MAYBE THEY THINK THEY ARE REFLECTING TRUTHFULNESS? MAYBE THEY FIND ANYTHING ELSE TO BE PLACATING? WHATEVER THEIR INTENTIONS HULK JUST THINKS THAT THEY DON'T REALIZE HOW MUCH THEY ARE NARROWING THEIR OWN NARRATIVE EFFECT. DELIBERATE POINTLESSNESS MAKES A STORY REALLY, REALLY INACCESSIBLE.

AND THE OTHER REASON HULK ISN'T A FAN OF THIS KIND OF RELATIVISM IS BECAUSE ... WELL, IT'S KIND OF PERSONAL AND FEEL FREE TO DISAGREE, BUT HULK FINDS RELATIVISM TO BE REALLY BORING.

NOT JUST DRAMATICALLY, BUT, LIKE, CONCEPTUALLY. HERE'S A NUTS AND BOLTS VERSION: POST-MODERNISM IS LARGELY GROUNDED IN THE DISSOLUTION OF TRUTH. WE ARE ESSENTIALLY TALKING ABOUT RELATIVISM, MEANING HULK'S VIEW CAN'T BE TRUE AND YOUR VIEW CAN'T BE TRUE, SO THEREFORE NOTHING IS TRUE, THERE IS ONLY WHAT WE BELIEVE. THAT'S A PRETTY CRUDE WAY OF PUTTING IT, BUT THE IMPORTANT THING IS THAT WE USE POST-MODERNISM TO DISSOLVE THE CERTAINTY OF ABSOLUTIST THOUGHT.

ON ONE HAND, THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF POST-MODERN THINKING IS PRETTY FUCKING IMPORTANT. IT'S PROBABLY THE BEST WEAPON HUMANITY HAS AGAINST TOTALITARIANISM AND EXTREMISM. BUT THERE IS A CAVEAT TO THAT AND HULK HOPES THE FOLLOWING MAKES SENSE: THE PROBLEM WITH POST-MODERN RELATIVISM IS THAT IT WAS ALSO HUMANITY'S FIRST PROBLEM.

"..... WHAT?"

OKAY HOW TO PUT IT... AT THE DAWN OF CULTURE WE DIDN'T HAVE LANGUAGE. WE POINTED AT THINGS. WE GRUNTED. WE ATE THINGS. WE INSTINCTIVELY KNEW HOW TO DO THINGS. BUT HOW DID WE SURVIVE? WE WERE IN THE FIGURATIVE TOWER OF BABEL AND WE COULDN'T COMMUNICATE. *EVERYTHING WAS RELATIVE*. AND THE FACT THAT WE HAD NO OBJECTIVE TRUTHS TO AGREE ON WAS A THREAT TO OUR VERY SURVIVAL. AND THEN OUR LITTLE PROTO-VERSIONS OF US CREATED LANGUAGE. WE POINTED AT ROCKS, AKA THOSE THINGS WE ALL SAW EVERY DAY, AND AGREED THAT THEY SHOULD BE CALLED "ROCKS." AND FROM THOSE ROCKS WE MADE SPEAR HEADS. WE WOULD POINT AT THOSE BIG FOOD THINGS AND WE CALLED THEM "MAMMOTHS" AND HUNTED THEM WITH OUR SPEAR HEADS. WE USED OUR LANGUAGES AND DEFINITIONS TO START PLANTING THINGS LIKE CORN. TO BEST RELAY THESE IDEAS WE CREATED A SEQUENCE OF MEANINGS, WHICH ARE EFFECTIVELY JUST "STORIES." THOSE STORIES BECAME CHANNELS TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE STARS AND UNIVERSE. A CALENDAR OF CELESTIAL BODIES STIRRING ABOVE US. WE GREW AND SURVIVED BECAUSE WE COULD COMMUNICATE. BECAUSE WE COULD

DEFINE THINGS. BECAUSE WE LOOKED AT A MAMMOTH AND SIMPLY AGREED TO CALL IT A MAMMOTH SO THAT WE COULD UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER AND COME TOGETHER. AN AGREEMENT ON LANGUAGE AND STORIES WAS HOW WE SURVIVED.

IT WAS HOW WE CAME OUT OF THE DARK.

AND THUS, AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE THINGS, OR AN ATTEMPT TO TELL A TRUTH, OR AN ATTEMPT TO BARE YOUR SOUL AND SAY SOMETHING IS *NOT AN INSTINCTUAL ATTEMPT TO UNDERMINE RELATIVISM*. OF COURSE WE CAN'T UNDERMINE IT. IT IS THE CONSTANT BATTLE WE WAGE EVERY SINGLE DAY OF OUR LIVES. WE DON'T LIKE TO THINK ABOUT IT, BUT WE LIVE IN THE DARK. THERE ISN'T A SINGLE PERSON ON THIS PLANET WHO CAN KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO US AFTER WE DIE. OR IF WE HAVE SOULS. THIS REALITY IS CRUSHING. AND THUS HULK WOULD LIKE TO SUBMIT THE IDEA THAT TRYING TO DEFINE THINGS IS NOT INHERENTLY A LIE. IT'S A SURVIVAL MECHANISM. IT IS THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE FOUNDATION OF SCIENCE. IT IS THE GOAL TO PURSUE AS MUCH TRUTH AS WE CAN POSSIBLY KNOW.

AND AS MUCH AS POST-MODERN RELATIVISM IS HERE TO SAVE US FROM THE CRUSHING CERTAINTY OF ABSOLUTISM, WE AS HUMAN BEINGS MUST ALSO BE HERE TO SAVE EACH OTHER FROM ABANDONING DEFINITION ALL TOGETHER. TO DO SO WOULD BE TO ABANDON THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE. FROM A PHILOSOPHY THAT OFTEN SEEMS LIKE IT'S TRYING TO DIG US RIGHT BACK DOWN INTO THE DARK. JUST AS WE POINTED AT THE MAMMOTH SO WE COULD GIVE A WORD TO IT AS FOOD, WE POINT AT THOSE UNKNOWABLE CONCEPTS LIKE LOVE, ANGER, HAPPINESS, JEALOUSY, AND LUST AND GIVE THEM NAMES. WE TELL STORIES SO THAT WE CAN KNOW THESE CONCEPTS AND GROW AND PASS ON AN UNDERSTANDING. WE DON'T THROW UP OUR ARMS AND SAY "IT'S ALL RELATIVE! SO WHATEVER!" WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO THE SCIENTIFIC PROCESS IF WE EVER GAVE UP ON FINDING THE BETTER ANSWER?

WE TELL STORIES SO THEY MIGHT BE OF SOME FUCKING USE.

... BUT MAYBE THAT'S JUST THE WORKING DEFINITION.

OKAY, OKAY LET'S BRING THIS BACK TO A LITTLE LESS GRANDIOSE PLACE: HULK KNOWS THAT A LOT OF POST-MODERNISM IS GEARED AROUND A LESS STRINGENT VERSION OF THE RELATIVISM HULK TALKED ABOUT EARLIER, OR THAT IT EMBRACES THE NEW MYTH, BUT HULK CAN COUNT ON HULK'S FINGERS AND TOES THE NUMBER OF FILMS HULK'S SEEN THAT ARE INTERESTED IN CREATING THE NEW MYTH. MEANWHILE, HULK CAN COUNT BY THE BARRELFUL THE NUMBER OF STUDENT FILMS THAT HULK HAS SEEN IN WHICH RELATIVISM, REFLEXIVISM, AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SINGLE PERSPECTIVE HAVE BEEN HURLED ONSCREEN WITH THE SAME KIND OF INEFFECTUAL SHRUG BEFITTING ITS LACK OF FORETHOUGHT. FOR EVERY BRILLIANT DALLIANCE OF POST-MODERN REFLEXIVISM, FOR EVERY TRULY GREAT FILM HULK HAS SEEN IN WHICH POST-MODERN THOUGHT LED ITS HERO TO SHYING AWAY FROM ABSOLUTISM OF POLITICS OR SOMETHING EQUALLY DANGEROUS, HULK HAS SEEN 50 TIMES THE AMOUNT OF JUVENILE B.S. FROM SOMEONE WHO IS JUST AFRAID TO SAY SOMETHING.

DO WITH THIS SENTIMENT WHAT YOU MAY. IF YOU LOOK AT THIS AND THINK HULK IS SUPER-DUPER WRONG, THEN BY ALL MEANS GO FOR IT. DO WHAT COMPELS YOU. PROVE HULK WRONG. FIND THE GREAT CINEMATIC REFLECTION OF RELATIVISM OR FLIPPANTLY POINTLESSNESS. THIS IS JUST A HULK BEING HONEST ABOUT WHAT HULK DOESN'T FIND COMPELLING...

THE THING HULK WANTS YOU TO KEEP IN MIND IS THAT MOST AUDIENCES, WHETHER MAINSTREAM, INDEPENDENT, OR ARTISTIC, INSTINCTIVELY TEND TO AGREE WITH HULK ON THIS ONE.

43. ADAPTATION

SO IF YOU EVER FIND YOURSELF IN THE POSITION OF WRITING IN HOLLYWOOD, CHANCES ARE YOU'LL FIND YOURSELF DEALING WITH THE ART OF ADAPTATION. FOR MANY YEARS, THE MAIN FOCUS WAS THE ADAPTING OF POPULAR BOOKS. THE PRACTICE HAD ITS OWN PECULIARITIES (FULL-

ON NOVEL-ADAPTATION SCREENWRITING CLASSES WOULD BE TAUGHT AND EVERYTHING), BUT THEN THE INDUSTRY REALLY STARTED SHYING AWAY FROM THAT FOCUS. NOW, IT'S ALL ABOUT ADAPTING "PROPERTIES." IT STARTED WITH OLD TV SHOWS AND THEN SWITCHED TO COMICS, CARTOONS, FAMOUS CHARACTERS, TWITTER ACCOUNTS, AND EVEN THEME PARK RIDES. IT WASN'T ABOUT KNOWN STORIES, IT WAS ALL ABOUT "KNOWN ICONOGRAPHIES."

THE REASON WHY THIS HAPPENED ISN'T SOME BIG MYSTERY. IT'S ALL ABOUT MARKETING A KNOWN VALUE SO YOU CAN GET YOUR AWARENESS NUMBERS UP AND THAT SOMEHOW BECOMES YOUR JUSTIFICATION FOR GREEN-LIGHTING A MOVIE. WHICH IS PRETTY DAMN MEANINGLESS IN TERMS OF MAKING A GOOD MOVIE, SO WE'LL JUST LEAVE THAT ONE ALONE. THE IMPORTANT THING TO REALIZE IS THAT EVEN WHILE THE PARTICULAR TALENTS FOR ADAPTING A NOVEL ARE SLOWLY BECOMING LESS RELEVANT, THE CORE IDEA AT PLAY IN ADAPTATION IS SOMETHING YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND.

THERE ARE NO SET RULES IN ADAPTATION, BUT INSTEAD THERE IS A VERY SPECIFIC SET OF CONDITIONS BEST EXPRESSED BY A SIMPLE DICHOTOMY.

THE FIRST PART OF THE DICHOTOMY IS THAT YOU HAVE TO ACCEPT THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE IN THE THEATER WHO WANT A STAGED, LINE BY LINE RE-CREATION OF THE SOURCE MATERIAL AND DON'T ACTUALLY CARE ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OTHER THAN THAT.

THE SECOND PART OF THE DICHOTOMY IS TO ACCEPT THERE ARE PEOPLE THERE WHO HAVE NEVER READ THE BOOK AND COULD CARE LESS ABOUT FAITHFULNESS.

AND EVEN IF MOST PEOPLE ARE SOME LESSENERED VERSION OF EACH SIDE, YOU STILL HAVE TO TRY AND PLEASE EVERYONE, BECAUSE NEITHER GIVES YOU A SIZABLE ENOUGH AUDIENCE TO BE SUCCESSFUL. DON'T PLEASE THE HARDCORE FANS? THEY DON'T HELP YOU MARKET THE LONG PLAY TO THE MASSES. DON'T PLEASE THE SIMPLE MOVIE-GOERS? YOU WON'T HAVE A SUCCESSFUL FILM ON ANY LEVEL THEN. WHICH MEANS THE ART OF ADAPTATION JUST FALLS TO OUR RELIABLE OLD CONCEPT OF "BALANCE" TO SAVE US.

BASICALLY, THAT JUST MEANS YOU HAVE TO WRITE A GOOD MOVIE.

THE KEY TO DOING THAT IN ADAPTATION IS UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU HAVE TO KEEP AND WHAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO KEEP. PEOPLE ALWAYS TALK ABOUT HOW A GOOD ADAPTATION "CAPTURES THE SPIRIT" OF THE PROPERTY, BUT WHAT DOES THAT ACTUALLY MEAN? IT'S KIND OF VAGUE, RIGHT? REALLY, IT MEANS WHAT HULK BEEN SAYING SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THIS WHOLE DAMN BOOK: *CHARACTER IS KING*. YOU WANT THE PEOPLE OF THE PROPERTY TO BE THE SAME PEOPLE IN THE FILM. THAT'S EVERYTHING, REALLY. AUDIENCES JUST WANT TO RECOGNIZE THE CHARACTERS THEY HAVE COME TO LOVE OR BE FASCINATED BY. AND IF EMPATHY TRULY IS EVERYTHING FOR GETTING YOUR AUDIENCE TO INVEST, THEN GETTING THE CHARACTERS RIGHT IS YOUR PRIMARY CONCERN. AND HEY, IF THE ORIGINAL PROPERTY WAS ABLE TO RESONATE THEN THAT'S A PRETTY DAMN GOOD INDICATOR THAT CAPTURING THE SAME THINGS WILL CAUSE YOUR ADAPTATION TO RESONATE TOO!

SO REMEMBER: CAPTURING THE SPIRIT = NAILING THE CHARACTERS.

AS FOR THE PLOTTING? IT'S A NEGOTIATION. SOMETIMES YOU'RE FINE IF YOU GO JUST MAKE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE, BUT FOR TRUE ADAPTATION YOU REALLY JUST NEED TO DECIDE ON THE CENTRAL PLOT-POINTS (MEANING MECHANISMS) THAT ALLOW THE FUNCTIONING OF THE PLOT IN THE ORIGINAL PROPERTY AND INCORPORATE THEM INTO THE CENTRAL STRUCTURE OF YOURS. JUST REMEMBER, IT'S NOT THE "WHAT" OF THE PLOT POINT BUT "THE WHY." THINK ABOUT *THE PURPOSE* AND EVERYTHING WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTER DECISIONS? WHAT ARE THE THEMES? HOW DO THE PLOT MECHANISMS ACCELERATE AT A CERTAIN POINT? AND FROM THERE: STREAMLINE! DO EVERYTHING WE'VE TALKED ABOUT WITH ECONOMY, THEREFORE / BUTS, TAKING "WRITTEN INFO" AND MAKING IT "SHOWING INFO," AND MERGING INTO CONFLICTING ARCS. ALL THE SAME LESSONS APPLY. IT'S

WRITING ALL THE SAME. THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BEING THAT YOUR ABILITY TO ANALYZE AND BREAKDOWN WHY A STORY WORKS IN ITS ORIGINAL FORM WILL ABSOLUTELY ALLOW YOU TO BUILD A BETTER ADAPTATION.

STILL, PEOPLE WORRY ABOUT CRAMMING EVERYTHING INTO AN ADAPTATION, WHICH HULK READILY ADMITS CAN BE DIFFICULT. IF YOU NEED A GOOD WORKING EXAMPLE OF THE TACTICS YOU CAN USE IN YOUR APPROACH, THEN HULK HEARTILY RECOMMENDS FIRST READING JOHN LE CARRE'S **TINKER TAILOR SOLDIER SPY** AND THEN SEEING THE RECENT TOMAS ALFREDSON FILM ADAPTATION WITH GARY OLDMAN. AND THAT'S BECAUSE THE FILM IS A MASTER CLASS IN ADAPTATION. NOT BECAUSE OF ANY TONAL CHOICES (THE FILM IS REMARKABLY SUBTLE AND QUIET), BUT BECAUSE OF THE EXPRESSIONS OF PLOT THROUGH PURE CINEMA. LOOK AT THE CHOICES THEY MAKE IN CONDENSING INFORMATION. ENTIRE MONOLOGUES IN THE BOOK ARE CUT OFF AND FEED WHAT WE ASSUME THEY MUST HAVE TALKED ABOUT BASED ON THE NEXT SCENE. IT'S ALL TRANSITIONAL FILMMAKING. A KNOCK ON THE DOOR, A FILE DROPPED ON A DESK, A SMILE, AN EXTENDED GAZE. EACH ACTION FORWARDS THE STORY. EACH ACTION REVEALS CHARACTER. AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT THEY'VE TAKEN A BOOK THAT WAS A 5 HOUR MINISERIES ADAPTATION AND TURNED INTO A 2 HOUR FILM WITHOUT MISSING A BEAT.

A *MASTER CLASS*.

44. SPEC SCRIPTIN'!

OKAY, SO TECHNICALLY A SPEC SCRIPT IS ANYTHING THAT IS WRITTEN "ON SPEC," MEANING ANYTHING THAT IS UNSOLICITED MATERIAL, BUT A PRODUCTION COMPANY IS STILL READING TO CHECK OUT A WRITER. MOST OF THE TIME WHEN YOU'RE FIRST TRYING TO GET AN AGENT OR MANAGER YOU WILL BE WRITING ORIGINAL SCRIPTS AND THEY WILL BE READ BY THESE PEOPLE "ON SPEC."

BUT THERE IS A CURIOUS OVERLAP IN TERMINOLOGY THAT SPECIFICALLY APPLIES TO TELEVISION. BECAUSE TELEVISION SO READILY INVOLVES HIRING WRITERS FOR AN EXISTING SHOW (90% OF WRITERS ARE WORKING ON A SHOW THAT ISN'T "THEIRS"), THE INDUSTRY ALSO USES THE SAME PHRASE OF "SPEC SCRIPTS" TO MEAN UN-COMMISSIONED TV SCRIPTS FOR SHOWS THAT ALREADY EXIST.

SAY YOU WANT TO BE A TV WRITER. SAY YOU WANT TO WRITE ON A SMART, DRAMATIC TV SHOW. SO YOU WRITE A FAKE EPISODE OF **MAD MEN** AND THE IDEA IS TO ESTABLISH THAT YOU COULD TOTALLY WRITE AN EPISODE OF THAT SHOW TO PROVE YOUR METTLE. BUT REALLY YOU WANT TO SHOW THAT YOU CAN LOOK AT ANOTHER PERSON'S SHOW AND UNDERSTAND THE CHARACTERS AND GET THE TONE RIGHT. YOU ARE PROVING THAT YOU CAN TAKE THAT WORLD AND CRAFT YOUR OWN UNIQUE AND INTERESTING STORY WITHIN IT. THE IDEA IS TO BOTH IMPRESS THE HELL OUT OF EVERYONE AND SIGNIFY THAT YOU CAN PLAY WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S TOYS.

WHICH MEANS JUST DOING ALL THE GOOD WRITING STUFF WE'VE TALKED ABOUT HERE. WITH THE CAVEAT OF A FEW PIECES OF ADVICE HULK WILL GIVE YOU NOW ON HOW TO THREAD THE NEEDLE OF WHAT PEOPLE WILL BE LOOKING FOR...

I) OFTEN TIMES IT'S NOT GOOD TO WRITE A SPEC SCRIPT FOR THE *EXACT* SHOW YOU'RE TRYING TO GET A JOB ON. IT'S SORT OF A WEIRD CIRCUMSTANCE. YOU WOULD IMAGINE IT WAS THE MOST LOGICAL THING IN THE UNIVERSE. BUT THE PEOPLE APPROVING YOU AND HIRING YOU ARE OFTEN *TOO CLOSE* TO THE SHOW TO TRULY BE ABLE TO SEPARATE THEMSELVES FROM WHAT YOU ARE WRITING. THEY KNOW THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE SO WELL THAT THEY WILL TAKE IT PERSONALLY. THEY ARE GUARDED WITH IT. AND IN THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES IT'S JUST SO EASY TO GO OFF THE RESERVATION FROM THEIR SPECIFIC WAY OF WRITING THE SHOW.

II) SO THAT MEANS YOU PICK A SHOW THAT'S *LIKE* THE SHOW YOU WOULD WANT TO WORK FOR. LOOK FOR OVERLAPS! LOOK FOR THE KINDS OF SHOWS THAT THOSE PEOPLE LIKE! BE SMART ABOUT IT! BUT AT THE SAME TIME...

III) DON'T PICK A SHOW THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW WELL. IT HAPPENS MORE THAN YOU WOULD THINK AND IT'S SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN'T FAKE. EITHER YOU KNOW THE HISTORY AND TONE OF A SHOW AND THAT'S CLEAR OR YOU DON'T. AT THE SAME TIME...

IV) DON'T GO NUTS TRYING TO SHOW OFF HOW MUCH YOU KNOW! A LOT OF SPEC SCRIPTS WILL TRY AND CRAM IN EVERY HISTORY OR REFERENCE EVER. UNLESS YOU'RE **ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT** OR SOMETHING WHERE CALLBACKS ARE WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF THE SHOW, DON'T GO NUTS! HECK... EVEN THEN.

V) ALSO, DON'T GO NUTS WITH YOUR FAN-FIC-ING INCLINATION FOR THE SHOW. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? WELL, PUT IT THIS WAY. WHEN **FRIENDS** WAS FIRST ON THE AIR THE WRITERS WOULD ALWAYS GET SPEC SCRIPTS WHERE IT WAS CLEAR THE WRITER JUST WANTED TO MAKE TWO OF THEIR FAVORITE CHARACTERS HOOK UP... DON'T DO THAT. QUITE BLUNTLY, IT'S AMATEUR HOUR BECAUSE YOU'RE INSTANTLY PROVING YOU'RE A MASTURBATORY AND INDULGENT WRITER. SO TRY TO AVOID NEW HOOK-UPS BETWEEN THE CHARACTERS. IT JUST ALWAYS, ALWAYS PLAYS BAD.

VI) OR LESS OFFENSIVELY, A LOT OF TIMES SPEC SCRIPT WRITERS INCLUDE SOME *MAJOR EVENT* THAT DRAMATICALLY CHANGES A CHARACTER OR THE PLOT. IT'S AN UNDERSTANDABLE INCLINATION, BECAUSE YOU WANT TO WRITE A BIG, IMPRESSIVE, DRAMATIC SCRIPT... BUT REALLY YOUR JOB IS TO SHOW THAT YOU CAN UPHOLD THE RULES AND NORMS OF THE UNIVERSE YOU ARE TRYING TO WRITE FOR. YOU WANT TO PROVE YOU CAN UPHOLD THE STATUS QUO... NOT CHANGE IT. IT CAN EVEN BE A LITTLE THING. SOME YEARS AGO HULK WROTE A SPEC THAT HULK THOUGHT WAS SHARP AND UPHELD THE UNIVERSE, BUT IT USED A NARRATIVE DEVICE (CENTRALIZING AROUND A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN CHARACTER) THAT MANY FELT WAS TOO RADICAL A DEPARTURE FOR THAT SHOW... PERHAPS HULK WAS JUST TOO INSPIRED BY "THE ZEPPO." (THAT'S A REFERENCE!)

VII) LASTLY, REMEMBER THE DIFFICULTY OF AIMING TOO HIGH. YOU KNOW HOW HULK MENTIONED **MAD MEN** AS A POSSIBLE OPTION? WELL, ONE THING YOU SHOULD KEEP IN MIND IS THAT MATTHEW WEINER IS ONE OF THE BEST WRITERS ON THE PLANET. IT WOULD BE LIKE WALKING OUT ON TO A MAJOR LEAGUE FIELD AND TRYING TO NO-HIT AN OPPOSING LINE-UP. HULK ISN'T TELLING YOU TO AIM LOW... HULK'S JUST SAYING TO *BE AWARE OF WHAT YOU'RE ATTEMPTING...* BECAUSE YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW MANY ARE NOT.

SO THAT'S A LOT OF THINGS TO TRY AND BALANCE, RIGHT? OF COURSE IT IS, BUT WOULD YOU EXPECT ANYTHING ELSE IN THE MAJOR LEAGUES OF WRITING? LIKE EVERYTHING HULK HAS TOLD YOU SO FAR, ACHIEVE BALANCE IN YOUR WRITING. NEGOTIATE WHAT YOU MOST VALUE AND ACCOUNT FOR ALL THE POSSIBLE RESULTS. WRITING IS ABOUT MAKING DIFFICULT CHOICES, WHICH IS ODDLY ENOUGH THE SAME THING THAT MAKES COMPELLING CHARACTERS.

BUT ENOUGH TANGENTIAL THOUGHTS... IT'S TIME TO ADDRESS ONE OF THE TRICKIEST, MOST PROBLEMATIC CONCERNS IN WRITING...

45. HOW TO APPROACH PLOT HOLES AND MOVIE LOGIC

WHENEVER PEOPLE TALK ABOUT HOW STUPID MOVIES ARE THEY LIKE TO TALK ABOUT PLOT HOLES AS IF THEY ARE *THE REASON* THE MOVIE WAS BAD. HULK UNDERSTANDS THIS INCLINATION. MOVIES DEFINITELY NEED TO HAVE A CERTAIN LEVEL OF LOGIC TO WORK BECAUSE WE ARE, AFTER ALL, LOGICAL BEINGS WHO NEED TO MAKE SENSE OF WHAT IS HAPPENING AROUND US. BUT WHAT HULK WOULD LIKE TO PROVE TO YOU IN THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER IS THAT PLOT HOLES (AT LEAST IN THE WAY PEOPLE USE THE TERM) ACTUALLY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH WHETHER OR NOT STORIES ARE GOOD OR BAD.

THEY JUST BECOME THINGS WE TALK ABOUT IN TRYING TO EXPLAIN THEM.

THE PROBLEM WITH TALKING ABOUT PLOT HOLES IN THE FIRST PLACE IS THERE SEEMS TO BE A LOT OF CONFUSION ABOUT WHAT THEY EVEN ARE. HALF THE STUFF THAT GETS CALLED A PLOT HOLE

THESE DAYS ISN'T EVEN CLOSE, BUT A TRUE PLOT HOLE IS ACTUALLY A VERY NUANCED THING THAT HULK BELIEVES CAN STILL BE DEFINED IN A CLEAR, OBVIOUS WAY (THIS IS HULK'S PERSONAL DEFINITION): A PLOT HOLE IS A CRUCIAL GAP OR INCONSISTENCY IN A STORYLINE (AS PRESENTED) THAT PREVENTS THE PROPER FUNCTIONING OF THE PLOT OR CENTRAL CHARACTERIZATION (AS PRESENTED).

THE WORDS "CRUCIAL" AND "PREVENT" ARE BOTH KEY FOR REASONS THAT HULK WILL EXPLAIN IN A BIT, BUT FOR NOW NOTE THAT THE TWO WORDS "AS PRESENTED" ARE ALSO RATHER IMPORTANT. BECAUSE THOSE WORDS PREVENT US FROM DIVING INTO A WHOLE BUNCH OF EXTRANEIOUS QUESTIONS AND THEY ALLOWS US TO ACCEPT THE RULES OF THE WORLD ON A CONDITIONAL BASIS.

THINK OF IT LIKE THIS: IN MATHEMATICAL PROOFS, YOU ALWAYS START WITH A SERIES OF RULES AND INFORMATION. THESE RULES ARE ACCEPTED AS TRUE AND CALLED "GIVENS," WHICH YOU WILL THEN USE TO SOLVE THE PROOF STEP BY STEP. AND IN A WAY, WHEN WE START A FILM WE ARE ESSENTIALLY ACCEPTING THE RULES OF THE WORLD AS A KIND OF "GIVEN." FOR INSTANCE, A SCI-FI FILM MAY EXPLAIN IN THE BEGINNING WHY THIS PARTICULAR WORLD IS DIFFERENT AND HOW THAT SOCIETY OPERATES. A MORE CONCRETE (AND FAMOUS) EXAMPLE OF SCI-FI "GIVENS" WOULD BE ASIMOV'S THREE LAWS OF ROBOTICS (AND IF YOU'LL NOTICE, THE SUBSEQUENT BREAKDOWN OF THOSE THREE RULES IS WHAT CREATES THE CHIEF CONFLICT IN HIS STORIES). BUT THIS DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THE CASE FOR THESE UNIQUE SCI-FI WORLDS. THE IDEA OF ESTABLISHED GIVENS SHOULD WORK EVEN FOR MORE EMOTIONAL REALMS OF A MOVIE WORLD, LIKE MELODRAMAS AND COMEDIES. FOR INSTANCE, IT CAN BE THAT "THIS CHARACTER CAN TALK TO THE CAMERA" OR "PEOPLE BEHAVE ABSURDIST" IN THIS WORLD. SOMETIMES THOSE RULES CAN BE ABOUT CHARACTER CONSISTENCY AND ESTABLISHED FEELINGS, LIKE "DAD HATES MOM" OR "OUR MAIN CHARACTER IS UNPOPULAR." THESE BEHAVIORS AND DYNAMICS ARE *GIVENS* FOR THE WORLD WE ARE ENTERING, AND THEN WE OPERATE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE MOVIE FROM THERE.

BECAUSE AS MOVIES GO ON, WE GET MORE AND MORE INFORMATION (WHETHER FOR PLOTTING, CHARACTER, OR THEME), AND THIS CREATES MORE AND MORE UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD. BUT A PLOT HOLE OCCURS WHEN THE NEW INFORMATION GIVEN IS FUNDAMENTALLY COUNTERING THE OLD INFORMATION *WITH NO EVENTUAL ACCOUNTING FOR WHY*. DO YOU SEE THE DISTINCTION? A LOT OF TIMES WE CAN HAVE A CHARACTER SUDDENLY SWITCH MOTIVATIONS, BUT THIS HAS TO BE EXPLAINED FOR US TO ACCEPT IT. AND THE MORE THE SWITCH MAKES SENSE BASED ON OTHER INFORMATION PRESENTED BEFORE OR AFTER, THE BETTER WE FEEL ABOUT IT.

BUT THE THING TO UNDERSTAND HERE IS THAT THE KINDS OF PLOT HOLES THAT ACTUALLY MATTER ARE THE PLOT HOLES THAT HURT *THE FUNCTIONING OF THE MOVIE*, MEANING THE PLOT HOLES THAT DERAIL THE IN-MOMENT EXPERIENCE AND *ACTIVELY* PREVENT YOU FROM ENJOYING THE FILM RIGHT THERE AS YOU ARE IN THE THEATER.

SO IN THAT SPIRIT, LET'S BE CLEAR - A PLOT HOLE IS **NOT** ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

- I) A BLATANT MOVIE-STOPPER
- II) SOMETHING THAT ONLY SEEMS CONFUSING IN RETROSPECT
- III) AN EVENT THAT SIMPLY OCCURS OFF-SCREEN
- IV) A LOOSE END (THOUGH IT CAN BE)
- V) A REAL-LIFE INACCURACY

SO LET'S TALK ABOUT EACH IN ORDER...

I) IT IS NOT A BLATANT MOVIE STOPPER.

A FRIENDLY AND KIND ACQUAINTANCE OF HULK'S WAS ONCE DISCUSSING THE PROBLEMS HE SAW IN **LOOPER** AND HE ASKED THE LOGICAL QUESTION: "*Why doesn't the future mob just drop their targets in the middle of the ocean?*"

THE SIMPLEST ANSWER?

BECAUSE THEN THERE WOULD BE NO MOVIE.

GLIBNESS ASIDE, IT REALLY IS THE ONLY ANSWER THAT MATTERS. YOU CAN STOP VIRTUALLY ANY SINGLE MOVIE ON THE PLANET (INVENTED SCI-FI WORLD OR NOT) WITH A SIMPLE SOLUTION THAT NULLIFIES THE CORE CONFLICT. BUT WE DON'T GO TO THEATERS TO WATCH PEOPLE COME UP WITH THE BEST SOLUTIONS. WE GO BECAUSE WE WANT TO WATCH A DAMN MOVIE. AND WE WATCH MOVIES TO EXPERIENCE DRAMA, LAUGHTER, DIZZYING HIGHS, SADNESS, TEARS, AND SYMPATHY. AND IN ORDER TO EXPERIENCE THESE THINGS WE *MUST* HAVE SITUATIONS IN WHICH THE SIMPLEST AND MOST LOGICAL SOLUTION ISN'T PRESENT. IN FACT, WE HAVE TO WATCH PEOPLE DO THE WRONG THING. WE HAVE TO WATCH PEOPLE FUCK UP. WE HAVE TO SEE THEIR WANTS AND DESIRES BECOME ENTANGLED IN A SITUATION WHERE THEY HAVE TO MAKE A BAD CHOICE... WE CALL THESE SORTS OF SITUATIONS "CONFLICT" AND THEY HAPPEN TO BE *THE ENTIRE BASIS* OF GOOD STORYTELLING AND DRAMA.

ON TOP OF THAT THE FREQUENT PROBLEM WITH GOING DOWN THE LOGIC RABBIT HOLE IS THAT HULK HAS A MILLION GOOD REASONS THE OCEAN SOLUTION ISN'T EVEN A LOGICAL FIX TO BEGIN WITH, BUT NONE OF THEM HAVE TO DO WITH ACTUAL STORYTELLING, JUST LOGIC ITSELF. FOR INSTANCE, HULK WOULD ARGUE THERE'S A PRETTY DAMN GOOD REASON FOR THE FUTURE MOB'S USE OF LOOPER HITMEN - BECAUSE MOB KILLINGS ARE ALL ABOUT "KILL CONFIRMATION," HAVING SOMEONE RESPONSIBLE WHO CAN ATTEST TO THE RELATIVE SUCCESS OF THE HIT AND BE RESPONSIBLE IF IT FAILS (IT'S ACTUALLY THE SAME REASON PEOPLE LAUGH AT BOND VILLAINS WHO LEAVE OUR HERO IN AN EASILY ESCAPABLE SITUATION AND JUST PRESUME HE'LL DIE WITH NO ONE WATCHING. THERE'S NO KILL CONFIRMATION). AND THE OCEAN SOLUTION IGNORES THIS RATHER LOGICAL POLICY OF THE MOB. WHEN HE WAS PRESENTED WITH THIS LOGICAL COUNTERPOINT, SAID ACQUAINTANCE THEN CITED THAT THE OCEAN SOLUTION WAS STILL PREFERABLE BECAUSE WITH THE LOOPER SYSTEM, WE SEE THE HITMEN "FUCK UP" A LOT. WHICH IS NOT ONLY INACCURATE, BUT ANOTHER MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE VERY PURPOSE OF CONFLICT. IN FACT, WE ACTUALLY SEE THE LOOPER HITMAN SYSTEM AS A WHOLLY FUNCTIONAL ENTERPRISE AND THE ONLY TWO UNSUCCESSFUL INCIDENTS ARE ACTUALLY THE SOLE *DRIVING FORCE OF THE CONFLICT IN THE MOVIE*. AGAIN WHAT IS BEING MISSED HERE IS THAT THE DISTURBANCE OF NATURAL, LOGICAL ORDER TO THINGS IS ACTUALLY THE FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH TO CREATING CONFLICT IN MOVIES. IT'S ALL "EVERYTHING WAS OKAY, AND THEN THIS INCITING INCIDENT HAPPENED SO IT WASN'T ANYMORE!"

FAR MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE OCEAN SOLUTION HAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH MAKING IT A "BETTER" MOVIE. IT WOULD IN FACT MAKE THE MOVIE INFINITELY WORSE. IT WOULD CREATE A NON-STORY. IT IS THE FAILURE TO REALIZE THAT EVERY SINGLE CONFLICT SCENARIO YOU HAVE EVER SEEN ONSCREEN PROBABLY HAD A MORE LOGICAL SOLUTION THAN THE ONE THAT PLAYS OUT IN THE NARRATIVE, BUT THAT TRULY DOESN'T MATTER.

THAT SENTIMENT SHOULD BE BLINDINGLY OBVIOUS TO ALL OF US, AND YET WE STILL KEEP REVERTING TO THE PLACE WHERE WE ASK THOSE LOGICAL QUESTIONS. ESPECIALLY WITH HORROR MOVIES. NOW, THIS IS LARGELY BECAUSE WE PLACE OURSELVES IN THE STALKEE'S SHOES A GREAT DEAL IN THOSE KINDS OF MOVIES AND ACTIVELY LOOK FOR SOLUTIONS ON OUR OWN, BUT THE REAL ANSWER TO "WHY DIDN'T THEY JUST DO ____" IN A HORROR MOVIE IS ALWAYS *TO MAKE THE MOST EFFECTIVE, DRAMATIC SCARE*, WHICH, LEST WE FORGET, IS THE ENTIRE REASON WE ARE IN THE THEATER. OF COURSE, THERE ARE A MILLION OTHER THINGS THAT HAVE TO DO WITH MAKING AN EFFECTIVE SCARE OR AN EMOTIONALLY EFFECTIVE SCENE, BUT HULK ASSURES YOU THEY OFTEN DON'T HAVE ALL THAT MUCH TO DO WITH PLOT LOGIC EITHER.

SO IN HULK'S MIND, THESE OVERT LOGIC QUESTIONS THAT ARE "MOVIE-STOPPERS" OR "SCARE STOPPERS" OR "DRAMA STOPPERS" ARE REALLY NOT EVEN WORTH GETTING INTO THAT MUCH, BECAUSE THEY UNDERMINE THE EXPERIENCE WE ARE THERE FOR AND FUNDAMENTALLY MISUNDERSTAND THE GOAL OF A DRAMATIC, COMPELLING EXPERIENCE.

II) IT IS NOT SOMETHING THAT ONLY SEEMS CONFUSING IN RETROSPECT.

THIS ONE IS ACTUALLY THE MOST COMPLICATED, BUT IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT GETS AT THE HEART OF THE MOVIE "FUNCTION" PART OF HULK'S DEFINITION. AND THE BEST WAY TO ADDRESS THIS PART IS TO HAVE A LITTLE TALK ABOUT CHRISTOPHER NOLAN.

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN IS PRETTY DAMN WELL RESPECTED FOR THE MOST PART, RIGHT? WE CAN AT LEAST AGREE WITH THAT. MOST PEOPLE THINK HE MAKES PROFICIENT AND REASONABLY EFFECTIVE MOVIES. STILL, HE IS OFTEN THE SUBJECT OF A LOT OF PLOT HOLE TALK. FOR INSTANCE, A NUMBER OF PEOPLE HAVE SPENT THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS LAUGHING ABOUT HOW **THE DARK KNIGHT** DOESN'T MAKE A LICK OF LOGICAL SENSE WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE PLOT AS A WHOLE. AND WHEN YOU LOOK AT IT IN A RIGID PLOT-BASED WAY, YES, THAT IS VERY TRUE. THE JOKER'S PLAN FOR MUCH OF THE MOVIE IS RIDICULOUSLY IMPLAUSIBLE AND DEPENDENT ON INCREDIBLE AMOUNTS OF CONVENIENCE AND LUCK. BUT HERE'S THE THING ABOUT ALL OF THAT... IT REALLY DOESN'T END UP MATTERING.

WHY? BECAUSE NOLAN ISN'T THAT INTERESTED IN HAVING IT ALL MAKE SENSE. HE'S INTERESTED IN ENTERTAINING US IN AS DRAMATIC A WAY AS POSSIBLE, WHILE KEEPING EVERYTHING THEMATICALLY INTERESTING. AND HE DID A PRETTY DARN GOOD JOB OF IT IF YOU ASK HULK (AND THE LEGIONS OF PEOPLE WHO FIRST WALKED OUT OF THE THEATERS PROCLAIMING IT A MASTERPIECE). THE PLOTTING MECHANISM AT PLAY WAS FAIRLY OBVIOUS: NOLAN WAS JUST BUILDING A CAT AND MOUSE GAME OF INCREASING ESCALATION WHERE WE FOLLOW NEW PIECES OF INFORMATION FROM SCENE TO SCENE IN AN ULTRA-ENTHRALLING AND PROPULSIVE FASHION. BUT IT WORKED. BOY HOWDY DID IT WORK. SCENES MOVE ALONG WITH NOT JUST FANTASTIC PACING, BUT FANTASTIC *PURPOSE*. THERE IS A SENSE OF INTRIGUE AND CHARACTER MOTIVE THAT SHOWCASES WHAT A MASTER FILMMAKER CAN DO. SURE, THE MOVIE'S OVERALL LOGIC DOESN'T QUITE WORK, BUT IT STILL FLOWS BEAUTIFULLY AND ENGAGES US ON OTHER LEVELS WHICH ARE FAR MORE IMPORTANT.

WHAT ARE THOSE OTHER LEVELS? HULK ARGUES THAT WHAT SAVES **THE DARK KNIGHT** FROM HAVING A THREAD OF ILL-CONCEIVED LOGIC UNDO EVERYTHING IS THE FACT THAT THE *IDEOLOGY AND THEME* ARE SO DAMN LOGICAL, RESONANT, AND FOCUSED THAT THEY UTTERLY CARRY US THROUGH THE MOVIE IN TERMS OF OUR UNDERSTANDING AND COMPREHENSION. YES, THE JOKER'S PLAN IS CHAOTIC, BUT HIS CRYSTALLINE APPROACH TO THE IDEAS BEHIND THAT CHAOS, THE PURE ANARCHY AND HIS GOALS OF BREAKING DOWN BATMAN, HARVEY DENT AND THE REST OF GOTHAM ARE SO ABSOLUTELY CLEAR (AND TERRIFYING) THAT WE CAN COMPLETELY HANG OUR "ATTENTION AND INTEREST" ON THEM FOR EVERY SECOND. HELL, WE'RE DOWNRIGHT FASCINATED BY IT. AND PLEASE TAKE SPECIAL CARE TO NOTE THAT ALMOST ALL OF THE JOKER'S GAMES ARE BUILT AROUND ETHICAL CHOICES THAT DIRECTLY ENGAGE BOTH THE CHARACTERS AND THE AUDIENCE TOO; THE MOVIE PRACTICALLY FEELS LIKE A TIGHTROPE WALK FOR OUR MORAL SOULS. IT'S BECAUSE OF THE MOMENT-TO-MOMENT ENERGY AND THE CLARITY OF A MENTAL CONNECTION THAT **THE DARK NIGHT** GETS HAILED AS A MASTERPIECE.

BUT YOU'LL NOTICE THAT HULK TALKED ABOUT A SITUATION BEING ONLY "CONFUSING IN RETROSPECT." EVERYONE WHO TENDED TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE LOGICAL PROBLEMS OF **THE DARK KNIGHT** ONLY SEEMED TO DO SO LONG *AFTER* THE FIRST TIME THEY SAW IT (AND GENERALLY LOVED IT). IN FACT, IT DIDN'T REALLY POP UP A LOT UNTIL MOST PEOPLE HAD EXPERIENCED MULTIPLE RE-WATCHES AT HOME OR ON HBO. WITH PLOT HOLE HUNTERS, THIS IS VERY COMMON. IT MEANS THEY'VE HAD TIME TO PROCESS THE LOGIC AND NOW THEY CAN SUDDENLY SEE THE SEAMS. AND THAT'S WHEN (BECAUSE THEY THINK MOVIES HAVE TO BE DEFINED BY LOGIC) THEY BEGIN TO THINK THAT GREAT MOVIE THEY LOVED WAS PERHAPS NOT SO GREAT.

NOT ONLY IS THAT A SHAME, BUT IT IS SO, SO, SO MISSING THE POINT OF WHAT A MOVIE IS SUPPOSED TO DO. IF A STORY DIDN'T NEED THE LOGIC TO FUNCTION LIKE THAT THE FIRST TIME, THEN IT REALLY DOESN'T NEED IT AT ALL. BECAUSE SO OFTEN THE ESCHEWING OF LOGIC IS DONE IN THE NAME OF GIVING YOU A DRAMATIC AND THEMATICALLY RESONANT EXPERIENCE (THAT PROBABLY MADE YOU FALL IN LOVE WITH THE MOVIE IN THE FIRST PLACE). AND THAT'S EVERYTHING. THAT'S WHAT PULLS YOU IN. THAT'S WHAT BRINGS YOU SATISFACTION. DRAMA IS BY FAR THE MOST EFFECTIVE TOOL IN CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE. TO FULFILL THE PURPOSE OF

STORYTELLING AND TRANSLATE LIFE'S NARRATIVE... SO WHY DO WE JUDGE THE LOGIC OF A MOVIE DIFFERENTLY IN RETROSPECT? WHY DO WE SAY "SHIT, THIS MOVIE MAKES LESS SENSE THE NINTH TIME WE WATCHED IT!" DRAMA IS SIMPLY THE GATEWAY TO EVERYTHING WE NEED FROM A MOVIE. AND EVEN THOUGH THERE IS A PLETHORA OF FILMS THAT REWARD MULTIPLE WATCHES FOR EITHER CEREBRAL, DETAIL-ORIENTED, OR HUMOROUS PURPOSES, IT'S *THAT FIRST WATCH* THAT COUNTS FOR EVERYTHING IN TERMS OF WHETHER OR NOT THE DRAMATIC FUNCTION WORKS.

III) IT IS NOT AN EVENT THAT SIMPLY OCCURS OFF-SCREEN.

SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS OFF-SCREEN AND IS LATER ALLUDED TO IS NOT A PLOT HOLE.

TO REITERATE: MOVIES ARE THINGS THAT ARE EDITED. THEREFORE MOVIES CREATE INHERENT, *INTENTIONAL* GAPS OF INFORMATION THAT ARE OMITTED BECAUSE THE VIEWER DOESN'T NEED TO SEE THEM. HECK, MOVIES BRING US INTO FULLY REALIZED WORLDS WITH THEIR OWN HISTORIES. AND THE THING ABOUT THESE HISTORIES AND MYTHOLOGIES IS THAT WE DON'T NECESSARILY NEED TO KNOW THEM, BUT SIMPLY *FEEL* THEM.

ALL OF THIS SHOULD BE OBVIOUS, BUT YOU WOULD NOT BELIEVE THE NUMBER OF TIMES HULK HAS BEEN ASKED ABOUT A "PLOT HOLE" THAT INVOLVED SOMETHING THAT WAS EXPLAINED BUT NOT SHOWN... YEAH THOSE ARE NOT PLOT HOLES. HULK JUST HAD TO ACKNOWLEDGE THIS AND MOVE ON.

IV) IT IS NOT A LOOSE END (THOUGH IT CAN BE).

SOMEWHAT CONFUSING MATTERS IS THE SUBJECT OF A LOOSE END, OR AN UNRESOLVED PLOT-LINE OR CHARACTER ARC AT THE END OF THE FILM.

SO LET'S QUALIFY IT LIKE THIS: THE MERE EXISTENCE OF A LOOSE END IS NOT NECESSARILY A PLOT HOLE, BUT THERE ARE INDEED LOOSE ENDS THAT CAN BE PLOT HOLES. THE PROBLEM IS THAT THERE'S A HUGE RANGE OF WHAT QUALIFIES AS A LOOSE END. BECAUSE OF THIS GRAY NATURE, HULK COULD JUST SIT BACK AND ARGUE THAT IT'S ALL A "CASE BY CASE" BASIS, WHICH IS CERTAINLY TRUE... BUT THAT'S NOT REALLY ALL THAT *HELPFUL*, SO THE FOLLOWING IS HULK'S PUNY ATTEMPT TO ARGUE THAT THE KINDS OF LOOSE ENDS THAT ACTUALLY QUALIFY AS PLOT HOLES HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH *WANT*, BUT INSTEAD WITH *FUNCTION* (ARE YOU SENSING A THEME HERE?)

WHAT DOES HULK MEAN BY *WANT*? WELL, FOR INSTANCE, YOU MAY HAVE *WANTED* A LIKABLE COMIC RELIEF CHARACTER TO GET A PROPER SEND-OFF, BUT IF THEY SERVE THEIR FUNCTION EARLIER THEN THEY MAY NOT BE NECESSARY FOR THE FILM'S ENDING, ESPECIALLY IF THEIR RESOLUTION WOULD BE TONALLY DISPARATE. OR PERHAPS YOU MAY HAVE *WANTED* TWO CHARACTERS TO HOOK UP, BUT INSTEAD THE FILM IS INTERESTED IN TELLING A DIFFERENT KIND OF STORY AND LEFT THAT LOVE UNEXPLORED ON PURPOSE (OR HAS THEM COMMITTING TO OTHER LIFE NEEDS). AND THE THING ABOUT LOOSE ENDS IS THAT THEY TEND TO BOTHER US NOT BECAUSE WE WANT WHAT WE WANT, BUT BECAUSE AS AN AUDIENCE WE LIKE *EVERYTHING TO HAVE A REASON*. AND QUITE HONESTLY, WE'RE KIND OF RIGHT TO WANT EVERYTHING TO HAVE A REASON. HULK EVEN ARGUES THAT EVERYTHING HAVING A GRAND, PLOT-BASED PURPOSE IS ACTUALLY A SUREFIRE SIGN OF GOOD STORYTELLING, BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT YOU SIMPLY CANNOT WRAP *EVERYTHING* UP IN A FILM WITHOUT LETTING ALL THE AIR OUT OF YOUR EMOTIONAL CONCLUSION AND POIGNANCY. ULTIMATELY, IT BECOMES A QUESTION OF FUNCTION AND BALANCE.

AS A WRITER YOU WILL STRUGGLE WITH THIS CONSTANTLY. WHAT IS WORTH WRAPPING UP? WHAT IS NOT? HULK ADVISES YOU TO LOOK TO EXISTING, EFFECTIVE ART TO FIND A BALANCE. J.K. ROWLING COULD HAVE ATTEMPTED TO DETAIL WHAT HAPPENED TO EVERY SINGLE CHARACTER IN THE HARRY POTTER UNIVERSE, BUT YOU CAN'T DO THAT WITHOUT REALLY *UNDERMINING THE EMOTIONAL END FOR HARRY*. WHICH MEANS THE QUESTION OF "WHAT GETS RESOLVED" (PARTICULARLY IN A BIG SAGA) IS LARGELY A QUESTION OF NEGOTIATION. AND IN THE END THE AUTHOR IS CHOOSING WHAT GETS WRAPPED UP AND WHAT DOESN'T AND WE HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THAT. THE THINGS WE *WANT TO HAPPEN* MUST OFTEN BE LEFT ASIDE FOR WHAT THE

STORY *NEEDS TO HAPPEN* (AND NOTE THAT ROWLING EXPLAINED MOST OF HER EXTENDED EPILOGUE OUTSIDE OF BOOK FORM TO GIVE THAT ADDED RESOLUTION FOR THE MINOR CHARACTERS LATER).

NATURALLY, THIS ALL BECOMES AN EVEN MORE NUANCED SUBJECT OF LOOSE ENDS WHEN WE GET INTO THE TOPIC OF PURPOSEFUL AMBIGUITY. LOOK. A LOT OF AUDIENCES HATE AMBIGUITY (SPECIFICALLY REGARDING ENDINGS) ALMOST ON PRINCIPLE. IN FACT, IT MAKES THEM DOWNRIGHT ANGRY. AND ON ONE HAND, HULK GETS IT. HULK TALKS ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING AND HULK HAS SEEN A LOT OF AMBIGUOUS ENDINGS THAT HAVE NO OTHER BIGGER IDEA BEHIND THEM THAN "IT'S AMBIGUOUS!" OR "YOU GUESS WHAT HAPPENED!" OFTENTIMES, THE CREATORS THINK THAT AMBIGUITY ITSELF WORKS BECAUSE IT GETS TO THAT INHERENT POST-MODERN TRUTH OR RELATIVITY. AND QUITE HONESTLY, HULK FINDS A LOT OF AMBIGUITY TO BE KIND OF SOPHOMORIC (AS ONE VERY, VERY SMART PERSON ONCE SAID TO HULK REGARDING A TERRIBLE AMBIGUOUS ENDING HULK WROTE: "C'MON. YOU'RE A BIG BOY. HAVE YOUR CHARACTER MAKE DECISIONS.") BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN AMBIGUITY CAN'T BE COMPLETELY PROFOUND, EITHER.

HULK HAS TALKED ABOUT THE END OF **NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN** AD NAUSEUM, BUT THAT MOVIE MADE SO MANY BEAUTIFUL STATEMENTS ABOUT HOW THINGS CAN'T ALWAYS END THE WAY WE WANT, AND IT SHOWS THE DAMAGE WE WILL DO IF WE CHASE THOSE "ENDS." CALL 'EM WHAT YOU WILL: MONEY, JUSTICE, POWER - MEN WILL PURSUE THEM TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH. AND THE MOVIE IS REALLY ABOUT MAKING PEACE WITH AMBIGUITY AND ALL THE LOOSE ENDS OF LIFE IN A TRULY MEANINGFUL WAY. BUT THAT'S JUST A STELLAR EXAMPLE OF ITS USE.

AND HONESTLY, HULK KIND OF ADORED MOST OF **LOST**'S USE OF AMBIGUITY FOR MUCH OF THE SERIES' RUN. IT WAS OFTEN BURIED INTO THE THEMES AND CHARACTERIZATION IN A WAY THAT FELT LARGELY NATURAL AND COMPELLING (INCLUDING THE FEW RARE CASES OF GREAT USE OF DEUS EX MACHINA). BUT THE AMBIGUITY THING BECAME SLIGHTLY PROBLEMATIC WHEN THEY WENT IN A PURPOSEFULLY DIDACTIC DIRECTION IN THE FINALE. HULK WON'T GET INTO ALL THAT (PHEW), BUT WHILE THEY WERE TRYING TO CLEARLY ADHERE TO THEIR CENTRAL THEME, THEIR DIDACTIC EXPLANATION OF IT CAME OFF RATHER CURT AND CRUELLY WITHHOLDING. HULK UNDERSTANDS THIS WASN'T THE INTENTION, BUT THEY DIDN'T REALIZE THAT AMBIGUITY IS SOMETHING BEST EXPERIENCED AND NOT TOLD.

BUT PERHAPS THE BEST EXAMPLE ON THE SUBJECT OF LOOSE ENDS IS **THE SOPRANOS**. NO SHOW WAS EVER MORE CONTENT WITH PUSHING THE LIMITS OF AUDIENCE INDULGENCE AND WITHHOLDING WANT MORE THAN THAT PARTICULAR SHOW. PEOPLE LIKE VIOLENCE? YOU GET AN EPISODE LIKE "UNIVERSITY" WHERE IT BECOMES SO CRUEL AND UGLY THAT YOU CANNOT ABIDE IT. PEOPLE WANT MORE DRAMA? YOU GET THE ENTIRE SLOW BURN OF SEASON 4. DAVID CHASE WASN'T BEING A DICK ABOUT IT EITHER, FOLKS. HE WAS POINTING AT US AND TRYING TO GET US TO LOOK INWARD. HE WAS ALWAYS QUESTIONING OUR MORALS AND GETTING TO THE HEART OF LIFE'S NARRATIVE. HE WAS ASKING WHY WE INDULGED IN THE KILLINGS AND THE NUDITY AND WHAT WE GOT OUT OF IT. HE DIDN'T TRY OUR PATIENCE WITH SLOWER EPISODES TO BE A JERK, BUT INSTEAD TO GET US TO EXPLORE BIGGER FORMS OF STORYTELLING AND THE AMAZING NUANCES OF ALL THE CHARACTERS AT PLAY. HE WANTED US TO FUCKING CARE. HE WANTED US TO BE BETTER VIEWERS. HE WANTED US TO GET OUTSIDE OURSELVES, LIKE SO MUCH OF THE PSYCHOLOGY THAT HAD BECOME FUNDAMENTAL TO THE SHOW'S TEXT. AND WHEN IT ALL CAME TO AN END AND EVERYONE WAS EXPECTING ALL THE STORIES TO GET WRAPPED UP, HE INSTEAD WENT OUTWARD. HE GOT ESOTERIC. HE WENT WITH THE MOST OPEN-ENDED, SYMBOLICALLY DRIVEN, BRILLIANT CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE THAT BROUGHT US RIGHT INTO THE HEAD OF TONY SOPRANO. HULK SAYS IT ALL THE TIME, "THE ENDING IS THE CONCEIT," AND THE ENDING OF THAT SHOW FULLY EXPRESSED WHAT IT WAS REALLY ABOUT: BRINGING YOU INTO THE MIND OF A MAN WHO IS EMOTIONALLY CONNECTED, RATHER UNBALANCED AND MORALLY ASKEW.

AND YET, THERE WERE SOME PEOPLE PISSED OFF WITH THE ENDING OF **THE SOPRANOS** 'CAUSE THEY NEVER CAME BACK TO THE RANDOM CRAZY RUSSIAN GUY WHO WAS RUNNING AROUND IN THE WOODS SOMEWHERE... AND OH YEAH, THAT WHOLE CUT TO BLACK THING DROVE MOST OF AMERICA CRAZY. AND TRUTH BE TOLD, HULK GETS IT. THAT WAS A REALLY PROVOKING MOVE

(ESPECIALLY WITHOUT THE TITLE CARD). **THE SOPRANOS** WAS CEREBRALLY BRILLIANT AND OFTEN VERY INVOLVING EMOTIONALLY, BUT HULK GETS WHY SOME FOUND IT DRAMATICALLY UNSATISFACTORY. BUT TO HULK'S POINT; DAVID CHASE WASN'T INTERESTED IN JUST GIVING A DRAMATICALLY SATISFACTORY ENDING. HE COULD HAVE DONE THAT IN HIS SLEEP. HE WANTED TO PUSH US INTO AN AREA WE WEREN'T COMFORTABLE WITH. HE WANTED US TO EXPLORE NEW BOUNDARIES OF STORYTELLING. HE WANTED US TO EMBRACE THE IDEAS BEHIND TONY SOPRANO AND WHY WE WERE EVEN WATCHING IN THE FIRST PLACE.

WHEN YOU ARE DEALING WITH THESE LOOSE END QUESTIONS IN YOUR OWN WRITING, HULK WANTS YOU TO REALLY DIG IN AND ASK "WHY DID THE FILMMAKER DO THIS?" THESE THINGS ARE RARELY UNINTENTIONAL, SO ASK YOURSELF: "WHY WAS IT NOT ADDRESSED? WAS IT REALLY ALL THAT IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE THEY SAYING BY THAT?" AND THESE QUESTIONS MAY GIVE YOU THE ANSWERS AND POSSIBLY THE DRAMATIC CATHARSIS YOU NEED, IF YOU ARE OPEN TO THEM.

V) IT IS NOT A REAL-LIFE INACCURACY.

YOU.

YES, YOU SITTING THERE READING THIS BOOK. GUESS WHAT? YOU ARE PROBABLY AN EXPERT IN SOMETHING. MAYBE YOU ARE A MOLECULAR BIOLOGIST. MAYBE YOU ARE AN ELECTRICAL ENGINEER. MAYBE YOU LIKE MUSCLE CARS. MAYBE YOU'VE SEEN EVERY BERGMAN FILM. MAYBE YOU KNOW EVERY WORD TO THE REPLACEMENTS' OEUVRE. MAYBE YOU KNOW THE INS AND OUTS OF EVERY EPISODE OF **AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER**. WHATEVER IT IS, YOU PROBABLY KNOW MORE ABOUT SOMETHING THAN MOST OTHER PEOPLE. AND WHEN YOU SEE SOMEONE TALKING ABOUT THAT SUBJECT OR DRAMATIZING IT IN SOME WAY, YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE PERSON MAY NOT BE AN EXPERT IN THE SAME WAY YOU ARE. AND THAT MEANS YOU HAVE TO BE WILLING TO GIVE A LITTLE LEEWAY. ESPECIALLY IN HOW YOU WATCH MOVIES.

BECAUSE WRITING AND MAKING MOVIES WELL IS REALLY, REALLY, REALLY FUCKING HARD. LIKE HARDER THAN ANYTHING YOU CAN EVER IMAGINE. AND CHANCES ARE THAT WRITER OR DIRECTOR HAS THROWN THEMSELVES INTO WHOLE WORLDS AND DONE COUNTLESS AMOUNTS OF RESEARCH (AGAIN, CINEMA IS THE LENS OF *EXPLORING EVERYTHING ABOUT THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE*) AND BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL EFFORT, WE HAVE THE ENTIRE AFOREMENTIONED DEPARTMENTS DEVOTED TO GETTING THINGS RIGHT.

BUT IN THE COMMUNITY PROCESS OF FILMMAKING THINGS CAN GET MISSED. OR THINGS CAN BE IGNORED IN THE FACE OF SOME OTHER ARTISTIC CHOICE. SO WHEN YOU'RE DEALING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS NOT AN EXPERT LIKE YOU, WHO IS JUST TRYING TO MAKE THE BEST CHOICE FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF THE MOVIE, THEN THERE HAS TO BE A SENSE OF UNDERSTANDING WITH ALL OF IT. THIS DOES NOT MEAN ACCEPTING IT IF THEY SPIT IN THE ENTIRE FACE OF WHAT THE SUBJECT MEANS, BUT IT DOES MEAN SOMETIMES ACCEPTING IT IF THEY FUDGE DETAILS IN THE NAME OF EFFECTIVE DRAMA. REMEMBER, WHY ARE YOU IN THE THEATER? CHANCES ARE IT'S NOT TO WATCH SEAMLESS HISTORICAL OR FACTUAL INTEGRATION.

AND AS A WRITER YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE PROBLEMS WITH THIS DILEMMA. BECAUSE SOME PEOPLE AREN'T GOING TO KNOW WHAT YOU'RE PUTTING ON SCREEN IS WRONG. AND SOME PEOPLE ARE *VERY MUCH* GOING TO KNOW THAT WHAT YOU'RE PUTTING ON SCREEN IS WRONG. AND IT'S HARD TO PLEASE THEM BOTH. SO WHILE HULK TOLD YOU TO RESEARCH YOUR HEART OUT, AND IN AN IDEAL SCENARIO ALL THAT IS FACTUALLY ACCURATE WILL FEED ITSELF INTO THE CORRECT DRAMATIC CHOICE, BUT OFTEN IT WILL NOT. SO AT A CERTAIN POINT YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE TO MAKE A CHOICE: DO THE DRAMATIC THING OR DO THE LOGICAL, FACTUAL THING.

LOOK TO AN EXAMPLE. TAKE ALFONSO CUARON'S **GRAVITY**. IT'S A GREAT FILM THAT VERY MUCH CAPTURES SOME REALISTIC ASPECTS OF SCIENCE (THE LACK OF SOUND IN SPACE, THE DANGERS OF SPACE DEBRIS) BUT FUDGES ON OTHERS (THE RELATIVE DISTANCES BETWEEN SPACES STATIONS AREN'T MANAGEABLE DISTANCES TO TRAVEL IN THE WAY THEY ARE SHOWN). WHY DID HE FOLLOW SOME LOGICAL RULES AND NOT OTHERS? BECAUSE HE TOOK THE THINGS THAT MATTERED IN TERMS OF CONVEYING A REALISTIC, TERRIFYING EXPERIENCE AND HE IGNORED THE ONES THAT

WOULD GREATLY IMPAIR HIS ABILITY TO TELL A DRAMATIC STORY. HE HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE, AND TO RESOLVE IT HE ASKED HIMSELF, “WHY IS MY AUDIENCE IN THE THEATER? WHAT AM I TRYING TO CONVEY?”

* * *

PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT ARGUMENT FOR WHY YOU SHOULD NOT OVERLY FOCUS ON PLOT HOLES IS THAT WE ONLY SEEM TO BE ENRAGED OVER THEM WHEN A MOVIE IS BAD. FUNNY, ISN'T IT?

WE WALK OUT OF A MOVIE LIKE **TRANSFORMERS: REVENGE OF THE FALLEN** WITH THIS FEELING OF RELATIVE HORROR IN OUR GUTS OVER THE NONSENSICAL THING THAT WE HAVE JUST WITNESSED. AND WHEN IT'S TIME TO EXPLAIN WHY WE HAVE THAT FEELING, WE USE OUR LOGICAL BRAINS TO FIND THE APPARENT FAULTS. AND BECAUSE OUR BRAINS ARE LOGICAL, WE LOOK FOR LOGIC. WE TALK ABOUT THE FACT THERE'S NO WAY A TRANSFORMER COULD TAKE A REAL-LIFE LADY FORM AND HOW THAT'S NEVER ADDRESSED. WE TALK ABOUT CHARACTERS BEING IN PLACES THEY SHOULDN'T. WE TALK ABOUT NONSENSICAL GEOGRAPHY. ALL THOSE THINGS ARE VALID OBSERVATIONS AND SOME ARE TRUE BLUE PLOT HOLES. BUT **TRANSFORMERS ROTF(L)** SUCKS BECAUSE IT IS A TERRIBLY TOLD STORY WITH ENDLESS BLOAT, NO MOMENTUM, PAPER THIN CHARACTERIZATION, NO CHARACTER CONSISTENCY, NO ACTUAL RELATIONSHIPS, POORLY ARTICULATED CONFLICTS, ZERO SENSE OF DRAMA, A WEIRD-AS-HELL TONE, AND A WHOLE LOT OF SEXISM AND RACISM TO BOOT. BUT TO ARTICULATE ALL THAT TO SOMEONE, YOU NEED TO BE PRETTY WELL-VERSED IN THE LANGUAGE OF DRAMA AND CHARACTER AND ALL THE OTHER STUFF HULK TALKS ABOUT IN THIS BOOK. JUST KNOW THAT MOVIES DON'T SUCK BECAUSE OF SOME LOGICAL HICCUP.

MEANWHILE, WE WALK OUT **THE DARK KNIGHT** AND WE PROCLAIM IT TO BE A MASTERPIECE. SURE, THAT MOVIE DOESN'T MAKE A WHOLE LOT OF SENSE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MATTER BECAUSE THE MOVIE IS 100% GROUNDED IN CHARACTER PURPOSE AND THEME. WE ADORE IT. AND UNLIKE **ROTF(L)**, IT IS WRITTEN WITH AN ASSURED HAND, CAREFULLY BUILDING TO ALL ITS POINTS AND MOMENTS OF DRAMATIC EMPHASIS. THE LOGIC AND GOAL WILL MORE OR LESS MAKES SENSE FROM MOMENT TO MOMENT, AND THAT'S WHY WE DON'T CARE IF IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE IN RETROSPECT.

THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN THESE TWO MOVIES ILLUSTRATES EVERYTHING HULK IS TRYING TO CONVEY TO YOU IN THIS CHAPTER. AS A WRITER, YOU WILL BE BRANDISHING A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD. YOU WILL WANT YOUR STORY TO MAKE SENSE. TO BE WELL-RESEARCHED. TO BE FACTUAL. AND HEY, IF YOU ARE MAKING A FILM LIKE **PRIMER** (WHICH IS LARGELY ABOUT THE CEREBRAL COMPONENT OF THE STORY AND MAKES THE SCIENCE FRONT AND CENTER), THEN THESE ELEMENTS WILL MATTER MORE THAN USUAL. BUT THE KIND OF TRUTH THAT WILL ALWAYS NEED TO RESONATE MORE IS AN EMOTIONAL AND VISCERAL ONE, NOT A FACTUAL ONE. FOR ALL OF THE MUCH DESERVED CREDIT FOR ACCURATE SCIENCE, **PRIMER** IS A GREAT MOVIE BECAUSE IT ARTICULATES DESIRE, FEAR, WANT, THE WILL TO CONTROL, AND THE COMPLETE LOSS OF THAT CONTROL. IT ALL WORKS TOWARD THE PURPOSE OF STORYTELLING. WE DON'T GO TO THE MOVIES TO WATCH A LOGICAL EXERCISE PLAY OUT IN FRONT OF US. WE GO TO BE ENTHRALLED. TO SEE SOMETHING SPEAK TO OUR SOULS AND EMOTIONS.

BUT AS A WRITER, HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN TO DO WHICH AND HOW?

THERE IS NO GREAT ANSWER. ALL HULK CAN SAY IS THAT WRITING IS ABOUT MAKING CHOICES. MOST SCREENWRITING BOOKS WILL TELL YOU “DO THIS!” OR “DO THAT!” AS IF THERE WAS ONE MAGIC ANSWER, BUT IT'S NOT THE CASE. SOME CHOICES FIX ONE PROBLEM AND INADVERTENTLY HURT ANOTHER AIM YOU MAY HAVE. SO IT'S ALL ABOUT MAKING THAT CHOICE OF WHAT YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH, WHY, AND HOW YOU THINK IT HELPS YOUR STORY. STILL, GIVEN EVERYTHING HULK HAS LEARNED ABOUT MOVIES, HERE'S HULK'S ADVICE ON WHICH WAY YOU SHOULD BE LEANING:

WORRY MORE ABOUT CHARACTER HOLES. WORRY ABOUT EMOTIONAL HOLES. WORRY ABOUT

MOTIVATION HOLES. WORRY ABOUT INSPIRATION HOLES. WORRY ABOUT DRAMA HOLES. WORRY ABOUT THEME HOLES. WORRY ABOUT MOMENTUM HOLES. WORRY ABOUT PACING HOLES.

AND WORRY LESS ABOUT PLOT HOLES.

46. WRITING IS RE-WRITING

ONE OF THE BIG PROBLEMS PEOPLE HAVE IN WRITING IS PARALYSIS.

THERE ARE TWO FORMS. THE PARALYSIS THAT COMES FROM A BLANK WHITE SHEET OF PAPER WHERE A SCENE SHOULD BE. THE OTHER PARALYSIS COMES FROM THE WORDS ACTUALLY BEING ON THE PAGE AND HAVING NO IDEA WHAT TO DO WITH THEM.

IN BOTH CASES, THERE'S JUST SOMETHING SO DAUNTING ABOUT THE PROSPECT OF THEIR BEING UNFINISHED OR UNFORMED. OUR BRAINS WANT THE WORDS TO BE PERFECT; WE WANT THEM TO CONVEY EXACTLY WHAT WE INTEND. BUT THEY WON'T EVER BE PERFECT, WILL THEY? SO WHAT IS THE POINT OF BEING PARALYZED? SO HERE'S HULK'S ADVICE FOR BOTH FORMS OF PARALYSIS:

JUST WRITE THE FIRST DRAFT NO MATTER WHAT.

DON'T CARE IF IT'S GOOD. DON'T CARE IF IT EVEN WORKS. DON'T CARE EVEN IF IT'S GOBBLEDYGOOK. JUST GET IT DONE. IT DOESN'T MATTER. GET IT ALL UP ON THE PAGE BECAUSE NO ONE EVER HAS TO SEE IT. REMOVE THE PARALYSIS. GET IN A PLACE SO YOU CAN SEE IT ALL BEFORE YOU. SO YOU CAN SEE WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE AND HOW IT NEEDS TO BE CHANGED.

AND THEN? DO, LIKE, 7 REWRITES... AT LEAST.

BECAUSE THE SIMPLEST TRUTH IS THAT A FIRST DRAFT IS NOTHING. IT IS NOT PROOF YOU HAVE WRITTEN A STORY, BUT PROOF YOU HAVE WRITTEN A CERTAIN NUMBER OF PAGES. HULK HAS NEVER REALLY READ A GOOD FIRST DRAFT OF ANYTHING. SO THE WAY HULK ALWAYS LIKES TO WRITE IS TO JUST GET A FIRST DRAFT OVER AND DONE WITH SO THAT HULK CAN THEN BE ON HULK'S WAY WITH ALL THE FUN EDITING PROCESS.

AND EDITING IS *FUN*.

REALLY, IT IS! THERE IS THE OLD ADAGE THAT "WRITING IS RE-WRITING." HULK FEELS IT IS TRUE BECAUSE THAT IS WHEN YOU GET TO SHAPE THE ACTUAL STORY. WHEN IT'S A BAD SCRIPT (AND THEY ARE ALL BAD AT FIRST) YOU CAN RESHAPE IT THROUGH SHEER COMMITMENT TO MAKING IT A GOOD SCRIPT. AND THE BEST PART ABOUT REFINING YOUR SCRIPT IS, YOU KNOW, YOU CAN STILL MAKE GREAT CHANGES WITH ZERO NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES (UNLIKE WHEN YOU START FILMING). HULK LOVES EDITING SCRIPTS. IT'S WHEN THE STORY ACTUALLY FEELS ALIVE.

PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON TALKED ABOUT WRITING ONCE AND SAID, TO PARAPHRASE, THAT WRITING IS LIKE IRONING. YOU HAVE THIS RUMPLED MESS THAT'S STILL A SHIRT AND EVERYTHING, BUT YOU KEEP GOING OVER IT AGAIN AND AGAIN UNTIL IT'S SMOOTH. EACH PASS STRAIGHTENS THE SHIRT, ACCOMPLISHING ITS JOB UNTIL YOU HAVE EXACTLY WHAT YOU NEED.

"So yeahyeahyeah, edit a lot. Got it, Hulk. But how do you know when you're done?"

WELL, WE'LL GET TO THAT. FIRST WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT:

47. WHEN & HOW TO DISREGARD THESE GUIDELINES

IN THE BEGINNING OF THIS BOOK, HULK SAID THESE CHAPTERS WERE ALL GUIDELINES, NOT RULES. AND HULK MEANT IT.

YOUR IDEA. YOUR STORY. THE THING THAT COMPELS YOU.

THESE ARE WHAT MATTER.

SO EVERYTHING YOU WRITE SHOULD CATER TO MAKING THOSE THINGS RESONATE. YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THAT THROUGHOUT ALL THESE GUIDELINES, HULK KEPT BRINGING UP EXCEPTIONS TO RULES. SOMETIMES THEY WERE EXAMPLES OF GUIDELINE EXCEPTIONS THAT WORKED AND SOMETIMES THEY WERE EXAMPLES WHERE IT DIDN'T WORK. THE ONES THAT DIDN'T WORK WERE USUALLY THE RESULT OF HAPHAZARD, UNCONSCIOUS REACTIONS OR FLIPPANT, COUNTERINTUITIVE GESTURES. THEY WERE THE RESULTS OF ARTISTS WHO DIDN'T REALLY UNDERSTAND THE CONVENTIONS AND STORY DEVICES THEY WERE UTILIZING. BUT ALL THE EXCEPTIONS THAT WORKED DID BECAUSE THEY KNEW HOW TO NEGOTIATE WHAT THEY WERE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH. THEY ABANDONED ONE ELEMENT OF OUR GOOD NARRATIVE DEFINITION TO DEEPLY EXPLORE ANOTHER ELEMENT OF OUR DEFINITION. THE GOOD EXCEPTIONS CAN ALWAYS NEGOTIATE AND APPROXIMATE IN THE NAME OF A MORE IMPRESSIVE DRAMATIC FUNCTION, WHETHER IT IS PLOT, CONTEXT, CHARACTER, TEXTURE, THEME, ETC.

SO DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR THE KIND OF STORY YOU WANT TO TELL. UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISMS AT PLAY AND YOU CAN ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING WITH THEM.

BUT YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THEM AND KNOW HOW TO USE THEM FIRST.

BE WILLING TO SAY "FUCK BIG, EPIC BATTLES IN THE LAST ACT! THEY TEND TO LET ME DOWN!" IF THAT'S WHAT YOUR STORY CALLS FOR. TARANTINO'S **KILL BILL VOL. I** KNEW THAT AFTER THE BATTLE AGAINST THE 88, HE COULDN'T TOP IT ACTION-WISE. SO HE HAD A BRILLIANT 5 MINUTE MONOLOGUE, SUMMING UP THE ENTIRE VIEWPOINT OF THE CHARACTER, FOLLOWED BY AN EQUALLY CLIMACTIC DISCUSSION OVER DINNER, AND FINALLY 5 SECONDS OF INTENSE FIGHTING... AND IT WAS A HUNDRED TIMES MORE INTERESTING THAN ANY POSSIBLE BATTLE. HE DID WHAT MADE SENSE FOR HIS STORY.

SO DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR YOUR STORY.

MIKE LEIGH'S **HAPPY GO LUCKY** ESCHEWS EVERY RULE OF TRADITIONAL ROMANTIC COMEDIES TO SAY SOMETHING AND OPTS FOR A SYSTEM OF CHARACTER REVEALS INSTEAD OF DRAMATIC FUNCTION, BUT IN DOING SO HE CREATED A MOVIE THAT USED OUR OWN EXPECTATIONS AND MOVIE-WATCHING PREJUDICES AGAINST US, ALL IN THE NAME OF DELIVERING A BEAUTIFUL STATEMENT ABOUT THE NATURE OF LIFE AND HAPPINESS.

DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR YOUR STORY.

ANIMAL HOUSE ESSENTIALLY STOPS THE MOVIE'S FORWARD MOTION IN ANY CONVENTIONAL SENSE IN ORDER TO HAVE A FULL-ON DANCE NUMBER TO "SHOUT." IT HALTS THE NARRATIVE, BUT IT STILL SUCCEEDS ONLY BECAUSE THE SEQUENCE IS PURE JOY FROM START TO FINISH.

DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR YOUR STORY.

THE ENDING OF **NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN** TOSSES ASIDE ALL NARRATIVE PROPULSION TO WAX PHILOSOPHICAL ON THE NATURE OF LIFE AND RESOLUTION ITSELF. IT POKES INWARD AT EACH OF THE CHARACTERS, CUTTING TO THE BONE OF THEIR ESSENCE, EVEN IF IT LETS THE BIG CATHARTIC STORY GESTURES HAPPEN OFF-SCREEN. IT GETS AWAY WITH DOING THIS BECAUSE THE STORYTELLERS KNEW HOW TO TAKE THAT AUDIENCE DISAPPOINTMENT AND DIRECTLY ADDRESS IT. THEY KNEW THEY COULD MAKE US UNDERSTAND WITH A RESONANT FINAL MONOLOGUE ABOUT TWO DREAMS.

DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR YOUR STORY.

SHANE CARRUTH'S **PRIMER** GLEEFULLY BREAKS EVERY SINGLE RULE ABOUT NARRATIVE, CONCEPT, AND COHERENCE. AS SUCH, THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE *WHO CAN'T EVEN WATCH IT*. BUT FOR SOME FOLKS, HE MANAGES TO CREATE ONE OF THE MOST BRAZEN, INTERESTING FILMS EVER

MADE. IT SO CONCENTRATES ON THE CONCEPTS OF SCIENTIFIC VERACITY THAT IT CAPTURES ITS RESONANT THEMATIC TRUTHS THROUGH THE SUBJECT ITSELF (MUCH LIKE THE **ZODIAC** AND **CONTAGION** EXAMPLES), ONLY HIS SUBJECT IS ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX THEORETICAL CONCEPTS ON THE PLANET. THIS COMPLETELY UNAPOLOGETIC TREATMENT OF SCIENTIFIC ACCURACY-VIA-PLOTTING RESULTS IN A STUNNING, DISTINCT, AND COMPLETELY ORIGINAL FILM. THE FILMMAKER PURSUED AN UNCOMMON VIEW THAT *COMPELLED* HIM AND THUS REVEALED A NEW VIEW THAT *COMPELLED* US.

DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR YOUR STORY.

BUT JUST KNOW THIS... EVERY SINGLE RULE OR GUIDELINE THAT IS BEING BROKEN IN THE EXAMPLES LISTED HAS DAMN GOOD REASONS FOR WHY. IT'S NEVER "JUST BECAUSE IT WOULD BE NEAT." THEY WEREN'T MAKING SOME TOTALLY PEDESTRIAN MOVIE AND THEN BROKE A RULE BECAUSE "IT'S MORE REAL!" EVEN IF GOING WITH THEIR GUT WAS THE THING THAT BROUGHT THEM TO THIS CREATIVE DECISION, THEY ALL EVENTUALLY HAD A LOGIC AND SENSE OF HOW TO MAKE IT WORK.

THESE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL EXCEPTIONS WORKED BECAUSE THE EXCEPTIONS MAKE COMPLETE SENSE FOR THOSE STORIES AND ARE HANDLED RESPONSIBLY. IT'S ALMOST AS IF THE STORY *HAD* TO GO TO THESE CREATIVE PLACES IN ORDER TO SEE THEIR CONCEITS THROUGH TO THE END.

BUT THE BIGGEST PROBLEM WITH HOW EVERYONE IS BREAKING THE RULES NOWADAYS IS NOT BECAUSE IT'S ROBBING US OF TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE POWER (THOUGH THAT SUCKS), IT'S BECAUSE NO ONE SEEMS TO EVEN UNDERSTAND *WHY THE RULES ARE EVEN THERE*. IF THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THE RULE SAYS AND HOW IT WORKS, THEY THEREFORE CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT *BREAKING THE RULE* SAYS EITHER. THEY'RE JUST TRYING TO BE DIFFERENT. HULK'S ALREADY EXPLAINED WHY THAT'S SO PROBLEMATIC BUT WORSE, THERE ARE A LOT OF FILMMAKERS WHO REALLY DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THE RULES ARE ANYMORE.

THERE'S GOT TO BE A REASON FOR ALL OF THIS, RIGHT? WHY DON'T WE KNOW THE RULES ANYMORE? WHAT HAPPENED? AND WHY DO WE JUST SLAM FORWARD WITH THIS FAUX-UNDERSTANDING OF FILMMAKING?

IT ALL SPEAKS TO AN EVOLUTION OF CINEMA. IF YOU FORGIVE HULK FOR INDULGING IN THIS BIT OF A HISTORY LESSON, BUT BACK IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD EVERYONE PRETTY MUCH KNEW THE NARRATIVE RULES. MOVIES HAD A VERY SET CRAFT. THEY KNEW ALL THE BEATS. WRITERS WERE ALL STABLED IN THE STUDIO SYSTEM AND THEY WOULD EVEN HAVE DIFFERENT ROLES. THERE WOULD BE A STRUCTURE GUY. A DIALOGUE GUY. THE DIRECTOR HAD A ROLE. MOVIES AND STORYTELLING WERE, ESSENTIALLY, ON AN ASSEMBLY LINE. YES, THIS PRODUCED A LOT OF FILMS THAT WERE SIMILAR, BUT IT ALSO PRODUCED MOVIE AFTER MOVIE *THAT JUST WORKED, DAMMIT*, AND SHOWED OFF TOP-NOTCH QUALITY CRAFT. AND BESIDES, ALL THE BEST WRITERS / FILMMAKERS OF THAT ERA KNEW EXACTLY HOW TO SNEAK SUBVERSION INTO THEIR WORK. EVEN THEIR ARTISTIC INCLINATIONS COULD FLOURISH.

BUT THE '60S AND '70S CHANGED THE PARADIGM. THE SYSTEM HAD BEEN "WORKING" SO WELL FOR SO LONG, BUT A GOOD DEAL OF STORYTELLERS AND STUDIO FOLKS GOT LAZY WITHIN THOSE CONSTRUCTS. WHICH MEANS MOVIES IN GENERAL GOT LAZY TOO. WHEN THIS FACT WAS COUPLED WITH SERIOUS CHANGES IN THE COUNTER-CULTURE, IT RESULTED IN THE AUDIENCE GENUINELY TIRING OF THE HOLLYWOOD SYSTEM. NEW AUDIENCES WANTED AN ALTERNATIVE AND SOMETHING THAT FELT RESONANT TO THEM. SO THE MOVIES TURNED TO NEW FILMMAKERS. THEY DIDN'T HAVE RESOURCES SO THE CONSTRUCTION WAS MESSY. NATURAL. OUTDOORS. THUS, THE STYLE OF MOVIES BROKE THE MOLD, TOO. THE TEXTURES, STORIES, IDEAS ALL RESONATED IN A PERFECT WAY FOR THE TIME AND PLACE.

OF COURSE, THE HUGE SUCCESS OF SOME OF THESE RAG-TAG BLOCKBUSTERS IN THE '70S SUDDENLY PUT DOLLAR SIGNS IN THE EYES OF BIG BUSINESS AND PAVED THE WAY FOR ANOTHER ROUND OF STUDIO DOMINANCE, ALL DONE THROUGH THE HOMOGENIZED, WALL STREET-CENTRIC

1980S. BUT AGAIN, THINGS CHANGED. WE HAD ANOTHER REACTION TO "THE MAN" WITH THE '90S INDEPENDENT FILM BOOM. AGAIN THE FILMS WENT MESSY. NATURAL. OUTDOORS. BUT ALAS, THE INDEPENDENT MOVEMENT WAS HOMOGENIZED AGAIN AS CORPORATIONS ARE NOW RUNNING "INDIE STUDIOS" TOO.

THE PURPOSE OF ALL THIS HISTORY IS TO HIGHLIGHT THE FACT THERE HAVE BEEN EBBS AND FLOWS TO THE NATURE OF THE BUSINESS FOR... PRETTY MUCH ALWAYS. THERE IS ALWAYS A DICHOTOMY: TO WORK WITHIN THE SYSTEM, OR TO WORK OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM. DEPENDING ON THE DIRECTION OF THE TREND IT MAKES IT EASIER TO DO ONE OR THE OTHER, BUT STORYTELLERS ALWAYS SEEM TO HAVE AN IMPLICIT DESIRE TO SNUB THE DOMINANT CULTURE OR POPULAR MODELS AND EMBRACE THE MOST ARTISTIC CONSTRUCTS AND FORMS. IT IS AN IDOLIZATION OF PERPETUAL REBELLION. THE 1990S' INDEPENDENT FILMMAKERS REBELLED AGAINST THE HOMOGENIZED '80S MODEL, BUT THEY WERE ALSO IN LOVE WITH THE '60S AND '70S POETS OF THEIR DAY, AND SOUGHT TO EMULATE THEM.

IT'S ALL VERY ROMANTIC-SOUNDING... BUT THE PROBLEM WITH THIS, AND WHY NO ONE SEEMS TO GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THE RULES ANYMORE, IS THAT WE HAVE FALLEN IN LOVE WITH THE *CADENCE* OF THIS REBELLIOUS WORK.

THINK ABOUT THE '90S BOOM. TARANTINO HAS HAD HUNDREDS OF EMULATORS, BUT THE REASON NO ONE COMES CLOSE TO BEING AS GOOD AS HIM IS THEY ONLY TAKE THE TANGIBLE STUFF FROM HIS FILMS. THE COOL SUITS. THE SWEARS. THE OUT-OF-ORDER STORYTELLING. THE IRONIC SENSE OF MUSIC AND BLOODY GUNFIGHTS. THEY GET THE IDEA THAT PEOPLE TALK, BUT NOT *HOW* THEY TALK. THEY MISS THE VERY SIMPLE ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE PROPULSION, OBJECTIVES, AND CLEAR STAKES. HIS STORYTELLING ISN'T OUT OF ORDER FOR NO GOOD REASON, BUT INSTEAD TO REVEAL THE STORY IN A FASCINATING THEMATIC EVOLUTION. PEOPLE OBSESSES OVER HIS CADENCE, WHICH IS TOTALLY NEAT AND STUFF, BUT IT'S NOT WHY HIS FILMS *WORK*.

THIS HAS ALWAYS BEEN TRUE. PEOPLE RIP OFF ALTMAN, SCORSESE, SPIELBERG, LUCAS, ETC. BUT THE REASON THOSE RIP-OFFS FEEL SO FALSE IS NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE DERIVATIVE, BUT BECAUSE THEY FAIL TO RECOGNIZE THE MOST BASIC DYNAMICS OF GOOD NARRATIVE STORYTELLING. LET'S LOOK AT SUPER-RECENT EXAMPLES OF BOTH:

SUPER 8 USURPS ALL THE LANGUAGE AND CADENCE OF SPIELBERG'S FILMS, BUT IT FAILS BECAUSE IT DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO MAKE THE MONSTER ELEMENTS CONNECT THEMATICALLY TO THE STORY (UNLIKE **JAWS** AND **ET**). REALLY, IT DOESN'T GET TWO CENTRAL COMPONENTS OF OUR GOOD NARRATIVE DEFINITION.

ATTACK THE BLOCK SUCCEEDS BECAUSE IT TAKES THE INSPIRATION OF CARPENTER AND DANTE AND FILTERS THOSE MOTIFS AND APPROACH INTO ITS OWN PERSONAL STORY AND TEXTURE. PLUS IT HAS DEEP THEMATIC IDEAS. IT GETS ALL FOUR COMPONENTS OF HULK'S GOOD NARRATIVE DEFINITION.

STORY RULES. CADENCE IS OVERRATED.

AND BECAUSE HULK HAS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXCEPTION FOR JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING, YES THE CADENCE/STYLE OF YOUR SCRIPT AND FILM ARE GREAT TOOLS FOR SPEAKING TO CERTAIN AUDIENCES. BUT STYLIZATION IS NOT NEARLY AS CRITICAL AS THE INTENTION AND HONESTY OF YOUR WELL-MEANING STORY. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHERE YOU COME FROM AND WHO YOU'RE WORKING FOR, YOU CAN BE OPERATING SUBVERSIVELY WITHIN THE SYSTEM, OR YOU CAN BE CHUCKING ROCKS FROM THE OUTSIDE WITH AN INDEPENDENT BENT. YOU CAN BE TELLING A TRADITIONAL STORY OR YOU CAN BE USING A WILDLY INVENTIVE META FORM. IT REALLY MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO HULK.

THE MEANING OF THE STORY, AND ITS ABILITY TO RESONATE FOR THE AUDIENCE, IS WHAT MAKES THE NARRATIVE WORK. HULK DOESN'T CARE WHAT KIND OF CONCEPTUAL STORY YOU ARE TELLING, OR WHAT STRUCTURE YOU ARE USING... JUST THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE SAYING. APPROACH YOUR STORIES IN TERMS OF MIND, BODY, AND SOUL. ASK YOURSELF QUESTIONS. WHAT

DOES THIS ACTION MEAN? WHAT AM I IMPLYING WITH THIS CHARACTER'S BEHAVIOR?

KNOW WHEN YOU'RE FOLLOWING THE RULES AND KNOW WHEN YOU'RE BREAKING THEM.

KNOW WHO YOU ARE REACHING AND WHY.

BE CONSCIOUS.

BE SMART.

AND BE YOU...

PART SIX - HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY –SCRIPT-SPECIFIC INSTRUCTION

OF COURSE, THERE IS ALSO THE FORMAT OF THE SCREENPLAY ITSELF!

HOLY HELL! CAN YOU BELIEVE WE'RE FINALLY HERE? HULK APOLOGIZES THAT HULK WAITED ALL THE WAY UNTIL PART SIX TO TALK ABOUT THIS, BUT IT IS BECAUSE THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GOOD STORYTELLING ARE WAY, WAAAAAAAAY MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT BASICALLY AMOUNTS TO A *MATTER OF PROPER FORMATTING*. AND THE THINGS YOU ARE ABOUT TO LEARN IN THIS SECTION ARE REALLY SIMPLE AND EASILY APPLIED.

BUT PLEASE DO NOT TAKE THIS STATEMENT TO MEAN THAT HULK THINKS FORMATTING AND SCREENPLAY ETIQUETTE ARE *UNIMPORTANT*, AS THEY CAN ACTUALLY HELP YOU WRITE THE MOST FUNCTIONAL, READABLE SCREENPLAY POSSIBLE, IT'S JUST THE SOLUTIONS TO ACHIEVING THIS ARE MUCH MORE CLEAR AND DIRECT. BASICALLY, THERE'S MUCH LESS NUANCE. BUT IT IS STILL INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT.

BECAUSE WHILE MOST OF HULK'S PREVIOUS ADVICE WAS STUFF THAT HELPED YOU WRITE COMPELLING STORIES, HULK PROMISES YOU THAT THIS SECTION WILL HELP YOU THE MOST WHEN IT COMES TO *ACTUALLY SELLING YOUR SCRIPTS!*

SO LET'S GET STARTED:

48. YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND GRAMMAR AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

THAT MAY SEEM OBVIOUS, BUT DO YOU REALIZE HOW MANY SCRIPTS HULK READS WHERE IT IS CLEAR THAT THE PERSON DOES NOT HAVE A LOT OF EXPERIENCE *ACTUALLY WRITING AND COMPOSING SENTENCES?*

IF THAT'S THE CASE THEN IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW GOOD A STORY YOU TELL, YOU WILL NOT BE HIRED. SERIOUSLY. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU UNDERSTAND A LOT ABOUT CINEMA, SCREENWRITING IS WRITING. IT IS YOUR TRADE AND CHOSEN PROFESSION. YOU CANNOT JUST BE A SCREENWRITER AND THINK CINEMATICALLY. YOU HAVE TO HAVE MASTERY OVER THE WRITTEN WORD.

AFTER ALL, WHEN YOU SELL A SCREENPLAY YOU ARE REALLY BEING HIRED FOR *YOUR ABILITY TO WRITE*. IT'S NOT JUST FOR THE SCRIPT ITSELF, ESPECIALLY BECAUSE FROM THEN ON IN THERE WILL PROBABLY BE A LOT OF RE-WRITES DURING PRE-PRODUCTION. IF YOU CANNOT COMPOSE A SENTENCE ON THE FLY, IF YOU CANNOT WORK QUICKLY, THEN YOU WILL BE IN BIG TROUBLE AND PROBABLY LEFT IN THE DUST IMMEDIATELY SO THEY CAN BRING SOMEONE IN WHO CAN ACTUALLY DO THESE THINGS. TRUST HULK ON THIS ONE. SO MANY YOUNG WRITERS WILL SELL SOMETHING AND NOT UNDERSTAND WHY THEY ARE IMMEDIATELY DISMISSED. SOMETIMES IT IS GENUINE BAD LUCK, BUT MANY OTHER TIMES IT IS BECAUSE THE WRITERS HAVE A GOOD IDEA, BUT DO NOT KNOW HOW TO WRITE. SO PLEASE, PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE NOT BEING HIRED FOR WHAT YOU HAVE ALREADY WRITTEN. YOU ARE BEING HIRED FOR YOUR ABILITY TO WRITE.

AND THAT MEANS YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND GRAMMAR AND USAGE.

SO GET OUT THERE. READ BOOKS. LIKE ACTUAL BOOKS. THEY WILL REINFORCE YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE BETTER THAN ANYTHING ELSE. SOAK THEM UP. KEEP YOUR GRAMMAR GUIDES AND USAGE DICTIONARIES RIGHT BESIDE YOUR COMPUTER. DON'T BE LAZY. LOOK STUFF UP. CONSULT USAGE. HULK'S DONE IT ABOUT 275 TIMES IN THE PROCESS OF WRITING THIS BOOK. THAT'S TOTALLY ALLOWED! BUT ALSO DON'T THINK OF THE ABILITY TO LOOK THINGS UP AS A CURE-ALL. USE IT REPEATEDLY OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR LIFE SO YOU GET BETTER. LEARN HOW TO MASTER OUR LANGUAGE. AND LIKE EVERYTHING, THEN YOU CAN KNOW HOW TO

BREAK RULES FOR EFFECT (OUR RUNNING THEME). DO THAT AND YOU WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE UP FUN WORDS AND DO ALL THAT INVENTIVE LINGUISTIC STUFF WE WANT TO DO FROM THE VERY BEGINNING. BUT YOU HAVE TO KNOW GRAMMAR AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE TO DO SO.

AND BEYOND THE BASICS OF LANGUAGE, THERE ARE OTHER BASIC THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW, LIKE WHAT SCENE HEADINGS ARE, HOW TO NUMBER SCENES, ETC. SO LET'S GET TO THAT STUFF:

49. SCREENPLAY FORMAT BASICS!

PLEASE NOTE: IF YOU ARE WRITING A SCRIPT AND HAVE ANY INTENTION OF DOING SOMETHING WITH IT YOU SHOULD ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY USE SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE. NO QUESTION. SUCK IT UP AND BUY YOUR OWN COPY, TOO. HULK USES FINAL DRAFT AND HULK LOVES IT. THE LAST THING YOU WANT TO DO WHILE WRITING IS WASTE TIME ON FORMATTING. AND SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE WILL DO ALL THE FORMATTING FOR YOU. PLEASE. ABSOLUTELY BUY THE SOFTWARE. DON'T DOWNLOAD IT EITHER BECAUSE HULK SWEARS YOU CAN GET IN TROUBLE WITH THE W.G.A. OVER THAT. IT'S COMPLICATED TO EXPLAIN, BUT JUST KNOW IT'S NOT WORTH IT. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A LOT OF MONEY, SAVE UP AND BUY IT. IF YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER, THIS IS PART OF THE SACRIFICE. STRIVE FOR IT.

BUT JUST SO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING WITHOUT THAT SOFTWARE, HERE'S HULK'S NO-BULLSHIT QUICK GUIDE TO FORMATTING A SCREENPLAY. TO START, THE FOLLOWING ARE THE ONLY (NEEDED) LINE DESIGNATIONS:

- HEADER
- ACTION LINE
- CHARACTER
- DIALOGUE
- CHARACTER PARENTHETICAL
- DIALOGUE PARENTHETICAL
- TRANSITION
- OVER BLACK;
- SCENE NUMBERS

THAT'S SERIOUSLY IT. THERE'S NOTHING ELSE NECESSARY FOR WRITING A SCREENPLAY.

SO LET'S GO ONE BY ONE....

I) HEADER

IT'S AN ALL CAPS LINE (YAY!) AT THE TOP OF YOUR SCENE. THE FIRST PART TELLS YOU WHETHER THE SCENE IS AN EXTERIOR (EXT.) OR INTERIOR (INT.) FOLLOWED BY THE LOCATION, FOLLOWED BY A DASH AND THEN THE TIME OF DAY. IT LOOKS LIKE THIS:

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT"

THINGS TO CONSIDER: WHEN A SCENE TRANSITIONS FROM INTERIOR TO EXTERIOR OR VICE VERSA WITHOUT A BREAK YOU CAN WRITE "INT. / EXT." ALSO, SOME PEOPLE GET INTO DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HOW DETAILED YOU WANT TO BE WHEN TALKING ABOUT THE LOCATION. HULK TRIES TO KEEP IT AS SIMPLE AS POSSIBLE (AS IT'S EASIER FOR SOMEONE TO READ), BUT SOMETIMES IF THERE'S A LOT OF LOCATION HOPPING IN YOUR SCRIPTS, YOU SHOULD PUT THE CITY OF THE LOCATION FIRST TO HELP AND THEN A COMMA FOLLOWED BY THE DESTINATION. WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP IT ORGANIZED AND SIMPLE.

II) ACTION LINE

THE ACTION LINE IS A LINE OF DESCRIPTION UNDERNEATH THE HEADER THAT DESCRIBES IN MORE DETAIL WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE SCENE. IT LOOKS LIKE THIS:

“INT. HULK’S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired.”

THINGS TO CONSIDER: THIS ACTION LINE SHOULD BE STRICTLY VISUAL INFORMATION, AS CINEMA IS DEPENDENT ON WHAT WE CAN SEE. ALSO THE CHARACTER’S NAME SHOULD BE IN ALL CAPS. THERE’S SOME DISAGREEMENT ABOUT HOW OFTEN YOU SHOULD CAPITALIZE: EITHER THE FIRST TIME A CHARACTER IS INTRODUCED OR FOR THE ENTIRE DURATION OF THE SCRIPT. HULK LIKES CAPITALIZING THE NAME FOR THE ENTIRE DURATION. IT JUST SINGLES IT OUT SO THE READER CAN ALWAYS KNOW WHO THE CHARACTERS ARE IN THE SCENE AND WON’T LOSE TRACK OF THEM.

III) CHARACTER

A CHARACTER DESIGNATION GOES BELOW AN ACTION SCENE AND LETS YOU KNOW WHO IS TALKING. IT LOOKS LIKE THIS:

“INT. HULK’S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!”

... IT’S ALL PRETTY SELF-EXPLANATORY.

IV) DIALOGUE

YOU CAN SEE IT BRIEFLY IN THE EXAMPLE ABOVE, BUT A CHARACTER TALKS WITH A LITTLE CONDENSED BLURB. AND THEN ANOTHER PERSON TALKS. IT LOOKS LIKE THIS:

“INT. HULK’S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!”

V) CHARACTER PARENTHETICAL

EVERYTHING ELSE YOU’VE SEEN BEFORE, BUT CHARACTER PARENTHETICALS YOU MAY HAVE NOT. BASICALLY THEY ARE PARENTHESES NEXT TO THE CHARACTER NAME THAT INDICATE IF THE CHARACTER TALKING IS DOING SOMETHING BESIDES THE STANDARD TALKING TO ANOTHER PERSON ONSCREEN. THERE IS VOICE-OVER (V.O.), OFF-SCREEN DIALOGUE (O.S.) AND SPECIAL DESIGNATIONS LIKE TALKING ON THE PHONE (INTO PHONE). IT LOOKS LIKE THIS.

“INT. HULK’S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK'S phone rings.

HULK (INTO PHONE)
Yello? ... What up, Tony!

BETTY rolls her eyes and exits the room.

BETTY (O.S.)
Come to bed when you're done!

HULK
Okay!

HULK puts the phone back to his ear.

HULK (INTO PHONE)
Go on....

NARRATOR (V.O.)
And so Hulk sat there on the phone and listened to Tony Stark ramble on about science or something. Meanwhile..."

HULK SHOULD MENTION ONE THING THAT DRIVES HULK NUTS IS PHONE RULE INCONSISTENCY. IN YOUR CINEMATIC UNIVERSE, CAN WE HEAR THE PERSON ON THE OTHER END OF THE PHONE LINE OR CAN WE NOT HEAR THEM? YOU'D BE SHOCKED HOW MANY FILMS MIX AND MATCH. IT MAY NOT SEEM LIKE A BIG DEAL, BUT IT'S JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS NO ONE EVER THINKS ABOUT. AND HEY, IF YOU REALLY NEED TO DO BOTH FOR DRAMATIC PURPOSES, DO SO. BUT OTHERWISE JUST TRY TO BE CONSISTENT.

VI) DIALOGUE PARENTHETICAL

SO THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM THE CHARACTER PARENTHETICAL AND IS PLACED INSTEAD RIGHT BEFORE THE DIALOGUE. ITS PURPOSE IS TO ILLUSTRATE HOW THE PERSON IS TALKING OR WHAT THEIR TONE IS. IT CAN ALSO INDICATE WHEN ANOTHER LANGUAGE IS BEING USED. IT LOOKS LIKE THIS.

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. He seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
(angrily)
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
(concerned)
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK
(sheepishly)
Hulk know, Hulk know. You right.

BETTY walks over and puts her arms around him.

BETTY
(whispering)
It's okay, Hulky. It's okay.

THE WHITE TIGER suddenly bursts in and starts yelling in Spanish.

WHITE TIGER
(subtitle)
Hey you two! It's me, The White Tiger! The short-lived Puerto Rican superhero that Marvel created in the '70s! I'm sadly the only character you could think of who speaks Spanish!"

THINGS TO CONSIDER: SO... UM... TRY NEVER TO USE DIALOGUE PARENTHETICALS. ESPECIALLY FOR DESCRIBING THE EMOTIONAL STATE OF THE CHARACTER. SERIOUSLY. YOU MAY WANT TO, BUT YOUR ABILITY TO WRITE WILL DEPEND ON YOUR ABILITY *NOT TO USE THEM*. YOU WANT TO HAVE THE ABILITY TO MAKE IT CLEAR EXACTLY WHAT YOU MEAN THROUGH THE DIALOGUE ITSELF. WHEN YOU'RE STARTING OFF THAT CAN BE HARD, BUT YOU'LL GET THERE. HAVE CONFIDENCE IN YOUR WORDS. ONLY USE DIALOGUE PARENTHETICALS WHEN THE CHARACTER'S TONE IS *TRULY* COUNTERINTUITIVE. OTHERWISE YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO BE THE ACTING COACH AND THE ACTORS WILL RESENT WHAT YOU TRY TO TELL THEM ANYWAY.

HULK ONCE READ A SCREENPLAY WHERE 50% OF THE DIALOGUE HAD DESCRIPTIONS OF HOW IT SHOULD SOUND AND HOW THE CHARACTERS WERE FEELING. IT WAS SHOWCASING A WRITER WHO DIDN'T HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THEIR WORDS...

THE REST OF THE SCRIPT BACKED THAT UP.

VII) TRANSITIONS

SO A TRANSITION COMES AT THE END OF THE SCENE AND GOES ALL THE WAY OVER TO THE RIGHT OF THE PAGE AND SAYS WHAT HAPPENS IN THE TRANSITION. NOW IT'S NOT SPECIFICALLY AN EDITING NOTE (FADE, STAR WIPE! ETC), BUT MORE JUST A WAY TO LET YOU KNOW THAT A SCENE IS OVER. MEANING IT SHOULD MOSTLY BE A "CUT TO:" SURE YOU HAVE YOUR POSSIBLE "FADE TO BLACK" WHICH IS OBVIOUS. BUT YOU ALSO HAVE YOUR "SMASH CUT TO:" (ANY TIME YOU WANT A CUT TO LAND REALLY HARD AND NOT SEEM SEAMLESS) OR "MATCH CUT TO:" (IN WHICH THE ACTION ONSCREEN MATCHES THE ACTION STARTING AT THE NEXT CUT IN SOME VISUAL OR AUDIO WAY). HERE'S WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE.

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK

Hulk supposes you're right.

CUT TO:

INT. READER'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A DEVOTED READER sits there, refreshing the homepage for an update over and over, whilst crying.

FADE TO BLACK.”

AWWW. LOOK AT HULK. PRETENDING THOSE PEOPLE EXIST! ANYWAY, HULK HOPES YOU LOOK AT THIS TRANSITION NOT JUST FOR THE FORMAT, BUT ALSO AS EXAMPLE OF HOW TO USE A PRETTY STANDARD JOKE KNOWN AS “A CUTAWAY.” REMEMBER, GIVE YOUR TRANSITIONS PURPOSE! LINK THEM IN A WAY THAT CREATES NEW MEANINGS!

THINGS TO CONSIDER: MOST OF THE TIME YOU DON'T ACTUALLY NEED TO INCLUDE TRANSITIONS WHATSOEVER. SERIOUSLY YOU CAN JUST START A NEW SCENE HEADING AND WE WILL KNOW. AND OF COURSE YOU WILL BE “CUTTING TO” IT. SO REALLY THE ONLY THINGS YOU MIGHT NEED ARE SMASH CUT OR MATCH DESIGNATIONS. ALSO IF YOU'RE CUTTING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN TWO LOCATIONS AND YOUR CHARACTERS ARE ON THE PHONE OR SOMETHING, TRY JUST INTRODUCING THE NEW SCENE WITH THE TRANSITION OF “INTERCUT WITH:” AND THAT WILL IMPLY FILMING THE SCENE IN BOTH LOCATIONS, NO PROBLEM.

VIII) OVER BLACK;

YOU'D BE AMAZED HOW MANY PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO CALL IT WHEN THE SCREEN IS BLACK AND YOU'RE DOING A TITLE CARD OR JUST AUDIO OR WHATEVER, CHIEFLY BECAUSE THERE'S NO INTERIOR OR EXTERIOR OR LOCATION. SO ALL YOU DO IS WRITE “OVER BLACK;” IN THE HEADER SCREEN. IT LOOKS LIKE THIS:

“INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. He seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK

Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY

Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK

Hulk supposes you're right.

BETTY

Come to bed, Hulky.

HULK

Oh yeah?

HULK smiles.

CUT TO:

OVER BLACK;

TITLE CARD: “Nine Months Later.”

The sound of screaming can be heard.

CUT TO:

INT. DELIVERY ROOM – DAY

BETTY screams as a DOCTOR delivers her baby.

DOCTOR
It's a girl!

HULK lights a cigar with the rest of the Avengers.”

... THE LESS SAID ABOUT THIS SCENE THE BETTER. MOVING ON!

VIII) SCENE NUMBERS

AND THE ONLY OTHER THING YOU NEED TO KNOW IS SCENE NUMBERS. SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE ADDS THEM IN THE MARGINS ANY TIME YOU TELL IT TO, BUT HULK RECOMMENDS YOU DON'T EVEN DO IT UNTIL THE END. IT WILL JUST CLUTTER THINGS OTHERWISE. AND ALL IT'S REALLY THERE FOR IS TO GIVE YOUR PRODUCTION A SENSE OF HOW MANY SCENES THEY'LL NEED TO SHOOT. ANYWAY, IT LOOKS LIKE THIS.

1. “INT. HULK’S HOUSE – NIGHT 1

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

CUT TO:

2. INT. THE LEADER’S HOUSE – NIGHT 2

THE LEADER sits there deep in thought.

THE LEADER
I wonder what that big green asshole is plotting against me now?”

AND THAT’S IT! THAT’S EVERYTHING YOU REALLY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FORMATTING A SCREENPLAY! EASY PEASY LEMON SQUEEZY!

BUT WHAT IS BOTH FAR MORE TRICKY AND FOR MORE NECESSARY TO DISCUSS ARE THE *UNSPOKEN* RULES OF SCREENPLAY FORMATTING THAT CAN GREATLY IMPROVE YOUR SCRIPT.

WHICH IS MORE DIFFICULT, DIFFICULT LEMON DIFFICULT.

... BOY DOES HULK LOVE THAT MOVIE.

50. SUBMISSION SCRIPTS VS. SHOOTING SCRIPTS (AND HOW IT AFFECTS ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING)

THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST HUGELY IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN IT COMES TO HOW TO APPROACH WRITING A SCREENPLAY, AND ALMOST NO ONE ON THE PLANET TALKS ABOUT IT.

OUR WORKING DEFINITION OF A “SUBMISSION SCRIPT” IS ANY SCRIPT THAT ISN’T NECESSARILY GOING TO BE MADE. THIS CAN MEAN A LOT OF THINGS: IT IS EITHER A SCRIPT THAT YOU PLAN TO HAVE STUDIOS READ SO THEY WILL WANT TO MAKE IT, A SCRIPT THAT YOU WANT TO GET YOU A

DIFFERENT JOB, A SCRIPT THAT YOU WANT TO LAND YOU AN AGENT / MANAGER, A SCRIPT THAT YOU ARE SUBMITTING FOR A NEW ROUND OF STUDIO NOTES ON A MOVIE IN DEVELOPMENT, OR EVEN A SCRIPT YOU ARE JUST GIVING TO A FRIEND FOR FEEDBACK. THE IDEA BEHIND THIS SCRIPT IS ALWAYS THE SAME: *YOU WANT THE PERSON TO ENJOY THEMSELVES*. YOU WANT THEM TO BE COMPELLED. YOU WANT THEM TO THINK YOU'RE A GOOD WRITER.

SO SHOULDN'T THE IDEA BE TO MAKE "THE READ" OF YOUR SCRIPT AS COMPELLING AND DRAMATIC AS POSSIBLE? AND SHOULDN'T THAT BE OBVIOUS?

MEANWHILE A SHOOTING SCRIPT IS SOMETHING ALREADY EFFECTIVELY "GREEN-LIT" AND YOU'VE FINISHED ALL THE DRAFTS THE STUDIO NEEDS, SO YOU CAN INCLUDE ANY INFORMATION YOU WANT LIKE CAMERA NOTATIONS, PRODUCTION DESIGN, AND THE THINGS THAT ARE ACTUALLY GOING TO HELP YOU MAKE THE DAMN THING. STILL...

IMPORTANT FACT: 95% OF SCRIPTS OUT THERE ARE SUBMISSION SCRIPTS, MEANING THAT'S WHAT 95% OF YOU ARE WRITING.

IMPORTANT QUESTION: SO WHY ARE MOST OF THAT 95% WRITING THEIR SUBMISSION SCRIPTS LIKE THEY ARE SHOOTING SCRIPTS?

SERIOUSLY. IT'S A HUGE PROBLEM. HULK SITS THERE AND READS THE MOST TECHNICAL, OVER-DESCRIPTIVE, BORING, UTTERLY PARALYZING SCRIPTS ALL THE TIME BECAUSE THE PERSON WRITING IT THINKS THEY HAVE TO CONTROL EVERY SINGLE THING HAPPENING ONSCREEN AND GO OVER THEM IN LABORIOUS DETAIL, RATHER *THAN MAKE A GOOD READ*. THEY'RE TRYING TO BE THE DIRECTOR, THE PRODUCTION DESIGNER, THE ACTING COACH, AND EVERYTHING *BUT THE WRITER*. AND THUS, THEY ARE SHOOTING THEMSELVES IN THE FOOT BECAUSE WHAT THEY ARE WRITING IS EFFECTIVELY *BAD DRAMA* FOR THE PERSON READING IT. YOU ARE RECITING THEM A GROCERY LIST INSTEAD OF TELLING YOUR STORY IN THE MOST COMPELLING AND INVOLVING WAY POSSIBLE. AND GUESS WHAT, FOLKS?

THE PERSON READING IS THE PERSON WHO IS TELLING YOU YES OR NO.

ISN'T THIS A HUGE DEAL? YET HULK SEES THOUSANDS OF YOUNG WRITERS PRESS ON WITH THE SHOOTING SCRIPT MODE BECAUSE THEY CAN'T LET GO OF CONTROL OR JUST BECAUSE THEY THINK THAT'S THE APPROPRIATE THING TO DO... AND IT IS VERY MUCH NOT. BESIDES, THE WORST PART IS YOU CAN JUST ADD ALL THAT STUFF IN LATER. LIKE, YOU KNOW, WHEN SOMEONE ACTUALLY WANTS TO MAKE IT AND IT WILL HAVE GONE THROUGH HUNDREDS OF CHANGES ANYWAY.

SO HULK WANTS YOU TO THINK ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO KINDS OF SCRIPTS VERY CAREFULLY. ASK YOURSELF: "HOLY CRAP, WHO AM I ACTUALLY WRITING THIS FOR?" AND THEN YOU SHOULD TRY AND MAKE IT AS READABLE AS POSSIBLE. THE SCRIPT SHOULD FEEL ALIVE AND VIBRANT, LIKE THEY'RE READING A PLAY. IT SHOULD FEEL LIKE IT IS HAPPENING IN REAL TIME.

IT SHOULD NOT FEEL LIKE A NOVEL.

SO THINK ABOUT THAT. BECAUSE FOR EVERY BIT OF SCREENWRITING ADVICE THAT IS TO FOLLOW, HULK WILL BE GEARING IT AROUND SUBMISSION SCRIPTS. BECAUSE THEY ARE THE ONES THAT MATTER. THEY ARE THE ONES THAT SELL AND MAKE YOU A BETTER WRITER. THEY ARE THE ONES TO LEARN HOW TO WRITE... HONESTLY THOUGH, MOST OF THE FOLLOWING CAN BE APPLIED TO A SHOOTING SCRIPT TOO.

51. KNOW IT IS BEING READ BY EVERY KIND OF PERSON

IF CHARLIE KAUFMAN, AN INCREDIBLE WRITER WHO KNOWS WHAT REALLY MAKES A GREAT SCRIPT, SAT DOWN TO READ YOUR SCRIPT YOU WOULD WANT HIM TO THINK IT'S GREAT. THIS GOES WITHOUT SAYING, RIGHT?

THE SAME CAN BE SAID FOR IF YOUR FAVORITE ACTOR SAT DOWN TO READ YOUR SCRIPT. AND THEN IF A STUDIO EXEC SAT DOWN TO READ YOUR SCRIPT, YOU WOULD WANT THEM TO THINK IT'S GREAT TOO. AND IF A SCRIPT READER, WHO READS A MILLION OF THEM AND WHOSE TIME IS SHORT, SAT DOWN TO READ YOUR SCRIPT YOU WOULD WANT THEM TO THINK IT'S GREAT AND NOT BE ABLE TO PUT IT DOWN, WHOLLY FORGETTING THERE'S A NEXT ONE ON THE PILE. AND IF A 21 YEAR OLD INTERN, WHO REALLY DOESN'T HAVE THE BREADTH OF EXPERIENCE OR PATIENCE FOR THIS JOB, SAT DOWN TO READ YOUR SCRIPT YOU WOULD STILL WANT THEM TO THINK IT'S GREAT TOO.

NOW... GUESS IN WHICH ORDER THE SCRIPT WILL BE READ?

YUP. THE REVERSE OF THAT. AND THAT'S WHY YOU HAVE TO MAKE YOUR SCRIPTS ACCESSIBLE TO THE 21 YEAR OLD INTERN. SORRY FOLKS, BUT WHEN YOU'RE STARTING IN THIS GAME AND DON'T HAVE A REPUTATION YET, IT'S ABSOLUTELY TRUE. NOW, THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT YOU CAN'T USE BIG WORDS OR TELL A COMPLEX STORY. THAT WOULD BE NONSENSE. BECAUSE THE 21 YEAR OLD INTERN IS ACTUALLY PRETTY SMART ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. BUT IT ALSO MEANS THEY ARE BUSY, EASILY DISTRACTED, AND NOT ENTIRELY AWARE OF THE SUBTLETY OF NUANCE. ACTUALLY, THE SAME GOES FOR MOST OF THOSE PEOPLE, REALLY. AND THE ONE UNIFYING CHARACTERISTIC IS THAT THEIR TIME IS EXTREMELY VALUABLE.

WHICH MEANS YOU HAVE TO GET TO THE POINT AND NOT DILLY-DALLY IN THE DAMN DESCRIPTION.

THAT MEANS NO WALLS OF BLACK TEXT. REALLY. HULK IS ONE OF THE MOST PATIENT READERS ON THE PLANET. AND HULK CAN READ FAST. HECK, HULK PICKS UP **INFINITE JEST** EVERY YEAR TO REVISIT IT. HULK FUCKING LOVES TO READ DENSE AND INTRICATE TEXT. HULK MEAN, HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A HULK ESSAY; HOW COULD HULK NOT?

BUT THOSE ARE ESSAYS. THOSE ARE NOVELS. THOSE ARE SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY. WHEN HULK SEES THAT BIG WALL OF BLACK TEXT IN A SCRIPT, HULK'S HEART JUST SINKS A LITTLE. IT HAS NO REAL FUNCTION IN A SCREENPLAY. BY THE END OF PART SIX YOU'LL FULLY UNDERSTAND WHY THAT IS, BUT FOR NOW JUST ACCEPT THAT IT IS TRUE. AND THIS PERTINENT REALITY MEANS IT IS NEVER PRODUCTIVE FOR YOU TO OVER-WRITE THE ACTION HAPPENING ONSCREEN. YOU MAY THINK IT'S IMPORTANT, OR RELEVANT, OR INTERESTING, OR CAREFULLY CONSTRUCTED.

BUT TO THE READER IT'S JUST NOT LIKE THAT. IT'S UNDRAMATIC. IT SLOWS THINGS DOWN. TRUST HULK ON THIS ONE. WITH SCREENPLAY DETAILS, LESS IS ALWAYS MORE. AND WHEN YOU HAVE TO OVER-WRITE EVERYTHING YOU ARE MAKING IT CLEAR THAT YOU DON'T TRUST THE READERS OR POTENTIAL FILMMAKERS. IT'S CLEAR YOU'RE WORRYING TOO MUCH ABOUT SOMEONE NOT DOING *EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT*. YOU ARE MAKING IT CLEAR YOU ARE TRYING TO DIRECT FROM THE PAGE, AND THAT'S NOT GOOD SCREENWRITING.

THE SAME GOES FOR THE DESIRE TO BE LOQUACIOUS OR OSTENTATIOUS. DAVID FOSTER WALLACE ONCE TALKED APTLY ABOUT "THE FEAR" YOUNG WRITERS HAVE WHERE THEY WANT TO BE SEEN AS SMART, SO THEY DRESS UP THEIR LANGUAGE IN WORDS THAT DON'T ACTUALLY MEAN ANYTHING. THEY OVERCOMPENSATE WITH BRAVADO. AND IT'S JUST SO UNNECESSARY IN A SCREENPLAY. TELL A GOOD STORY. THAT'S HOW HULK WILL KNOW YOU'RE SMART.

AS THE OLD ADAGE OF FILMMAKING GOES: "*DON'T IMPRESS ME, CONVINC ME.*"

TO DO THAT, BE AS BRIEF AND CONCISE AS POSSIBLE. IT'S SECRETLY THE SAME THING AS HULK'S LESSON IN NARRATIVE ECONOMY, ONLY IT APPLIES TO THE LITERAL TEXT OF THE SCRIPT. IT'S JUST HOW WE READ SCRIPTS. THE DIALOGUE AND QUICK SENTENCES PROPEL US. EVEN WITH THE MOST PROFESSIONAL, DILIGENT READERS, THEY WILL START TO TUNE OUT WHEN IT GETS DENSE. EVERY READER WILL TUNE OUT. IT IS AN ABSOLUTELY FIXTURE OF THE BUSINESS. THESE ARE BUSY-AS-SHIT PEOPLE. MOST OF THEM WILL SIMPLY GLANCE AT THE ACTION TO GET A SENSE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING AND THEN JUST GO BACK TO THE DIALOGUE. AND IF THEY'RE REALLY INTO THE STORY THEY ARE NOT GOING TO WANT TO SLOW DOWN ANYWAY! THEY ARE NOT GOING TO WANT TO MISS

A BEAT, SO DON'T LET THEM GET LOST IN TEXT!

BE BRIEF AND MOVE ON!

OKAY, OKAY YOU GET IT AND OF COURSE YOU CAN'T HAVE *NOTHING* EITHER. THAT'S WHY LEAN WRITING DOES NOT MEAN EMPTY WRITING. FILL YOUR LIMITED WORDS WITH PURPOSE AND IMPORT. CONVEY ONLY THE MOST RELEVANT INFORMATION!

AND HERE'S A GOOD WAY TO DO THAT:

52. THE GOLDEN RULE OF DESCRIPTION

WRITE ONLY WHAT WE CAN SEE.

THIS IS ALSO AN IMPORTANT ONE. IF YOU'RE WRITING A CHARACTER'S HISTORY IN YOUR ACTION LINES, STUFF LIKE: "HE GREW UP IN A SMALL TOWN BACK..." THEN YOU ARE TOTALLY DOING IT WRONG. IT MAY BE HELPFUL FOR THE FILMMAKERS IN TRYING TO DECIDE WHO TO CAST, ETC, BUT YOU ARE SECRETLY NOT HELPING YOUR MOVIE. THINK ABOUT IT: THE ONLY INFORMATION THAT SHOULD BE CONVEYED IN ACTION LINES IS **WHAT THE AUDIENCE COULD SEE IN THE THEATER.**

DOESN'T THAT MAKE SO MUCH SENSE?

FOR ONE, ANY GOOD DIRECTOR WILL SIT DOWN AND LOOK AT A PARAGRAPH IN YOUR SCRIPT THAT HAS NOTHING BUT CHARACTER HISTORY AND SAY "HOW THE FUCK CAN I SHOW THAT ONSCREEN?" AND THEN PROMPTLY TOSS YOUR SCRIPT IN THE GARBAGE. AND HEY, IF THEY LIKE THE STORY UNDER IT, THEN THEY'LL JUST IGNORE IT ANYWAY AND DO WHAT THEY WANT. SO TRY TO REMEMBER THAT A GOOD SCRIPT CONVEYS ONLY THE INFORMATION THAT CAN BE SEEN. THE DETAILS LIKE: AGE, CLOTHING, POSTURE, VOICE, AND ACTIONS. DON'T THINK OF THESE DETAILS AS BEING REDUCTIVE OR LIMITING, BUT AN OPPORTUNITY TO CRAFT EVERYTHING VISUALLY. REALLY TRY TO SAY SOMETHING WITH THE CHARACTER'S AGE, CLOTHING, POSTURE, VOICE, AND ACTIONS. USE THEM TO REALLY SAY *SOMETHING ABOUT THE CHARACTER.*

MORE IMPORTANTLY THAN INFORMING A DIRECTOR, YOU NEED DO THIS IN THE SCRIPT BECAUSE, FUCKIN HELL, IT'S EXACTLY WHAT *THE MOVIE* NEEDS TO DO TOO. IT'S NOT LIKE A NOVEL. A VOICE-OVER CAN'T JUST START READING YOUR ACTION LINES AND DESCRIBING YOUR CHARACTERS. SO THEY NEED TO CONVEY VISUAL INFORMATION!

SORRY IF HULK SEEMS ANGRY AND SMASHY ABOUT THIS ONE, BUT YOU'D BE AMAZED HOW MANY PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE THIS VERY SIMPLE FACET OF SCREENWRITING. A SCRIPT SHOULD BE INFORMING THE MOVIE HOW TO WORK. IF YOU NEED TO ESTABLISH THAT SOMEONE WORKED ON A FARM YEARS AGO? DON'T WRITE "SHE USED TO WORK ON A FARM." THERE'S NOTHING A FILMMAKER CAN DO WITH THAT. INSTEAD WRITE ABOUT HOW SHE HAS PICTURES UP OF HER WITH HER FAMILY ON A FARM OR SOMETHING VISIBLE LIKE THAT. IT MAY BE LAME, BUT IT'S AT LEAST SOMETHING THAT CAN BE SHOWN.

HULK'S OLD ACTION SCENE COLUMN PARTNER TOM TOWNEND (CINEMATOGRAPHER OF **ATTACK THE BLOCK!**) BROUGHT UP THE GREAT EXAMPLE OF HANDLING EXPOSITION WITH **SILKWOOD**. MERYL STREEP'S CHARACTER IS ON A PLANE AND SHE'S ABOUT TO BE HANDED FOOD. SHE GOES TO GRAB HER WALLET TO PAY, BUT ATTENDANT INFORMS HER THEY'RE FREE. THE MEANING IS CLEAR: *SHE'S NEVER BEEN ON A PLANE BEFORE*. ALSO, PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS WAS LONG BEFORE THE AIRLINES WENT BROKE AND YOU HAD TO START PAYING FOR SHIT. BUT AT THE TIME, THE ATTENTION TO DETAIL SPOKE VOLUMES ABOUT THE CHARACTER.

BUT SINCE YOU CAN'T JUST GO INTO THE DESCRIPTION AND WRITE THE HISTORY OF THE CHARACTER, EMBRACE THESE OPPORTUNITIES TO FIT IT IN ELSEWHERE. GOING BACK TO CHARACTER TREES (POINT #10) TRY TO FIT YOUR "FEET" DETAILS INTO THE STORY THROUGH OTHER APPROACHES: GROIN, THROAT, AND CROWN.

IF YOU WRITE SOMETHING WE CAN'T SEE, IT IS NOT JUST MERE FAUX PAS, IT'S NOT JUST A COMPLETELY WASTED OPPORTUNITY, BUT IT IS A WRITING HABIT THAT WILL ACTIVELY MAKE THE MOVIE WORSE. YOU'RE PUTTING AN IDEA INTO THE FILMMAKER'S HEAD THAT WILL MAKE TOTAL SENSE FOR YOUR STORY, AND IT WILL HELP *THEM* GET IT AND INFORM THEIR EXPERIENCE WHILE READING, BUT IT WON'T HELP THE AUDIENCE GET IT.

AND GUESS WHO MATTERS THE MOST?

THE GOLDEN RULE OF DESCRIPTION FIXES ALL: WRITE ONLY WHAT WE CAN SEE.

53. OH BY THE WAY, YOU ARE NOT THE DIRECTOR

HULK STATED THIS BEFORE, BUT WE REALLY HAVE TO RAM IT HOME.

ESPECIALLY BECAUSE THIS RULE SEEMS TO GO MORE AND MORE BY THE WAYSIDE. BUT HERE'S THE THING: IF YOU ARE SUBMITTING A SCRIPT, CHANCES ARE YOU ARE NOT THE DIRECTOR. CHANCES ARE THE ONES YOU ARE SUBMITTING TO WILL WANT TO HIRE ANOTHER PERSON, WHICH MEANS IF YOUR SCRIPT MENTIONS CAMERA MOVES OR ANYTHING THAT SHOULD BE IN *THE SHOOTING SCRIPT* ONLY, THEN YOU ARE TOTALLY OVERSTEPPING YOUR BOUNDS. THE DIRECTOR MIGHT EVEN BE PISSED OFF ENOUGH ABOUT IT TO DISREGARD YOUR ADVICE AND ACTIVELY DO THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU WROTE (EVEN IF YOUR IDEA IS GOOD). THIS IS NOT IN RARE CASES EITHER - THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS IN MOST CASES. HULK'S SEEN IT HAPPEN.

SO AS A WRITER, HOW DO YOU, LIKE, CONVEY WHAT SHOULD BE SEEN? THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE: YOU DON'T ACTIVELY TRY. INSTEAD, YOU USE A FEW TRICKS TO CONVEY WHAT *SHOULD* BE SHOWN AND HOW. HERE'S HULK'S BEST EXAMPLE OF HOW TO IMPLY MOVEMENT WITH WORDS. SAY YOU WANT TO SHOW SOMETHING UP CLOSE THEN HAVE THE CAMERA PULL OUT OR CUT FURTHER BACK TO SHOW THE WHOLE THING. TO DO THAT YOU SAY SOMETHING LIKE THIS:

"A delicate hand glides over a 1952 Chevy Bel Air. The hand belongs to Anita Jones (20's), fresh-faced Midwestern smile, with a bad home-spun blonde dye job and a discount pink dress. She proceeds to wave to the crowd."

NOW. HULK JUST MADE THIS UP. BUT WHAT DOES IT TELL YOU? IT CONVEYS A CAMERA MOTION WITHOUT AN ACTUAL NOTE OF CAMERA MOTION. THE "BELONGS TO" BIT IS GREAT TRICK FOR IMPLYING WE SHOULD BE UP CLOSE AND THEN BACK OUT. JUST LIKE YOU WANT TO DO WITH ACTION LINES, YOU SHOW DON'T TELL.

BUT GOING BACK TO POINT #52 JUST BEFORE THIS, THE INFORMATION ALSO CONVEYS A GOOD DEAL ABOUT CHARACTER. IT SHOWS SHE'S WORKING A CAR SHOW. THE "MIDWESTERN" TERM IMPLIES NOT ONLY A LOOK, BUT A PERSONALITY TYPE THAT GOES ALONG WITH IT, WITHOUT JUST SPELLING OUT WHAT HER PERSONALITY TYPE SHOULD BE. YOU SHOW HER D.I.Y. APPROACH TO HER APPEARANCE AND CHEAP CLOTHING AND THIS IMPLIES SHE DOESN'T HAVE MUCH MONEY.

WRITING THESE SORTS OF LINES, WHICH INHERENTLY CONVEY CHARACTER, MEANING, SETTING, INFORMATION, AND CINEMA, IS EXCEPTIONALLY DIFFICULT AND TAKES A LOT OF TIME. HULK PROBABLY SPENT 20 MINUTES ON THAT ONE LINE AND IT'S JUST AN EXAMPLE IN A BOOK AND NOT AN ACTUAL SCREENPLAY. THIS IS THE LEVEL OF THOUGHT AND EFFORT THAT YOU NEED TO PUT INTO YOUR BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS.

THIS IS ALL PART OF WHAT HULK LIKES TO CALL:

54. THE POETIC ART OF ACTION LINES

SO THIS IS JUST AN OPINION, BUT HULK THINKS PAUL ATTANASIO PROBABLY WRITES THE BEST SCREENPLAYS IN HOLLYWOOD.

THAT IS NOT TO SAY HE WRITES THE BEST STORIES THAT WILL BECOME THE BEST MOVIES (THOUGH HE'S OBVIOUSLY DONE SOME AMAZING WORK). THIS IS TO SAY THAT HE WRITES BEST FOR THE MEDIUM OF SCREENPLAYS. HIS SCRIPTS NOT ONLY MOVE FAST WITH GREAT ECONOMY, BUT HIS ACTION LINES ARE POETIC AND RESONANT. THEY ALLOW THE DIRECTORS TO MAKE THE BEST POSSIBLE MOVIES. EVEN WHEN HIS CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS GET A LITTLE TOO MUCH IN THE WAY OF THINGS YOU CAN'T SEE, THEY ARE STILL THESE BEAUTIFUL CONCEPTS THAT CAN COME ACROSS IN THE PERFORMANCE OF THE CHARACTER. BUT REALLY IT'S HIS ABILITY TO CONVEY INFORMATION IN LOVELY, SMALL BITS OF ECONOMY THAT MAKES IT WORK. BESIDES, IT'S ALL PART OF THE GREAT "NEGOTIATION" HULK TALKS ABOUT IN REGARDS TO THE CHOICES YOU MAKE TO BREAK GUIDELINES. LIKE TARANTINO, HIS WRITING IS SO GOOD AND PURPOSEFUL THAT YOU DON'T REALLY MIND HIS RULE-BREAKING.

CHECK THESE FUCKING OUT:

"HERBIE STEMPEL, Herbert the great, early 40s and overweight. Marine haircut and shabby suit. A Job for his generation - - exiled to the Boroughs, flayed by grey-flannel insults, scourged by lowly status, grudge-laden before God.

"CHARLES VAN DOREN, 30s, handsome, well-born, debonair, self-deprecating, perfect. the lithe build of a man who has never been made to run uphill. An endearing blankness -- the boy availability of a man still in search of himself.

THESE ARE BOTH FROM **QUIZ SHOW**, ONE OF THE BEST SCRIPTS EVER WRITTEN, BUT THE REAL REASON IT'S WONDERFUL, PARTICULARLY FOR THIS BOOK, IS THAT IT SHOWS YOU HOW TO *WRITE* SCRIPTS. CONCISE. TO THE POINT. DRAMATIC. GORGEOUS PROSE. HILARIOUS DIALOGUE. POIGNANT THEMES. IT'S ALL THERE. IF YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW TO WRITE BEAUTIFULLY IN THE SCREENPLAY FORMAT, THEN GO OUT AND HUNT DOWN A COPY OF **QUIZ SHOW** AND KEEP IT FOREVER.

55. WRITING ACTION SCENES!

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXTENSION OF WHAT HULK HAS BEEN TALKING ABOUT WITH NOT WASTING A READER'S TIME, BUT IT GOES FOR DOUBLE HERE:

READING ACTION SCENES IS THE MOST BORING THING IN THE UNIVERSE.

SURE, WHAT WE'RE SEEING IS RAPID ON THE SCREEN, BUT THE SECOND YOU STOP TO DESCRIBE THE MOTION OF PRETTY MUCH ANYTHING, THEN IT'S JUST SLOW-AS-HELL ON THE PAGE.

THE ANSWER? CRAFT IT DRAMATICALLY! PRETEND YOU'RE TELLING A STORY OF SOME BIG FIGHT THAT HAPPENED AT A BAR. YOU'RE TRYING TO ENTERTAIN THE PEOPLE LISTENING. SURE, YOU WOULDN'T REGALE WITH EVERY PUNCH AND BLOW, BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT'S EXCITING. YOU WOULD TELL THE BIG MOMENTS. YOU WOULD TELL HOW YOU REACTED. THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY. THE TURNING POINTS. THE BITS WHERE CONFLICTS TURN AND THEN ARE ULTIMATELY RESOLVED... DOESN'T THIS ALL SOUND A BIT FAMILIAR?

YUP... YOU WOULD BE TELLING A STORY.

AND THAT'S ALL THAT ACTION SCENES ARE: VISUAL STORYTELLING. CAUSE AND EFFECT. A TO B. ACTION AND REACTION. SO HAVE OBJECTIVES. CREATE STAKES. THREATEN TO KILL THE KITTEN. ENTERTAIN YOUR AUDIENCE AND COMPEL THEM. MAKE THE PERSON READING YOUR SCRIPT FEEL LIKE THEY ARE IN DANGER JUST SITTING THERE. BECAUSE ACTION SCENES SHOULD NOT BE BIG, TONAL CHAOTIC NIGHTMARES. THEY SHOULD NOT FEEL LIKE CHOREOGRAPHY DESCRIPTION.

THEY SHOULD FEEL DRAMATIC.

SO ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS JUST TAKE EVERY LESSON WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT WRITING AND REAPPLY IT TO THE ARENA OF ACTION!

OKAY, LET'S START GOING ON A PATH THAT BRINGS THIS SUCKER HOME.

56. DON'T WASTE OPPORTUNITIES TO SAY SOMETHING

IN ROBERT TOWNE'S INCREDIBLE SCRIPT FOR **CHINATOWN** (THOUGH HE ISN'T AFRAID TO GO ON FOR BIG WALLS OF TEXT... IT WAS A DIFFERENT ERA), THERE IS THIS REALLY NEAT LITTLE DETAIL THAT EXEMPLIFIES SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T HAPPEN NEARLY ENOUGH IN SCREENWRITING TODAY: IN THE FILM, JAKE GITTES IS A PRIVATE DETECTIVE WHO HAS JUST INFORMED ONE OF HIS CLIENTS THAT, YES, HIS WIFE IS CHEATING ON HIM. TO CONSOLE THE POOR CHAP, TOWNE WRITES THAT JAKE DOES THE FOLLOWING:

"Gittes reaches into his desk and pulls out a shot glass, quickly selects a cheaper bottle of bourbon from several fifths of more expensive whiskeys."

THE IMPLICATION OF THIS MAY SEEM OBVIOUS, THAT GITTES IS "CHEAP" OR SOMETHING, BUT THE FACT THAT HE HAS THEM ALL LINED UP AND READY TO GO IN HIS OFFICE SAYS SOMETHING ELSE. IT IMPLIES THAT JAKE KNOWS THE CLIENT *WON'T KNOW THE DIFFERENCE*.

WHAT MAY SEEM LIKE A SMALL DETAIL IN THE SCRIPT IS ACTUALLY A DETAIL THAT CAN BE SUSSED OUT TO SEVERAL OTHER IMPLICATIONS. IT'S A BRILLIANT LITTLE GESTURE OF WHICH TOWNE IS A MASTER. REALLY, HULK'S READ A SHIT TON OF SCRIPTS AND THESE OPPORTUNITIES ARE RARELY EXPLORED.

SO ALL HULK WANTS YOU TO DO IS EMBRACE THE KIND OF HIGH-DEGREE STORYTELLING EVIDENT IN THESE TINY DETAILS. EMBRACE THE HIGH STANDARD. ALWAYS TRY TO SAY SOMETHING. EVEN TRY TO SAY MULTIPLE THINGS AT ONCE. EVERY DETAIL IN YOUR SCRIPT CAN MATTER IF YOU REALLY WANT IT TO. DON'T WASTE OPPORTUNITIES TO SAY SOMETHING!

57. AND IF YOU WANT TO BE COLLOQUIAL...

SO WHILE ATTANASIO AND TOWNE REPRESENT THE FORMAL END OF THE SPECTRUM OF SCREENWRITING, ON THE OTHER SIDE THERE ARE MORE COLLOQUIAL WRITERS.

FOR INSTANCE, THERE IS SHANE BLACK.

SHANE BLACK WAS THE FIRST MILLION DOLLAR SCREENWRITER. HE WROTE THE **LETHAL WEAPON** MOVIES AND **THE LAST BOY SCOUT**. HE THEN SORT OF WENT TO WRITER JAIL FOR **THE LAST ACTION HERO** AND **THE LONG KISS GOODNIGHT**, BUT HE RETURNED IN A BIG, BIG WAY WITH **KISS KISS, BANG BANG** (IT'S A HILARIOUS, GREAT FILM IF YOU'VE NEVER SEEN IT) AND SOON AGAIN WITH **IRON MAN 3**. BUT WHEN HE STARTED OUT, ONE OF THE THINGS HE BECAME FAMOUS FOR WAS BEING VERY COLLOQUIAL IN THE SCRIPTS. HE DIRECTLY ENGAGED THE READER AND WOULD SAY THINGS LIKE: "This is the scene that's so fucking good, the audience will just whip out their dicks and start jerking off right there in the theater!"

... IT MADE AN IMPRESSION.

WHICH IS TO SAY A LOT OF PEOPLE LIKED IT AND FOUND IT FUNNY, AND A LOT OF THE OLD SCHOOL THOUGHT HE WAS PISSING ON THE CRAFT. BOTH ARE FAIR REACTIONS. BUT WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO SAY ABOUT IT, HULK THINKS THE SCRIPTS BEHIND BLACK'S COLLOQUIAL PROSE WERE USUALLY PRETTY GOOD AND THAT WAS THE IMPORTANT PART (EVEN IF THE SCENES USUALLY WEREN'T ACTUALLY GOOD ENOUGH THAT THE AUDIENCE WOULD START JERKING OFF). THE PROBLEM WAS THAT ALL THE LOVE AND ALL THE HATE HAPPENED TO SPAWN A LOT OF COLLOQUIAL IMITATORS, WHO WERE MUCH, MUCH WORSE AND DID NOT UNDERSTAND WHEN AND HOW TO DO IT. WHAT CAN HULK SAY? IT ALL JUST KEEPS COMING BACK TO PEOPLE FIXATING ON THE TANGIBLE DETAILS AND TONE INSTEAD OF THE ACTUAL FUNCTIONALITY OF THE MECHANISM.

BUT ALL HULK HAS TO SAY ON THE MATTER IS THIS: IF YOU'RE GOING TO GO COLLOQUIAL, THEN LET'S GET SOMETHING STRAIGHT... YOU HAVE TO BE *REALLY* FUCKING FUNNY.

THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT. BECAUSE IF YOU'RE NOT ACTIVELY MAKING THE READER LAUGH, THEN THERE'S NO POINT TO DOING IT. SERIOUSLY. NONE. YOU'RE ALREADY PISSING ON THE CONCEPT OF ECONOMY. AND BY BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL JUST SAY "I KNOW YOU'RE A PERSON / HULK WHO IS READING THIS. LET'S JUST TRY AND CHEER YOU UP!" IT BETTER BE GOOD. BUT THERE ISN'T ANYTHING ELSE THE READER CAN DO WITH IT OTHER THAN LAUGH. IT CERTAINLY WON'T MAKE THE MOVIE ANY BETTER. IT CERTAINLY WON'T CONVEY TO THE DIRECTOR HOW TO MAKE THE MOVIE ANY FUNNIER, BECAUSE THE AUDIENCE SURE CAN'T SEE THE FUNNY ACTION LINES!

IT ADDS NOTHING OF VALUE TO THE FILM. THE *ONLY* THING IT CAN DO IS MAKE THE READER LAUGH, WHICH ADMITTEDLY IS SOMETHING TO BE APPRECIATED IN THE LONG SLOG OF READING SCRIPTS.

BUT ALSO REMEMBER THAT HUMOR IS SUBJECTIVE, ALL COMEDY HAS A VICTIM, AND IF THE READER OF THE SCRIPT IDENTIFIES MORE WITH THE VICTIM THEN YOU'RE FUCKED. DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY TIMES HULK HAS SEEN A SCRIPT WHERE THE WRITER HAS IDENTIFIED A BAND OR A SONG OR A TV SHOW THAT SHOULD BE MADE FUN OF, BUT THE EXECUTIVE IN CHARGE OF READING THE SCRIPT ACTUALLY LIKES THAT THING? WAY MORE THAN YOU THINK. THIS SHIT IS TRICKY. AND IF IT DOESN'T MAKE HULK LAUGH, THEN IT IS JUST A GARBAGE LINE WASTING A READER'S TIME... WHICH MEANS THAT READER MIGHT THROW IT IN THE GARBAGE TOO.

THOSE ARE THE STAKES OF BEING COLLOQUIAL. BE WARNED.

58. VOICE-OVER... PERHAPS, TRY NOT USING IT

VOICE-OVER IS ONE OF THE MOST OVERUSED DEVICES IN THE HISTORY OF CINEMA. IT IS USED TO EXPLAIN THINGS THAT DON'T NEED EXPLAINING AND WOULD BEST BE LEFT SHOWN THROUGH VISUAL CINEMA OR NATURAL DIALOGUE, ISSUES THAT WOULD BE BEST LEFT EXPLORED BY DRAMATIC MEANS. EVEN THE MOST UNAWARE AUDIENCES FIND VOICE-OVER TO BE PRETTY UN-ENGAGING. WHY IS THAT?

BECAUSE VOICE-OVER *ALWAYS* TELLS, AND *NEVER* SHOWS.

WHAT PERHAPS SPEAKS TO THE DEVICE'S ASSURED LAZINESS IS HOW FUCKING INCONSISTENT IT IS TOO. IF YOU'RE GOING TO USE NARRATION AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR FILM, THEN YOU HAVE TO USE IT AT THE END (COUGH **THE DESCENDANTS** COUGH). OTHERWISE YOU'RE JUST CHEATING. THEN THERE'S THAT HILARIOUS TIME THE VOICE-OVER SHOWED UP IN A COUPLE SCENES IN THE MIDDLE OF **WE DON'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE** AND THEN PROMPTLY DISAPPEARED FOR THE REST OF THE FILM. THESE SORTS OF USES ONLY CONFIRM THE LAZINESS. THOSE FILMS USED IT JUST WHEN THEY NEEDED IT TO SOLVE SOME WEIRD, STUPID PROBLEM OF EXPOSITION. THEN THEY PROMPTLY DUMPED IT.

THE REAL PROBLEM HERE, AND WHAT EVERY SINGLE PERSON WHO USES IT TENDS NOT TO REALIZE, IS THAT WHEN VOICE-OVER GOES IN AND OUT HAPHAZARDLY, YOU ARE ALTERING THE RULES OF YOUR "MOVIE UNIVERSE." YOU ARE SAYING THE STORY COMES FROM THIS PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE AND THEY ARE A KIND OF "GOD OF PERSPECTIVE" IN THIS MOVIE. THAT'S WHAT VOICE-OVER REALLY MEANS TO YOUR TONE. AND IT HAS A *HUGE IMPACT* ON HOW YOUR AUDIENCE SUBCONSCIOUSLY THINKS ABOUT THE FILM'S REALITY.

SO WHEN THE MOVIE SUDDENLY FUCKING DITCHES THE VOICE-OVER AND BECOMES A REGULAR MOVIE APROPOS OF NOTHING, THEN *THE AUDIENCE CAN FEEL IT*. YOU ARE ESSENTIALLY SAYING YOU HAVE MADE TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF UNIVERSES IN YOUR FILM. AND THAT'S CHEATING. WORSE, IT'S DESTRUCTIVE TO THE INTENT OF YOUR STORYTELLING.

THERE ARE OF COURSE, A TON OF EXAMPLES OF GREAT VOICE-OVER.

ALL THE MALICK FILMS EMPLOY THE DEVICE TO STUNNING EFFECT. BUT HECK, THE DUDE IS BASICALLY WRITING POETRY, WHICH GOES ALONG WITH THE BEAUTY OF HIS IMAGERY. AND REALLY, HE'S ONE OF A KIND. ANOTHER EXAMPLE IS IN **THE INFORMANT!** WHERE THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE PLOT IS INTENTIONALLY UNDERCUT BY GOING INTO THE HEAD OF MATT DAMON'S RIDICULOUS MAIN CHARACTER, WHERE HE'LL SUDDENLY START RUMINATING ON PANTIES IN JAPANESE VENDING MACHINES. THERE IS NO INFORMATION OR EXPOSITION, BUT PURE CHARACTERIZATION AND HILARITY. THIS DOESN'T MAKE IT NARRATIVE NONSENSE THOUGH AS IT SERVES TWO OBVIOUS FUNCTIONS: IT HELPS BALANCE THE COMEDIC TONE WITH THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE STORY, AND IT HELPS EXPLAIN JUST WHAT KIND OF BATSHIT GUY WOULD GO DOWN THIS SILLY, EXTREME PATH. HULK THINKS IT'S GREAT. AND THEN THERE'S THE VOICE-OVER IN THE COEN'S **RAISING ARIZONA**, WHICH DOES THE EXACT OPPOSITE. H.I. MCDUNNOUGH, WHO ON THE SURFACE IS A COMPLETE HICK CRIMINAL, HAS THIS LOFTY, BEAUTIFUL, ELOQUENT NARRATION THAT ACTUALLY COUNTERS THE HILARITY OF THE WORLD OF THE FILM. SO BY GIVING IT THIS DEEP POETIC RESONANCE THE COENS TURN THEIR FILM INTO A LOFTY, WEIRD, WONDERFUL FAIRY TALE.

THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY TO USE A DEVICE WELL.

JUST DON'T BE LAZY ABOUT IT. VOICE-OVER CAN LEND A NICE FEELING OF ATMOSPHERE, CHARACTERIZATION, AND TONE, BUT BE CAREFUL WITH HOW IT AFFECTS YOUR UNIVERSE. IF YOU REALLY NEED IT AND DON'T WANT TO FUCK WITH YOUR UNIVERSE, THEN TRY A FEW SIMPLE TRICKS TO USE IT MORE ORGANICALLY. LIKE HAVE ONE CHARACTER LITERALLY TELLING A STORY THAT CAN OVERLAP INTO THE NEXT SCENE AND EFFECTIVELY BE USED LIKE VOICE-OVER. THIS WAY YOU GET THE INFORMATIVE EFFECT YOU WANT WITHOUT GETTING THE TONAL EFFECT YOU DON'T WANT. BUT AGAIN, *YOU HAVE TO BE CONSISTENT ABOUT IT.*

BUT REALLY, ALWAYS TRY NOT USING IT FIRST... YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW WELL PLAIN OLD NARRATIVE WORKS.

59. THE PRACTICAL ART OF DIALOGUE

SO HULK TALKED IN THE INTRODUCTION ABOUT KNOWING THE STRUGGLE OF WRITING. WELL... HULK *KNOWS THIS STRUGGLE*. FOR MANY YEARS, DIALOGUE WAS HULK'S BIGGEST OBSTACLE. HULK THOUGHT HULK JUST DIDN'T HAVE THE EAR FOR IT, ESPECIALLY WHILE WRITING THE FIRST FEW DRAFTS. TO EVEN GET TO A COMPETENT PLACE WITH DIALOGUE, IT TOOK TIME, PATIENCE, TRIAL AND ERROR, AND A LOT OF LESSON-LEARNING. AND EVENTUALLY, AFTER YEARS AND YEARS AND YEARS, HULK FINALLY GOT TO A REALLY GOOD PLACE.

BUT THAT'S GREAT NEWS. YOU SEE, IT TAUGHT HULK TO FLATLY REJECT THE NOTION THAT NATURAL TALENT IS INHERENTLY LIMITING. THERE IS NO ACCEPTING THAT THERE ARE JUST SOME THINGS YOU AREN'T GOOD AT. SURE, WE HAVE SOME NATURAL DISPOSITIONS, BUT WE CAN TRULY LEARN ANYTHING. IT JUST TAKES A MASSIVE AMOUNT OF WORK. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT'S STRUCTURE, CHARACTERIZATION, OR CINEMATOGRAPHY.

IF HULK CAN GET GOOD AT DIALOGUE, YOU CAN GET GOOD AT ANYTHING. SO HERE ARE THE FOLLOWING HARD-EARNED LESSONS ABOUT GETTING BETTER AT DIALOGUE THAT HULK LEARNED ALONG THE WAY:

1) ELIMINATE THE FOLLOWING IN DIALOGUE: "UMS", "LIKES", AND "YOU KNOWS."

THERE IS A HUGE INCLINATION AMONG YOUNG WRITERS TO DRESS UP DIALOGUE IN NATURAL SOUNDING CADENCE... THIS IS BAD. BECAUSE THERE'S A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NATURAL AND INANE. REALLY, IF YOU WANT YOUR DIALOGUE TO BE ORGANIC AND SOUND LIKE HOW REAL PEOPLE TALK, THEN THAT'S FOR THE ACTOR TO DECIDE. IF YOU'RE TRYING TO GET AN ACTOR TO TIME THEIR UMS, LIKES, AND YOU KNOWS TO YOUR EXACT SPECIFICATIONS AND CADENCE, THEN YOU ARE GOING TO GET THE MOST HOLLOW-SOUNDING, FAKE NONSENSE EVER. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO MAKE THESE KIND OF NATURAL PAUSES SEEM UNFORCED. SO TAKE THEM OUT OF YOUR DIALOGUE.

SERIOUSLY. THEY'RE NOT NECESSARY ANYWAY AND WILL COMPLETELY STALL THE READER FROM JUST TRYING TO GET THE MEANING OF YOUR WORDS. IT'S THE SAME LESSON OF ECONOMY AS BEFORE. PUTTING STALLS MAKES FOR A HORRIBLE READ AND TERRIBLE DRAMA. SO REALLY, MAKE THEM GO BYE BYE.

II) YOU WANT YOUR CHARACTER'S DIALOGUE TO BE MORE CLEAR AND ON POINT THAN YOU'D ASSUME.

ONCE AGAIN, THIS IS SORT OF THE DESIRE TO BE LIKE THE COENS AND TARANTINO, WHO CAN DO THIS SORT OF LONG VERBAL QUALIFICATION THING WELL, BUT THAT'S NOT YOU. CHANCES ARE YOU ARE STILL LEARNING, SO HULK ADVISES YOU NOT TO LAYER THE DIALOGUE IN A LOT OF QUALIFYING AND ANTICIPATION. FOR INSTANCE, NANCY MEYERS MOVIES TEND TO DO THAT HORRIBLY. STUFF LIKE "WELL, I WAS GOING TO SAY...." AND "I THINK I REALLY JUST NEED TO COME OUT, AND LET YOU KNOW THAT." UGHHHHHHHH. HAVE YOU EVER SEEN **THE HOLIDAY**? IT'S LIKE 2 HOURS OF CHARACTERS SPUTTERING OUT STUFF BEFORE THE CHARACTERS TALK AND HAVE OPINIONS. IT DOESN'T COME OFF LIKE "ORGANIC SPEECH," IT COMES OFF LIKE HULK'S ASS. ADDING THESE KIND OF QUALIFIERS JUST SLOWS DOWN THE ENTIRE RHYTHM AND IMPORT. IT PREVENTS THE AUDIENCE FROM FOLLOWING ALONG AND ENGAGING AND RESPONDING BECAUSE THEY'RE MILES AHEAD OF THE CHARACTERS THEMSELVES. THERE'S NOTHING MORE BORING THAN WAITING FOR SOMEBODY TO SAY SOMETHING. SO JUST SAY WHAT YOU FREAKIN' MEAN. BE TERSE AND TO THE POINT. YOU MAY WORRY THAT DOING SO WILL MAKE YOUR CHARACTERS SOUND TERSE AND TO THE POINT, BUT IT WON'T. THE NATURAL WAY WE WATCH MOVIE UNIVERSES FORGIVES A LOT OF BREVITY. IT WILL BE ORGANIC BECAUSE IT *WON'T* SOUND LIKE REAL LIFE. IT WILL MAKE THEM SOUND LIKE THEY'RE IN A DAMN MOVIE, WHICH IS GOOD NEWS BECAUSE THEY ARE IN A MOVIE! AND THAT MEANS AUDIENCES WATCH THEM LIKE THEY ARE IN A MOVIE! AND THAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP THAT REALLY MATTERS. THERE'S A REASON CHARACTERS TALK LIKE THAT IN FILMS AND IT'S BECAUSE THAT'S HOW THE AUDIENCE *NEEDS* THEM TO BE FOR THE MOST EFFECTIVE DRAMA AND STORY PURPOSE.

III) YOUR CHARACTERS CAN'T ALL TALK THE SAME WAY.

YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO HEAR ONE PERSON IN A SCENE AND KNOW WHO THEY ARE JUST BY THE DIALOGUE. ACHIEVING THIS CAN BE REALLY DIFFICULT, BUT IT'S TRUE. YOU CAN'T JUST RELY ON THE ACTORS TO DO IT FOR YOU. WHEN HULK READS COMEDIES, 1/4 OF THEM HAVE ALL THEIR CHARACTERS TALK IN THE GENERIC, WITTY-BUT-NOT-TOO-WITTY VOICE, AND 1/4 OF THE OTHERS HAVE THEIR CHARACTERS ALL TALK LIKE THE AUTHOR. IT SUCKS (FYI, THE OTHER 1/4 OF COMEDY SCRIPTS ARE REALLY FUNNY, AND THE LAST 1/4 ARE NOT FUNNY WHATSOEVER). SO CONCENTRATE ON HAVING YOUR CHARACTERS HAVE DIFFERENT VOICES. IF THIS IS A BIG PROBLEM FOR YOU, HULK HAS A FEW PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS FOR YOU. FOR EXAMPLE, THINK OF A BUNCH OF DIFFERENT, PRONOUNCED ACTORS IN YOUR HEAD, ALL WITH UNIQUE CADENCES. THROW IN STEVE BUSCEMI, WITH... UM... DENNIS LEARY AND, LIKE, CAROL KANE OR SOMETHING. OR WHOEVER YOU LIKE! HULK KNOWS THIS SOUNDS STUPID, BUT IT WILL HONESTLY HELP YOU DIFFERENTIATE THEM IN YOUR HEAD. AND WHEN WHATEVER ACTOR COMES IN TO PLAY THEM, THEY WILL BRING THE CHARACTER A MORE ORGANIC CENTER THAN THE EXTREMES YOU USED IN YOUR HEAD. IT'S JUST A WAY OF MAKING THEIR VOICES SEPARATE. IT'S A MERE MEANS TO AN END.

BUT HONESTLY, THERE'S A SUREFIRE WAY OF FIXING MOST OF THESE DIALOGUE PROBLEMS...

60. READ YOUR ENTIRE SCREENPLAY OUT LOUD... MANY TIMES.

THIS WILL SOLVE A LOT OF THE PROBLEMS MENTIONED NOT JUST IN THE LAST POINT ABOUT DIALOGUE, BUT ALL THE 59 POINTS MENTIONED SO FAR.

DO YOU REALIZE HOW MANY SCREENWRITERS NEVER READ THEIR SCRIPT OUT LOUD?

IT'S AMAZING GIVEN THE FACT THAT THE SECOND YOU HEAR YOUR SCRIPT OUT LOUD AND YOU CAN INSTANTLY BE LIKE "OH THAT SOUNDS LIKE CRAP" OR "OH THAT'S A WEIRD THING TO SAY" OR

"OH THAT TOTALLY WASN'T NECESSARY." BUT IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT WHAT SOUNDS WRONG TO YOUR EAR; IT'S SO MUCH MORE. YOU'LL GET A SENSE OF HOW YOUR SCENES ARE PACED AND IF ANY OF THE SCENES DON'T MAKE SENSE NEAR EACH OTHER. YOU'LL GET A SENSE OF TRANSITIONS. HAVE A COUPLE FRIENDS READ IT WITH YOU AND TALK ABOUT IT. ASK THEM NOT JUST ABOUT WHAT THEY UNDERSTOOD (AGAIN LESS IMPORTANT), BUT MORE ABOUT IF THE SCENES FELT DRAMATIC AND THINGS MOVED FROM MOMENT TO MOMENT. AND WHO CARES IF YOU'RE A BAD ACTOR? IT DOESN'T MATTER!

HULK REALLY CAN'T TELL YOU ENOUGH HOW MUCH *YOU NEED TO DO THIS*.

HECK, JUST BY GETTING THE DAMN THING *OUTSIDE YOUR HEAD* AND INTO THE OPEN AIR, IT SOLVES SO MANY PROBLEMS IMMEDIATELY. CHANCES ARE YOU LOVE MOVIES, BUT HAVEN'T HAD YEARS AND YEARS TO BREATHE SCRIPTS YET LIKE SOME OF US. SO THIS IS YOUR CHANCE TO MAKE THE SCRIPT FEEL ALIVE LIKE CINEMA. YOU'LL KNOW EXACTLY WHAT TO DO WITH IT ONCE IT'S "REAL." LIKE WITH THE ACTION LINES THAT GO ON AND ON? GUESS WHAT? IF YOU GET BORED READING THEM, THEN THE PERSON READING YOUR SCRIPT WILL GET BORED READING THEM TOO. SO YOU'LL KNOW EXACTLY WHAT TO CUT. READING A SCREENPLAY OUT LOUD SHOULD INFORM YOU. IT SHOULD SPEAK TO THE EXACT KIND OF MOVIE YOU WANT TO WRITE.

TO THE ANECDOTE!

AND NOW, HULK WILL SPEAK TO THE POWER OF WHAT READING A SCREENPLAY OUT LOUD CAN DO FOR YOU. WE CAN ALL AGREE THAT **THE SOCIAL NETWORK** WAS PRETTY MUCH GREAT, RIGHT? ASIDE FROM SOME LEGITIMATE CONCERNS ABOUT DEPICTIONS OF FEMININITY, IT HAS SUCH A WONDERFUL USE OF DIALOGUE, SMART COMMENTARY, INSIGHTFUL DETAILS, RESONANT THEMES, AND A PROPULSIVE SENSE OF STORYTELLING... HEY... WAIT A MINUTE! ISN'T THAT JUST ALL THE THINGS HULK MENTIONED BACK IN PART ONE OF THIS BOOK!?!? WHEN HULK TALKED ABOUT ALL THE STUFF THAT MAKES A GOOD NARRATIVE??? HULK IS BRINGING IT FULL CIRCLE ON Y'ALL!

SO ON TO THE ACTUAL ANECDOTE: DURING PREPRODUCTION ON THE FILM, DAVID FINCHER APPARENTLY HAD AARON SORKIN SIT DOWN FOR HIM, AND *IN ONE SITTING* HE HAD SORKIN READ THE SCRIPT OUT LOUD. HE WANTED TO KNOW THE PACE, INFLECTION, AND SENSE OF RHYTHM THAT BELONGED IN THE SCRIPT. SO AARON SAT THERE, READ THE ENTIRE MOVIE OUT LOUD, JUST AS HE HAD PICTURED IT. BREAKS NOT INCLUDED, IT TOOK HIM 2 HOURS AND 1 MINUTE TO READ THE WHOLE THING.

THE FINAL RUNNING TIME OF THE FILM? 2 HOURS 1 MINUTE.

THE LESSON IS CLEAR FOLKS: READ YOUR SCRIPT OUT LOUD AND HULK WILL GUARANTEE YOU WILL WIN AN OSCAR FOR IT.

... OKAY, IT WON'T DO THAT BUT IT WILL MAKE YOUR SCRIPT WAY, WAY BETTER IN EVERY SENSE.

61. FEEDBACK - GET A THICK SKIN AND EXPECT OTHERS TO HAVE NONE

AN OLD ACTING PROFESSOR OF HULK'S HAD A GREAT SAYING. HE SAID "Ideas are babies," AND HE MEANT THAT AS A WAY TO DESCRIBE HOW MUCH WE CHERISH AND PERSONALIZE AN IDEA OF OUR OWN. THEY ARE SO PRECIOUS THAT THEY FIGURATIVELY BECOME OUR BABIES.

AND ANYTIME SOMEONE BRASHLY REJECTS YOUR IDEA OR CALLS IT STUPID, IT'S LIKE "THEY TOOK YOUR BABY AND SMASHED ITS HEAD OVER A RADIATOR."

THAT'S INDEED WHAT IT FEELS LIKE.

IT IS OUR NATURAL, HUMAN INCLINATION. THAT KIND OF VULNERABILITY IS SO IMPORTANT TO THE CREATIVE INSTINCT... BUT CAN ALSO BE REALLY PROBLEMATIC TO THE CREATIVE PROCESS.

YOU HAVE TO SPEND A LIFETIME GETTING OVER THE FACT THAT YOUR IDEAS ARE YOUR BABIES. REALLY, YOU DO. YOUR ART WILL NOT BE ABLE TO FUNCTION WITHOUT CRITICISM AND INPUT FROM OTHERS. YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO EMBRACE THE FACT THAT YOUR IDEA MIGHT BE STUPID. THAT SOMETHING YOU THOUGHT WAS GENIUS IS ACTUALLY HACKNEYED AND TRITE. YOU HAVE TO BE WILLING TO TAKE YOUR LUMPS AND EVOLVE. YOU HAVE TO GET THE THICKEST POSSIBLE SKIN IMAGINABLE. IT IS THE ONLY WAY YOU WILL LEARN AND GROW AND GET BETTER.

IT IS THE ONLY WAY YOU WILL BECOME A PROFESSIONAL.

AND THAT JUST TAKES TIME. REALLY, THERE'S NO OTHER WAY. YOU NEED TO WRITE A LOT. YOU NEED TO SHARE IT A LOT. YOU NEED TO GET REJECTED A LOT. YOU NEED TO HEAR TERRIBLE THINGS. AND THEN YOU NEED TO NUMB THE PAIN.

BUT YOU WANT TO KNOW THE INTERESTING FLIP-SIDE? YOU CAN'T EXPECT OTHERS TO DO THE SAME.

YOU HAVE TO BE THE NICEST PERSON. THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU HAVE TO LIE. IN FACT YOU SHOULD BE HONEST. BUT THERE'S A WAY TO CRAFT EVERY BIT OF HONESTY IN A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY. AND WHILE DOING THAT YOU HAVE TO ACT LIKE OTHER PEOPLE'S IDEAS ARE BABIES AND CRADLE THEM GENTLY. NOW YOU MAY NOT WANT TO TAKE THAT BABY HOME WITH YOU AND ADOPT IT, BUT YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO HANDLE THAT DEFTLY. SO BE KIND TO THE PERSON YOU ARE WORKING WITH. HAVE EMPATHY FOR THEM. THEY ARE PUTTING THEIR IDEAS OUT THERE SO YOU NEED TO EXTEND A KINDNESS AND UNDERSTANDING TO THEM. DO THAT WHILE BEING CONSTRUCTIVE AND INFORMATIVE. PHRASE THINGS IN HYPOTHETICALS. USE IF / THEN STATEMENTS WITH THEIR STORY OPTIONS. MAKE IT CLEAR YOU ARE THERE TO HELP THEM UNLOCK THAT WHICH THEY WANT TO DO, NOT PAINT YOUR THOUGHTS OVER THEIRS. AND WHEN YOU DO THAT? THEY WILL FOREVER BE IN YOUR GOOD GRACES. AND THOSE ARE THE KIND OF WORKING RELATIONSHIPS YOU CAN BUILD A CAREER ON.

BUT MOST OF ALL, DESPITE GETTING A THICK SKIN YOU HAVE TO KEEP THE PASSION FOR YOUR OWN WORK. JAMES GUNN SAID: "The key to show business is to give 110% while simultaneously not giving a shit." THAT MAY SOUND ABSURD, CYNICAL, OR EVEN AN IMPOSSIBLE CATCH-22, BUT IT IS ONE OF THOSE ABSOLUTE TRUISMS OF HOLLYWOOD. GIVE 110% PERCENT BECAUSE YOU CAN'T ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING IN THIS BUSINESS WITHOUT ENTHUSIASM AND GENUINE INTENT. BE JOYFUL AND TAKE PRIDE WHEN THINGS GO WELL. BUT DON'T GIVE A SHIT IN THE SENSE THAT YOU HAVE TO TAKE REJECTION IN STRIDE. DON'T LET FAILURE BOTHER YOU. YOU MAY HEAR 17 YESSES IN A ROW ON A PROJECT AND THEN SUDDENLY BE CUT OUT AT THE KNEES BY A NO FROM THE TOP OF THE PYRAMID. HULK GUARANTEES YOU *THIS WILL HAPPEN*. BUT IT'S OKAY.

EVERY SINGLE THING THAT YOU DO IN THIS BUSINESS WILL FAIL UNTIL THE ONE TIME IT DOESN'T.

ISN'T THAT AMAZING? EVERYONE THINKS SUCCESS WILL BE INSTANT, BUT IT IS ROOTED IN FAILURE FOLLOWED BY PERSISTENCE. AND FOR THOSE WHO DO EXPERIENCE INSTANT SUCCESS, IT IS OFTEN FOLLOWED BY A SPIRAL WHEN THEY CANNOT HANDLE THE LOW POINT THAT INEVITABLY FOLLOWS. SO PRESS ON FURTHER. DON'T GET RATTLED. DO BETTER WORK NEXT TIME. IT IS ALWAYS ABOUT THE PROCESS. IT IS ALWAYS ABOUT GROWTH. IT IS ALWAYS ABOUT LEARNING TO BE BETTER.

SO LET'S TALK ABOUT THE FINAL STEP...

62. LETTING GO

"I just gotta finish this script!"

HULK'S HEARD THAT PHRASE A MILLION TIMES... BUT THERE'S NO SUCH THING.

NO ONE EVER FINISHES SCRIPTS. IT'S IMPOSSIBLE. NO SCRIPT EVER FEELS *PERFECT*. IF YOU'VE EVER

FELT LIKE ONE WAS PERFECT THEN HULK HATES TO SAY IT, BUT YOU MIGHT BE A LITTLE NAÏVE. THERE IS NO FINISH... *THERE IS ONLY THE TIME TO LET IT GO.*

BUT WHEN DO YOU LET IT GO? WELL, USUALLY BY THE TIME THE STUDIO SAYS “HEY, YOUR SCRIPT IS DUE,” OR BY THE TIME THE SHOW GOES ON THE AIR OR WHATEVER ENTERPRISE YOU ARE IN. BUT FOR SOMETHING YOU’RE DOING FOR SUBMISSION?

IT’S TIME TO LET GO WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE YOU’RE JUST TREADING WATER. WHEN YOU ARE JUST TINKERING WITH IT, MAKING SMALL INCREMENTAL CHANGES WHICH, SURE, MIGHT BE WELL AND GOOD, BUT THEY ARE PROVIDING NO DEEPER OVERHAUL OR UNDERSTANDING TO THE PIECE ITSELF. SO HULK THINKS YOU SHOULD ONLY GET REAL ONE OR TWO ROUNDS OF TINKERING AND THEN IT SHOULD BE OUT OF YOUR HANDS AND WITH OTHER, TRUSTED EYEBALLS. TO EITHER BE APPROVED, OR TO TELL YOU WHAT IT REALLY NEEDS.

NO SCRIPT EVER FEELS *PERFECT*. THERE IS ONLY THE TIME TO LET IT GO.

IT’S AMAZING HOW MUCH NO ONE EVER WRITES ABOUT THIS PART OF THE PROCESS, WHEN IN A LOT OF WAYS IT IS SO VITAL. IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT INDIVIDUAL SCRIPTS EITHER, BUT HOW LONG TO STICK WITH A SCRIPT YOU’VE WRITTEN IN TERMS OF TRYING TO SELL IT OR GET IT MADE. WHICH REALLY IT GETS TO THE HEART OF HOW WE RELATE TO OUR WORK AND WHAT WE WANT OUT OF IT. HULK JUST TALKED TO YOU ABOUT THE GIVING 110% AND SIMULTANEOUSLY NOT GIVING A SHIT PHILOSOPHY, BUT IT CAN SOMETIMES BE TRICKY KNOWING WHEN TO DO WHAT PART OF THAT EQUATION.

FOR INSTANCE, HULK WAS HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH A FILMMAKER FRIEND THE OTHER NIGHT AND HULK WAS TALKING ABOUT MOVING ON FROM A RECENT FAILED PROJECT TO GET SOMETHING NEW UP AND RUNNING, AND HULK WAS TAKING THIS ZEN APPROACH TO IT ALL. BUT HULK’S FILMMAKER FRIEND SPOKE UP AND SAID: “Yeah, but there’s a flipside to that. I can’t tell you how often my crazy passion for making something a reality is what ended up saving it at the last moment, and actually making it a reality.”

OBVIOUSLY, IT’S A GREAT POINT AND SOMETHING HULK OBVIOUSLY UNDERSTANDS, BUT THERE’S A DUALITY THAT MAY HAVE MORE TO DO WITH YOUR PERSONALITY. BECAUSE BOTH OPTIONS CAN HAVE REAL VALUE. SO ONCE AGAIN HULK BRINGS US TO THE PRECIPICE OF A DICHOTOMY:

I) THERE IS THE SODERBERGH/DEL TORO ROUTE OF EMBRACING THE CHAOS AND HAVING A LOT OF IRONS IN THE FIRE, MANY OF WHICH WILL NOT COME TO FRUITION, BUT ONE GOOD IDEA SURELY WILL. WORK FAST. MAKE THEM AND DON’T BECOME PARALYZED BY FEAR OR GET TIED DOWN BY MEGALOMANIA. MOVE AND EVOLVE.

II) AND THEN THERE IS THE SINGULAR PATH OF MANY A GREAT, AMERICAN AUTEUR, WHO WORK ON A SINGULAR PROJECT AND LABOR OVER IT INTENSELY UNTIL IT BECOMES A REALITY. THE ROAD OF WHICH IS MATCHED WITH HIGHER HIGHS AND SICKENING LOWS. YOU ARE LIVING AND DYING BY THE PROJECT, BUT IT MAY BE THAT VERY COMMITMENT THAT ULTIMATELY SAVES IT.

IN THE END, IT IS A DICHOTOMY. AND LIKE EVERYTHING IN THIS BOOK, YOU’LL HAVE A NATURAL INCLINATION, BUT HULK WANTS YOU TO LOOK AT IT IN TERMS OF A NEGOTIATION. ONE THAT IS BUILT ON YOUR VALUES AND THE BELIEF OF WHAT YOU CAN JUSTIFY.

BUT WHATEVER YOU DO, BE READY TO WORK HARDER THAN YOU EVER HAVE IN YOUR LIFE.

AND KNOW WHEN IT’S TIME TO LET GO....

PART SEVEN - NOW HERE COMES THE HARD PART

AND THUS WE COME TO THE SEVENTH AND FINAL PART OF OUR JOURNEY, AND TO START THIS SECTION, HULK ACTUALLY HAS SOME BAD NEWS TO TELL YOU...

NONE OF THE THINGS HULK JUST TOLD YOU *ACTUALLY MATTER*.

... THAT SOUND YOU HEARD IS EVERYONE'S HEARTS FALLING DOWN INTO THEIR BUTTS.

THE REASON THEY DON'T MATTER IS THAT EVERYTHING HULK JUST TOLD YOU IS NOT SOMETHING THAT CAN BE EASILY PARSED OUT OVER A FEW PLANNING SESSIONS AND INCORPORATED IMMEDIATELY. SURE, THANKS TO THIS BOOK YOU MAY NOW UNDERSTAND A GREAT MANY CONCEPTS, DEVICES, OR GUIDELINES YOU NEVER THOUGHT OF BEFORE. YOU MAY EVEN BE REALLY EAGER TO START TRYING TO APPLY THEM. BUT THEY CANNOT BE FULLY APPLIED WITH SIMPLE AWARENESS.

FOR ONE, THERE ARE SO MANY DETAILS ABOUT HOW AND WHY TO CREATE A STORY, THAT WHEN WE SIT DOWN TO ACTUALLY DO IT, THE MULTITUDE OF OPTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES RENDERS THE PROCESS DYSFUNCTIONAL. YOU'LL BE TRYING TO THINK OF THAT ONE THING HULK SAID TO DO, OR THAT ONE GOAL OF YOURS, AND MOST OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS BIG-ASS BOOK WILL FALL OUT OF YOUR BRAINS LIKE IT WAS ON TEFLON.

IN TRUTH, LEARNING IS REALLY THE PROCESS OF TAKING WHAT YOU'VE *ALREADY LEARNED* ON SOME INSTINCTUAL LEVEL AND SUDDENLY BECOMING AWARE OF IT. AND THIS BOOK MAY HAVE ARTICULATED AN IDEA ON THE TIP OF YOUR TONGUE OR ILLUMINATED YOU TO SOME NEW CONCEPT YOU NEED TO ABSORB. BUT FROM THERE, IT'S THE PROCESS OF RENDERING THAT AWARENESS BACK INTO AN UNAWARE PROCESS.

WHICH MEANS THAT, AS A WRITER, YOU HAVE TO TAKE THESE DEVICES AND CONCEPTS AND *INGRAIN THEM* INTO YOUR PROCESS. THESE ELEMENTS MUST BE SEARED INTO YOUR BRAIN SO THAT THEY ARE COMPLETELY AUTOMATIC. THEN, AND ONLY THEN, WILL THE WRITING PROCESS AND ITS RESULTS FEEL TRULY ORGANIC. ONLY THEN CAN YOU WRITE SEQUENTIALLY AND WITH FLOW AND PURPOSE. ONLY THEN WILL YOU STILL BE ABLE TO INCLUDE ALL OF THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING AND STRUCTURE THAT HULK HAS BEEN FAWNING OVER FOR THIS ENTIRE BOOK BECAUSE THE SIMPLEST TRUTH IS THAT YOU REALLY NEED THAT SPEED OF COMPREHENSION AND APPLICATION. THERE IS A CERTAIN KIND OF ON-THE-FLY WRITING CHOPS THAT ARE DESPERATELY NEEDED IF ONE PLANS TO BE A WORKING WRITER IN FILM AND TELEVISION.

SURE, YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO HAMMER OUT A GOOD SCRIPT IN THE COURSE OF A YEAR, BUT WHAT ABOUT WHEN YOU'RE HANDED A RE-WRITE JOB AND THE THING STARTS SHOOTING IN TWO WEEKS? WHAT ABOUT THE FACT THAT IT'S THE END OF THE SEASON AND YOU HAVE TO WRITE AN ENTIRE EPISODE IN TWO STRAIGHT ALL NIGHT SESSIONS? THAT'S WHAT BEING A WRITER IN THIS BUSINESS IS ACTUALLY LIKE. YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO WORK ON THE FLY AND SHOWCASE THE REAL-DEAL CHOPS. YOU CAN'T FAKE IT. AND EVEN IF YOU'RE A WRITER WHO SOMEHOW HAS ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD, CHANCES ARE THAT IF YOU CAN'T WRITE ORGANICALLY, THEN YOUR STORY WON'T BE COME ACROSS AS ORGANIC EITHER.

WORKING PROFESSIONALS CAN JUST DO IT.

AND TO EXPLAIN THE PRECISE NATURE OF WHAT HULK IS TALKING ABOUT, HULK WILL NOW CITE THE [DREYFUS MODEL OF SKILL ACQUISITION](#). TAKE A LOOK....

“...competence is characterized by active decision making in choosing a course of action. Proficiency is shown by individuals who develop intuition to guide their decisions and devise their own rules to formulate plans. The progression is thus from rigid adherence to rules to an intuitive mode of reasoning based on tacit knowledge. Michael Eraut summarized the five stages of increasing skill as follows:

1. Novice

- ‘rigid adherence to taught rules or plans’
- No exercise of ‘discretionary judgment’

2. Advanced beginner

- Limited ‘situational perception’
- All aspects of work treated separately with equal importance

3. Competent

- ‘coping with crowdedness’ (multiple activities, accumulation of information)
- Some perception of actions in relation to goals
- Deliberate planning
- Formulates routines

4. Proficient

- Holistic view of situation
- Prioritizes importance of aspects
- ‘perceives deviations from the normal pattern’
- Employs maxims for guidance, with meanings that adapt to the situation at hand

5. Expert

- Transcends reliance on rules, guidelines, and maxims
- ‘intuitive grasp of situations based on deep, tacit understanding’
- Has "vision of what is possible"
- Uses "analytical approaches" in new situations or in case of problems"

PRETTY SELF-EVIDENT, RIGHT?

SO HERE’S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN HULK AND PRETTY MUCH EVERY WORKING PROFESSIONAL HULK KNOWS SITS DOWN TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY:

SOMETIMES THEY’VE SCRIBBLED A FEW BRAINSTORM NOTES. SOMETIMES THEY OUTLINE CASUALLY UNTIL THEY’VE BROKEN THE STORY. THEN THEY JUST START WRITING IT. SOMETIMES IT’S A SCENE. SOMETIMES IT’S A DESCRIPTION OF A SCENE. SOMETIMES IT’S A SEQUENCE. THEN IT STARTS TO COME TOGETHER. BUT FOR THE MOST PART IT’S ALL ON THE FLY. THEY HAVE THE ABILITY TO TRAVERSE BETWEEN MICROSCOPIC ISSUES AND BIG PICTURE CONCERNS AT A MOMENT’S NOTICE. THEY START TO SEE THE SEAMS. THEY SEE A PROBLEM SO THEY GO BACK TO THEIR IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURE OR GENRE CONVENTION. THEY PIECE IT TOGETHER. THEY WRITE. THEY RE-WRITE. AND THEN THEY LET IT GO.

THE SAD THING IS THAT THIS NATURAL PROCESS IS ACTUALLY RUINED BY OBTUSE STUDIO INVOLVEMENT. A LOT OF TIMES THEY’LL REQUIRE A TREATMENT, BUT THERE ARE CERTAIN PROBLEMS YOU CAN’T SEE AT THE TREATMENT LEVEL THAT NEED TO BE CHANGED AT THE SCRIPT LEVEL AND IT BECOMES A WHOLE BIG PROCESS. OR WORSE, SOME PRODUCTION COMPANIES REQUIRE “ACT BY ACT” SUBMISSION, WHICH IS JUST GARBAGE IF YOU ASK THIS HULK. IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO WRITE A SCRIPT WHEN YOU CAN’T SEE THE WHOLE OF IT (AND IT UTTERLY DOESN’T HELP YOU CONFIRM THE TRUISM OF “THE ENDING IS THE CONCEIT”). AS FAR AS THE BUSINESS GOES, HULK’S FAVORITE METHODOLOGY IS JUST PITCH STRAIGHT INTO FULL SCRIPT. THE PROBLEM IS THAT USUALLY MEANS YOU HAVE TO NEGOTIATE FOR LESS MONEY.

IF ONLY THE INDUSTRY ITSELF JUST HAD A LITTLE MORE RESPECT FOR THE PROCESS. BUT AGAIN, WE’RE NOT HERE TO TALK ABOUT THE INDUSTRY. WE ARE HERE TO TALK ABOUT THE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO BECOME A BETTER WRITER. THE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO TAKE THIS ENTIRE BOOK FULL OF CONCEPTS AND INGRAIN THEM INTO YOUR PROCESS LIKE A PROFESSIONAL WRITER.

HOW THE HELL DO YOU DO THAT, ANYWAY? HOW DO YOU MAKE ALL OF THESE THINGS BECOME INGRAINED? IT SEEMS LIKE IT IS EITHER MAGIC OR INNATE TALENT, RIGHT?

NOPE!

IT IS HARD WORK + TIME.

HULK HAS REGULARLY CITED MALCOLM GLADWELL'S THEORY FROM "OUTLIERS" THAT IT TAKES 10,000 HOURS TO BECOME TRULY GOOD AT ANYTHING. IT TAKES PRACTICE. FOCUS. REPETITION. THE SAME WAY A BASEBALL PLAYER PRACTICES HITTING A BALL OVER AND OVER AGAIN UNTIL EACH REACTION BECOMES SIMPLE MUSCLE MEMORY. A WRITER MUST DO THE SAME. IDENTIFYING SCRIPT PROBLEMS, SEEING NARRATIVE SHIFTS, RECOGNIZING FALSE-SOUNDING DIALOGUE. THESE ARE ALL THINGS THAT MUST BE INGRAINED AND EASILY RECOGNIZED THOUGH THE BUILDING OF THE SAME KIND OF MUSCLE MEMORY PUT ON DISPLAY BY A GREAT BASEBALL PLAYER. AND TO GET TO THAT POINT TAKES 10,000 HOURS OF WRITING. 10,000 HOURS OF SOLVING YOUR OWN SCRIPT PROBLEMS. 10,000 HOURS OF THINKING ABOUT THINGS LIKE CHARACTER MOTIVE, STORY STRUCTURE, AND THE ART OF CINEMA.

AND IF YOU WRITE ALMOST EVERY DAY FOR A FEW HOURS, THEN 10,000 HOURS USUALLY TAKES ABOUT... 10 YEARS.

GULP.

HULK CANNOT HELP IF THIS REALITY SCARES YOU. SO OFTEN HULK TALKS TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE DREAMS OF WRITING SCRIPTS AND SO OFTEN THEY ARE NOT EVEN CLOSE TO THAT FIGURE. SOME OF YOU ARE STILL YOUNG AND IN SCHOOL AND IN THE PERFECT PLACE TO START. AND SOME OF YOU ARE... A BIT BEHIND. BUT IF YOU REALLY WANT IT, THEN YOU CANNOT LET THAT REALITY STOP YOU. YOU HAVE TO BE READY TO PUT IN YOUR 10 YEARS. AND HULK CAN REALLY SPEAK TO THE TRUTH OF THAT 10,000 HOUR FIGURE. IT WASN'T UNTIL 10 YEARS IN THAT HULK'S WRITING BECAME GOOD ENOUGH FOR REAL-DEAL INTEREST. AND SUDDENLY, IT FELT LIKE HULK WOKE UP ONE DAY AND IT ALL CLICKED. YES, THE PROCESS ITSELF WAS ACTUALLY RATHER GRADUAL, BUT ALL THESE THINGS HULK "KNEW" HAD BECOME SOMETHING HULK ACTUALLY "UNDERSTOOD." GOING BACK TO BEFORE, DIDN'T HULK MENTION THAT IT TOOK THE **SOUTH PARK** GUYS ABOUT 10 YEARS TO REALLY UNDERSTAND STORYTELLING AND HOW TO APPROACH THEIR SHOW? THAT WASN'T AN ACCIDENT. THINGS TAKE TIME. THINGS TAKE HARD WORK.

SO FOR ALL THESE PAGES AND PAGES OF GUIDELINES AND PRACTICAL ADVICE, EVEN IF IT'S ADVICE THAT HULK TRULY BELIEVES IN, EVEN IF EVERY SINGLE THING IN THIS BOOK IS SOMETHING HULK THINKS YOU SHOULD ADOPT WITH EVERY FIBER OF HULK'S BEING...THERE IS STILL NO QUICK FIX.

YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO INCORPORATE THOSE IDEAS INTO YOUR DEEPEST ESSENCE AS A WRITER. YOU HAVE TO PRACTICE WITH THEM LIKE A BASEBALL PLAYER WOULD. AND LIKE A BASEBALL PLAYER, YOU'LL FIND YOUR OWN STRENGTHS OVER TIME. YOU'LL FIND YOU ALREADY HAVE A LOT OF THE SKILLS AND TRAINING YOU NEED TO BE GOOD AT STRUCTURE. OR PERHAPS YOU'VE BEEN TRAINING AS A GOOD LISTENER SO YOU HAVE AN EAR FOR DIALOGUE. MAYBE YOU HAVE THE FOCUS TO BE ECONOMICAL. BUT NO MATTER WHAT YOUR SKILLS BECOME AND HOW THEY MANIFEST THEMSELVES, IT WILL TAKE UNBELIEVABLE AMOUNTS OF WORK. TEN YEARS OF IT.

THIS IS SCARY. AND YOU HAVE TWO POSSIBLE REACTIONS:

1) Damn... I ... I don't think I have the time to do that. I want to, but that's so much and I just usually don't have the work ethic to see it through. I think that seems daunting. I mean, I really would like to be a writer, but I don't know about that.

2) Okay, fine. Whatever Hulk. That's not going to stop me.

IF YOU ANSWERED LIKE #1, THEN YOU LIKE THE IDEA OF WRITING. YOU LIKE THE THINGS IT MAKES YOU FEEL, OR PERHAPS THE LIFESTYLE OR ACCLAIM YOU THINK IT WILL AFFORD YOU.

AND IF YOU ANSWERED LIKE #2, THEN YOU ARE A WRITER.

SO IT IS TIME TO START WRITING. GO DO YOUR FIRST SCREENPLAY. JUST WRITE THE DAMN THING.

DO IT. AND ONCE YOU FINISH IT, IT'S GOING TO BE TERRIBLE. BUT THAT'S TOTALLY OKAY. PUT IT IN A DRAWER. SIT DOWN. WRITE ANOTHER ONE. DO IT BETTER. THEN START ONE THAT'S WAY OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE. DO THINGS YOU ARE NOT GOOD AT. PUT IT IN A DRAWER. THEN DO IT ALL AGAIN. AND AGAIN. DON'T LOOK AT THEM AS YOUR BE ALL END ALL, BUT AS JUST ANOTHER STEP IN THE PROCESS. LEARN HOW TO CRAFT STORIES. THEN WRITE ANOTHER. AND ANOTHER. GET BETTER. DON'T WORRY YOU'RE WASTING GOOD IDEAS BECAUSE THE VALUE OF THE IDEA AND THE INSPIRATION NEVER GOES AWAY, EVEN IF THE SCRIPT IS CRAP. YOU CAN ALWAYS COME BACK AND RE-DO THE IDEA ONCE YOU'RE BETTER AT WRITING. HULK'S DONE THAT ALL THE TIME. JUST KEEP WRITING THEM.

FACT: HULK GOT AN EARLY START AND WAS SUPER DEVOTED TO THIS PROCESS AND HULK WROTE OVER 70 SCREENPLAYS BEFORE EVEN ONE WORKING PROFESSIONAL SAID "HEY THIS IS PRETTY GOOD!" AND FROM THERE? GETTING SOMETHING ACTUALLY MADE IS EVEN HARDER. BUT WHEN THE LUCK AND OPPORTUNITY FINALLY COMES AROUND, YOU HAVE TO BE SURE YOU CAN DELIVER THE GOODS. YOU HAVE TO BACK IT UP WITH REAL PROFESSIONAL KNOW-HOW.

AND YES, IT WILL BE SCARY AS ALL HELL, BUT YOU ARE NOT ALONE. YOU HAVE FRIENDS. YOU HAVE COLLABORATORS. THIS IS A TEAM MEDIUM, SO FIND YOUR SUPPORT. YOU HAVE THOUSANDS OF OTHER WRITERS WITH YOU...

... AND YOU HAVE A HULK.

HULK KNOWS THAT SOUNDS CHEESY AS ALL HELL, BUT HULK MEANS IT: *YOU HAVE A HULK ON YOUR SIDE*. HULK WANTS YOU TO WIN. HULK EVEN HATES THAT THIS OH-SO-NECESSARY 10,000 HOUR MESSAGE IS DOMINATING THE LAST SECTION OF THIS BOOK. YES, HULK NEEDED TO WARN YOU OF THE DIFFICULTIES, BUT HULK WOULD MUCH RATHER *INSPIRE YOU*. SO IN THAT SPIRIT, HULK JUST WANTS TO FINISH THIS SUCKER WITH A LITTLE EXPLANATION OF ONE OF HULK'S HEROES.

SO THERE IS THIS GUY NAMED PADDY CHAYEFSEY. HE IS ONE OF THE GREATEST SCREENWRITERS OF ALL TIME.

CHAYEFSEY'S SUCCESS WAS DUE IN LARGE PART TO THE FACT THAT HE WAS, FIRST AND FOREMOST, A WRITER OF ALL FORMS. HE WROTE PLAYS, NOVELS, TELEVISION, AND EVEN CRITICISM (HULK LIKES CRITICISM TOO IN CASE YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED). PADDY CHAYEFSEY APPROACHED HIS CRAFT WITH A REMARKABLE SENSE UNDERSTANDING. HIS STYLE ALWAYS SEEMED TO VARY. YOU COULD ALWAYS RECOGNIZE HIS FOCUS AND INTELLIGENCE, BUT NEVER AN OVERPOWERING "STYLE" THAT DOMINATED HIS WORK. HIS VOICE COULD MUTATE AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE. HE COULD TRANSCEND GENRE, TONE, COMEDY, DRAMA, MEDIUM, FORM, AND EVEN LANGUAGE. HE COULD EXPLORE THE SIMPLEST STORIES ABOUT DECENT HUMAN BEINGS AND ETHOS (**MARTY**), THE GROWING STATE OF THE NYC SOCIAL SCENE LONG BEFORE CAPOTE EVEN THOUGHT OF **BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S (THE BACHELOR PARTY)**, THE INCREDIBLE THEMATIC REALITIES OF BUREAUCRACY AND PERSONAL WILL (**THE HOSPITAL**), THE HARDCORE SCI-FI AND HORROR CONCEPTS OF TRIPPY GENETICS (**ALTERED STATES**), THE AHEAD-OF-ITS-TIME VIEWS OF SEXUALITY AND BECOMING A FORERUNNER TO LATE '60S CINEMA (**THE AMERICANIZATION OF EMILY**), AND IN HIS MAGNUM OPUS, HE MANAGED TO PENETRATE THE DEEPEST LAYERS OF SATIRE TO THE POINT WHERE HE BASICALLY FORETOLD THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION AND AMERICAN CULTURE AT LARGE (**NETWORK**).

IF YOU NEED A COMPARISON, THEN CHAYEFSEY WAS SORT OF A PORTO-CHARLIE KAUFMAN AND CERTAINLY EVERY BIT AS MUCH OF A GENIUS.

BUT CHAYEFSEY DIDN'T JUST WORK ON THESE LAUDED PROJECTS, WHICH EARNED HIM THE MOST LONE SCREENWRITING OSCARS OF ANYONE IN HISTORY; HE SPENT HIS EARLY CAREER AS A "WORKING WRITER" DURING THE GOLDEN AGE OF TELEVISION (READ: MASS PRODUCED AND NOT NEARLY ON THE SAME LEVEL AS CINEMA). BACK IN COLLEGE HULK HUNTED DOWN MOST OF HIS LESSER-SEEN STUFF AND THE ONE THING THAT ALWAYS BECOMES SO AMAZINGLY CLEAR ABOUT HIS WORK IS THAT EVEN WITH HIS THIS UTILITARIAN TV WORK, HE SO COMPLETELY UNDERSTOOD WHAT HE NEEDS TO DO WITH THE STORY AND DEVICES HE'S USING. *HE ALWAYS UNDERSTANDS THE*

PURPOSE!

AS ANY GENIUS WOULD, CHAYEFISKY FAMOUSLY HATED THE WAY HOLLYWOOD ENCROACHED ON STORYTELLING AND THE AUTHOR'S DUTY, CALLING IT "democracy at its ugliest," BUT HE STILL NEVER, EVER LET THAT IMPACT THE QUALITY, NOR THE EFFORT THAT WENT INTO HIS WORK. HE KNEW HOW TO WRITE BIG AND SMALL, BROAD AND NUANCED, FOR THE SYSTEM OR AGAINST IT, AND HE KNEW WHEN TO FOLLOW RULES AND WHEN TO ABSOLUTELY SHATTER THEM. HE ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD THE PURPOSE OF WHAT HE WAS WRITING.

AND THUS, THE RANGE, TOTALITY, UNDERSTANDING, AND HUMANITY OF PADDY CHAYEFISKY INSPIRES HULK EVERY SINGLE DAY. HE IS EVERYTHING WE SHOULD EVER WANT TO BE IN A SCREENWRITER.

AND HE IS A LARGE PART OF WHAT INSPIRED HULK TO WRITE THIS BOOK.

"Yeah, why would you write something like this, Hulk? As you would say, what is the purpose?"

ON ONE LEVEL, HULK WAS EXCITED ABOUT THE IDEA OF TRYING TO CONVEY THE SUM TOTAL OF ALMOST ALL OF HULK'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT STORYTELLING AND SCREENWRITING. HULK WANTED TO TRY AND MAKE IT A SINGULAR, COMPLETE THOUGHT. A STORY OF WRITING ITSELF WITH A THROUGH-LINE THAT WOULD MAYBE SPEAK TO YOU. AND ON ONE LEVEL, THIS BOOK FEELS COMPLETE, AND YET... HULK STILL FEELS LIKE IT'S BARELY SCRATCHING THE SURFACE. AS CRAZY AS IT SOUNDS, HULK LOOKS OVER WHAT IS WRITTEN AND STILLS SEES SO MUCH MORE THAT CAN BE SAID. BUT ALAS, IT WAS TIME TO LET GO.

WHICH MEANS THAT THE NEXT STEP FALLS TO YOU.

THIS BOOK IS ONLY BUT THE FIRST STEP IN A LONGER CONVERSATION. SO MANY IDEAS WITHIN ARE PART OF THE GREAT NEGOTIATION. YOU MAY HAVE A DIFFERENT TAKE ON HOW SOMETHING MIGHT WORK. YOU MAY RECOGNIZE A WAY TO IMPLY SOMETHING NEW. AFTER ALL, HULK WANTS YOU TO DO WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR *YOUR* STORY. BUT HULK WANTS TO TALK ABOUT ALL OF THOSE IDEAS WITH YOU.

HULK WANTS US TO FLESH THEM OUT AND MAKE THEM FEEL REAL AND UNDERSTOOD. HULK HOPES THAT MAYBE YOU CAN HELP HULK EVEN REFINE THOSE IDEAS TOO. TO TEACH HULK THE MANY THINGS THAT HULK HAS YET TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT A SUBJECT THAT CAN ONLY BE TAMED, BUT NEVER MASTERED. HULK WROTE THIS BOOK SO WE BOTH COULD BECOME BETTER WRITERS. AND IF WE REALLY WANT TO MAKE IT HAPPEN, THEN WE CAN ALL BE SOMETHING OF A SOUNDING BOARD FOR ONE ANOTHER. HULK SAYS THIS WITHOUT A HINT OF CYNICISM OR DISINTEREST. THIS MODERN WORLD IS SO FULL OF YELLING AND CONTENTION AND UGLINESS, SO THAT HULK WANTS TO CREATE A PLACE WHERE WE CAN DO WAY BETTER THAN THAT.

BECAUSE SECRETLY WE *ARE* WAY BETTER THAN THAT.

HULK GENUINELY WANTS TO CHANGE THE CULTURE OF SCREENWRITING. HULK KNOWS THAT SOUNDS FREAKIN' INSANE, BUT IT'S TRUE. THE ONLY WAY IT'S GOING TO HAPPEN IS IF WE COMMIT TO THE IDEA AND HAVE NOTHING BUT MUTUAL RESPECT FOR ONE ANOTHER.

DISAGREE WITH ONE OF HULK'S WORKING DEFINITIONS? NEED HELP BREAKING A STORY? CAN'T FIGURE OUT A CHARACTER'S PATH? WRITE. ASK. HELP. AND FEEL FREE TO DROP HULK A LINE ANY TIME AT FILMCRITHULK@GMAIL.COM. IT CAN GET A LITTLE BACKED UP AT TIMES AND SUBMITTING FULL SCRIPTS IS ACTUALLY RATHER TRICKY DEPENDING ON WHAT'S GOING ON WITH ALL HULK'S CONTRACTS AT THE MOMENT, BUT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS THEN HULK ASSURES YOU THAT HE READS EVERY SINGLE THING HULK IS SENT AND WILL ALWAYS TRY TO GET TO EVERY SINGLE PERSON. RIGHT NOW HULK'S ABOUT 500+ HULK-MAILS BEHIND (SOME GOING BACK AWHILE), SO PLEASE BE PATIENT BECAUSE HULK FULLY RESPONDS TO EACH ONE.

But really, why do all this, Hulk?

THE SAME REASON HULK EXPLAINED AT THE BEGINNING. BECAUSE HULK KNOWS THE STRUGGLE OF WRITING ALL TOO WELL. IT IS AN ENDLESS WAR WITH ONE'S ONE BRAIN. IT IS LONESOME. IT IS DIFFICULT. AND IT IS OFTEN INFURIATING.

... SO WHO WOULD WANT TO GO THROUGH THAT ALONE?

<3 HULK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THERE ARE TOO MANY PEOPLE TO THANK.

TO MAMA-HULK FOR HER SACRIFICE, LOVE, AND JEOPARDY-RIVAL-WORTHINESS, AND GLORIOUS TASTE IN CINEMA.

TO PAPA-HULK FOR HIS INTELLIGENCE AND PATIENCE.

TO BROTHER-HULK FOR HIS SENSE OF HUMOR.

TO "BETTY" FOR BEING THE MOST LOVING, FUN, AND SUPPORTIVE PERSON EVER.

TO ALL THE REMARKABLE FRIENDS WHO HAVE NOT ONLY BEEN GREAT FUN, BUT FOR WHOM WITHOUT THEIR HELP AND SUPPORT NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE.

TO THE MENTORS.

TO HULK'S COLLEAGUES IN HOLLYWOOD, HULK THANKS YOU FOR YOUR DAILY INSPIRATION.

TO HULK'S COLLEAGUES IN CRITICISM, HULK THANKS YOU FOR YOUR DAILY INSPIRATION.

TO THE BADASS DIGEST CREW WHO MAKE UP THE MOST AMAZING COWORKERS ON THE PLANET. AND EVEN BETTER FRIENDS... BUT PROBABLY EVEN BESTEST DRINKING BUDDIES?

TO EVERYONE WHO EVER GAVE HULK AN OPPORTUNITY.

AND TO EVERYONE WHO THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE FUN TO SEE WHAT TALKING-HULK HAD TO SAY ABOUT MOVIES, GOT WHAT HULK WAS DOING, LUCKILY STUCK AROUND, AND HELPED MAKE HULK BETTER AT THIS THING. YOU HAVE NO IDEA BUT YOU, DEAR READER, HAVE QUITE LITERALLY CHANGED HULK'S LIFE. AND FOR THAT YOU HAVE HULK'S ENDLESS THANKS AND FRIENDSHIP.

<3 HULK

ENDNOTES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS!

Screenwriting 101

(Sentence Case Version)

By Film Crit Hulk!

Introduction by Edgar Wright

Edited by Meredith Borders

Copy Edited by Lindsay Maher

Cover by Yannick Belzil

Film Crit Hulk was created in a chaotic lab experiment involving gamma radiation, the ghost of Pauline Kael, and telepods for some reason. Now Hulk has a deep and abiding love of cinema wherein Hulk recognizes the inherent values of popular, narrative, or experimental styles!

Through a unique journey, Hulk has ended up working in Hollywood for over a decade and now writes about cinema and storytelling in thoroughly Hulk-sized fashion.

And now you hold in your hands / have on your screen / whatever in your whatever, the first ebook by Film Crit Hulk.

The only thing it means to be is helpful.

For Mama-Hulk

Because she was the Giving Tree.

Introduction.

HULK MUSE. HULK PONDER. HULK BEAUTIFULLY ARTICULATE THE JOY OF CINEMA.

You won't like him when he's angry, but you will love him when he's passionate.

Film Crit Hulk makes all other cinematic commentary look very puny indeed. Marvel as he pounds the CAPS LOCK button to properly expound his love for cinema. Imagine Pauline Kael caught in a gamma bomb blast and you will realise that in the desert of cinematic connoisseurs, Film Crit Hulk is the strongest one there is!

In 1962, there once was a puny scientist with no love of the movie or regard for critical theory of cinematic arts. Then one fateful day, this non-cineaste was hit with massive amounts of radiation and transformed into a lumbering beast with superhuman strength, great invulnerability, but also with a newfound appreciation for classic storytelling, spatial awareness and genres of all form.

This writer of this book may only transform into the brutish green goliath in the dark of the movie theatre. His change into a passionate mass of movie loving can only be triggered by the release of adrenaline when intensely engaged or enraged by the images before him. The green goliath of the movie theatre possesses none of his human counterparts' snobbiness, making him the ideal creature to appreciate the highs and lows of cinema. Hulk will feast on the studio popcorn and arthouse carrot cake with the same voracious appetite. Just do not talk during the feature presentation or dare check your iPhone at any point, for you may be swatted into the parking lot.

Film Crit Hulk bats away other movie buffs with their endless lists they think constitute as articles, and brings the essay back to roaring life. Why would you want to read other literature about cinema with its simple use of uppercase and lowercase characters? Film Crit Hulk knows that a true love of cinema CAN ONLY BE FULLY EXPRESSED WHEN USING THE CAPS LOCK BUTTON.

WHY READ SMALL-MINDED FILM CRITICISM WHEN YOU CAN STAND IN AWE OF HULK'S GARGANTUAN LOVE OF THE MOVIES.

I give this book two Hulk Hands up. WAY UP.

Edgar Wright, 2013

- PREFACE -

So you want to write a screenplay?

Before you do, know this: it requires a great deal of effort and dedication. A lot of these screenwriting books like to fill your head with false promises and easy tricks. But it's so damn far from the obvious truth: becoming a talented writer takes a long time and a lot of hard work.

They also conveniently forget to mention that the odds are against you. There are over a million scripts already floating around Hollywood. Hulk has read, oh... a couple thousand of them. And nearly every single person Hulk meets in the film industry already has a script of some sort. Not only does the sheer volume of scripts make it difficult to distinguish oneself in this climate, but so does the fact that there are already a vast number of talented, professional writers in need of work.

So given all these crippling odds, we should all just give up, right? Well, no. You're not here reading this because that reality bothers you. And that's the thing about the movies: they're wonderful. They're the imagination of storytelling made tangible. They're our dreams made real. Who wouldn't want to be a part of all that?

But with cinema being so popular and with the omnipresence of talented writers, you would think Hollywood would be knee-deep in great scripts, right? Well, the obvious problem is they most definitely are not. Thus, Hulk will augment the phrasing of that problem and ask a different question of you:

Why do most movies have *major script problems*?

Quite frankly, the answer lies in a lot of industry bullshit. Now, Hulk isn't here to parse out an understanding of the studio system, but just understand that there is a good deal of putting the cart before the horse so to speak. So many movies press on before they even really have a story, just hoping they'll figure it out later... But like Hulk said, this book is not actually about sussing out industry problems. Nor is this book about writing screenplays that sell, or pop, or tell you how to pitch to a studio. Hulk would never falsely advertise to you in such a manner. While these elements are certainly important to being a "success" in Hollywood, they are not an important part of becoming a good writer, so they will only be a tangential part of what we shall discuss here. In fact, Hulk would argue that if you *only* possess the ability to sell, pop and pitch, then you can only have the kind of success that does not last.

Meanwhile, *knowing how to write lasts*.

So the following gargantuan seven-part book is Hulk's humble attempt to try and shed some light on how to become a better writer and storyteller. The first half of the book deals with important conceptual issues and takes a great deal of (needed) time to wax philosophical on the state of mind and purpose one needs to approach storytelling. There's just too many concepts to both learn and unlearn before you are ready to really start. But the last half of the book is (thankfully) rather practical in terms of how to apply those concepts to create a methodology for yourself and hone the craft.

Still, Hulk has tried to make the structure of this book as easily digestible and simple to navigate as possible. Most of the subjects are listed by chapter number, with either letter or Roman numeral sub-headings. It may all seem like a lot. It may even seem to dive headlong into nuance at the cost of direct clarity, but that is very much the point: too many screenwriting books parse out over-simplicities that do nothing but make your work feel more restricted and more like everyone else's. This book is about learning the ways to create any kind of story you want by using story mechanisms and conceptual understanding.

And whatever shortcomings this approach has in terms of pontification, the book will certainly not have suffered from a lack of effort. And like most Hulk pieces, the book's Hulk-sized-ness is informed by the sheer mass of the subject itself; for the art of storytelling, whether we distill it in terms of the ideas, the know-how, or its effect on the audience, is an art that is as varied as our own lives, and as expansive as our own universe.

But please know this book is not meant to be some authoritarian rant on Hulk's part. Hulk is not an ideologue and this is not about "how things should be done." It is meant to be helpful to you. Nothing more. Nothing less. The motives for writing it are born from a genuine sense of camaraderie, from knowing the same struggle that all writers go through. And

if you've been through that struggle, then you know that it is a sham for any writer to represent themselves as an authority. There is only the same lonesome struggle to execute one's ideas.

It is true of all of us. And it is constant, pervasive, and ever-lasting. Hulk believes this struggle is tough on writers because it makes for a solitary life and trying battles with one's own mind. It fosters a solipsistic sense of independence, which can also breed a sense of contempt. So as much as anything, Hulk writes a book like this in an attempt to connect. To share. To not feel like we are so alone in the pursuit.

As such, this book is meant for writers for every single level: introductory, intermediate, and working pros who perhaps know most of these things already in either a conscious or unconscious manner, but could always benefit from seeing the ideas made plain. Even certified geniuses can sometimes overlook some missing element a script may need in order to fully elevate their story. And yes, this book is also meant for those who have no interest in screenwriting whatsoever, but are just curious about the writing process and how it affects what they see onscreen.

Because ultimately this isn't about the path to success, or industry secrets, or some ethereal concept of import...

This is about learning how to write screenplays that work.

<3 Hulk

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Part One - What Is A Story?

You instinctively know what Hulk means when Hulk says the word *story*, but let's try an experiment: define "a story" in a single sentence.

... Yeah, it's harder than it seems.

Life is full of these obvious words that we can define so easily, concepts like love, anger, happiness, jealousy, and lust (can't forget lust!). We use those words every single day of our lives, but rarely do we try to actually define them in a singular, clear way. Perhaps because these words tend to capture enormous emotions; feelings so big they can take over our entire bodies. These words contain multitudes, and it's problematic when we try to simplify the sheer totality and range of most of these concepts. To embrace that range means not catering to a simple one-off line like "Love means never having to say you're sorry," but instead considering everything that the concept truly means. And come on, "never having to say you're sorry?" A good deal of us should be apologizing for, like, 60% of the things we say and do, especially to the people we love.

But Hulk wants to do a silly thing with you here and try to define the word *story*.

We could just call a story "one of those things people tell" and be done with it, but that's not very helpful, is it? And that's what matters. You see, Hulk believes that sometimes definitions shouldn't be only about accuracy or concision, but instead about application (take note as this will be a running theme with half the terminology used in this book). And that means giving you a definition that helps you best apply the idea in a concrete, substantial way. Hulk calls these kinds of definitions "working definitions" and they are a truly lovely thing.

So imagine if aliens landed on the planet and the fate of the human race depended on your clear explanation of what a story is. Think about how that outright *clarity* matters. If the aliens were asking for a definition of love, you couldn't tell them "Love means never having to say you're sorry," because they'd be super confused and probably enslave us or whatever. And defining "a story" is so hard because stories can have so many different purposes. They can be accounts of facts. Full-on narratives. Rumors. Legends. News articles. Background information. The word itself is so unbelievably dexterous, so how do we narrow it down?

For the purposes of this book, Hulk will mostly be narrowing our focus to the kind of storytelling we call *narrative*. And narratives are only something that humans have been creating since the freakin' dawn of culture. They are born from the need to communicate the most rudimentary concepts of survival. Out of our need to tell and inform, we built language. Out of our need to use language to best communicate ideas, we created narratives, which first sprang up as part of the oral tradition, built around campfires and communal experience. Again, this was something that was *necessary* for us to operate. From there we made symbols. Wrote. Painted. And the media, formats, and shapes of audiences have changed many times over the course of history, but the stunning importance of narrative has always remained. The universal tropes and devices involved in these narratives have stayed intact and remain wholly relevant for good reason: narratives allow us to come to a sense of understanding about life and our function within it.

Why is this history important?

Because it tells us why *we still do it*.

Think about it. Every day, parents try to teach their children how to live. Teachers instruct their pupils. Elders speak to youngin's. And they could just be like "do this!" or "do that!" but that tends not to work very well, does it? But by taking the same points and enveloping them within a story, they can convey so much more than mere instruction. It doesn't expressly need to be some long-winded tale; it's more of a conditional way to convey meaning. Consequence. Action. Inaction. *Purpose*. It's all there. Narratives mean so much to our culture, not just because they invoke a basic sense of morality, but because they make our very humanity something understandable. They make our humanity something tangible. They make it something *felt*.

And this should be your purpose in storytelling. Ideally, whatever it is that you want to communicate to both the people around you and future generations should not just be what exists in your story. It should be the very point of your story. It should be your purpose. But it is stunning how often we forget this. Or how often our modern sensibilities thumb our noses at anything that tries to say something meaningful or earnest. And that sucks because that's not the purpose of

stories.

After all, the very first stories were fables: a hypothetical, abstract situation designed to impart lessons upon youth. From there, fables grew into myths and hero stories and fairy and folk tales. From there, they spread to epics and novels and poems and plays and now we find ourselves rooted in the glory of cinema. The platforms may have changed, but the purpose has remained the same since the original fable: to demonstrate cause and effect in the form of abstraction in order to prove something true about our human experience. And Hulk honestly thinks it's one of the most important things we can do.

"Okay, we get it Hulk! Narratives are important! We know that! That's why we are here reading!!!"

Okay, sorry, sorry! Hulk just had to make it clear in case it wasn't. Some folks just think a story is something to pass the time. And that's not to say that it can't ultimately be a lighthearted thing, just that we still need to be reminded why we actually do this storytelling stuff in the first place. As we get older it becomes easy to forget that. We tend to lose sight of just how amazing the simple lessons in a story can feel. But if you ask a dozen English teachers about the purpose of stories, they'll speak to that power. They get to see the ongoing cycle of high school kids across the country discovering the same big ideas that you did in high school and they happen to feel just as revolutionary as they did for you. These are moments that shape our lives and conceptual understanding of the world around us. And while the joy of intellectual discovery tends to happen less and less frequently in adulthood, it becomes our duty to instead pass on that meaning. The cycle is not only constant, but critical to our function. Like Plato describing the cave, we use our considerate and thoughtful minds to pass the torch of universal truths and do our best to distinguish them from the shadows.

And if we can fundamentally agree that stories are both important and have a purpose...

The real question becomes: what makes a *good* narrative?

Is it something that involves you? Is it something that is well-realized? That feels honest and real? That is crafted without extraneous excess? That gets you to learn something you never knew before? Or is it something that speaks to some basic truth that you now recognize in yourself?

The correct answer is "yes."

Why yes, good friend, a good story does all of those things. There is, of course, some amount of wiggle room when it comes to *how* successful each of these elements needs to be in relation to each other. For instance, if your story is really concerned with the thematic meaning of a given scene it can indulge in some aspects that are not wholly crucial for story economy. There's a negotiation to all of this. You can't lose sight of *all the things* a good story needs, but when you do go out of bounds it has to be for a *really good reason*. Sure that good reason mostly depends on what matters to you, the proverbial author, or you, the proverbial audience member, but Hulk thinks it's safe to say that every great film does capture all of these elements in some way.

So let's just go for it! Here Hulk presents a working definition of ideal storytelling: **a good narrative is compelling to the audience, economically told, feels real either in terms of emotion, detail, or texture, and speaks to some thematic truth that you recognize in yourself or the world at large.**

Ta-da! And all Hulk had to do was cheat with a long, silly sentence that was just a list of the stuff Hulk said earlier.

Yes, this definition sets a high standard for execution, but please remember it is not meant to be exclusive or limiting or inflexible. It's instead an ideal model for how to tell *the best possible stories*. Meaning the definition is meant to be both practical and an inspiration, not restrictive. Hulk won't inherently exclude anything for lacking a component. It's just that Hulk tends to recognize that all the best stories are multifaceted, complex, interesting, and resonant. No matter how technically "untrue" a story may be, a well-told, compelling one will still feel *real*. And the best stories speak to your mind (thematically), body (viscerally), and soul (with resonance). So why wouldn't you want your own stories to do the same?

Hulk is all about embracing the high standard, regardless of our ability to actually live up to it. Just sit down and look at that definition again, then look at your own stories. Ask yourself, are you trying to be cool instead of compelling? Are you trying to be disaffected and edgy instead of authentic? Are you being disingenuous to the world you've created in the name of a quick fix? Heck, are you even thinking about what your story says on a larger thematic level at all? In total, are

you at least trying to do all the things you need to fit our working definition of a good narrative?

And the answers to these questions will tell you everything you need to know.

“Okay, gee. Thanks Hulk for the big definition there, but I don’t even know where to begin... I mean... what kind of stories do I even tell?”

Well, proverbial reader who lives in Hulk’s book, Hulk would like to suggest that you implicitly *know stories*. You know them in your bones. You’ve seen / read / heard thousands of them. You, no matter who you are, instinctively know what makes stories good and how they work.

The key is simply to become *aware* of what you already know.

Part Two - Where To Find Inspiration

For some people, the hardest part of writing is finding inspiration.

The problem with Hulk trying to help you find inspiration is that inspiration sort of has to be... um... natural. It certainly cannot be forced. Inspiration is largely a mysterious process that is, by its nature, organic and rather personal. And to understand how you, as an individual, find that inspiration takes practice, patience, and a lot of hard work. Sure, Hulk could give you the thoroughly bad (and rather popular) answer of saying "Stories are all around you! You just have to look for them!" but that doesn't really help now, does it? Even if the statement is weirdly true. Stories and inspiration actually *are* everywhere. But the real key is training your brain how to recognize this inspiration and apply it readily. And in doing so it will become constant, pervasive, and even downright suffocating to the point where you won't be able to keep up.

For far too long, Hulk thought the key to inspiration was having the ability to decipher a story that was worth telling versus one that isn't worth telling... but that was wrong. Anything in this universe can be a story worth telling, as long as you know how to best tell it. So that means the real key is understanding how to take that inspiration and make it manifest as "story."

So the first thing we have to do is decipher why the moment of inspiration itself really matters. It's not just the starting point, but something that can work as a backbone *for the entire process* of writing. Consider the fact that Hulk has tons of ideas at the moment and they exist in various forms: brain storms, outlines, half-written screenplays, fully-written screenplays, short stories, teleplays, novels. Even a litany of small ideas written on napkins and scraps of paper. What this personal information is meant to imply is that the relative "done-ness" or form of the property has *absolutely nothing to do with the idea and concept itself*. A finished film is as close to the inspiration that spawned it as that original scribbled note on a napkin. To the creator, they are *conceptually* the same thing, no matter how much they might have changed. Never forget that. Because the germ of your idea can be the thing that must constantly light the fire underneath you as you go forth. When you are in the slog of working out the logistics, you must find that same inspiration. Even if the project radically changes, the idea itself should be a through-line that saves your script throughout the process. The moment of inspiration is both your motive and motivation.

But even then, where to get that idea written on a napkin? The germ of the idea? The very first thing that you write down? The answers to those questions are so ethereal and vague that it is almost foolish to really try and answer it. But, foolish as it may be, Hulk wants to help you. So Hulk's going to do Hulk's best here and try to give you some productive ways of finding stories you want to tell.

To do that, Hulk will start with a question: why does it seem like so many movies aren't trying to say anything these days?

... Probably because a lot of movies aren't trying to say anything these days. It's a bit of a forgotten element in all this. Often we view a film trying to "say something" as an obstacle to entertainment, a challenging notion that prevents us from placating audiences with the dumb, mindless entertainment we think they crave. But as Hulk alluded to in Part One, Hulk disagrees with this idea. Humanity creates narratives. We give things meaning and value and import. You can bemoan the rise of reality TV and say that it's not saying anything because it's clearly full of false and manufactured storylines, all of which is likely true, but as a culture who watches it, we still assign socialization and narrative to reality TV all the same. People talk of the motives of the Kardashians the same way we do the motives of the highest fiction. The Kardashian show may not be intentionally trying to "say anything," and there may be an intellectual chasm between the subtleties of that kind of show and the pinnacle of art, but it is rather easy to forget that we're effectively doing the same thing with both properties. Both are narratives that serve the same purpose of informing life. Meaning both low-fiction and high-fiction say something. Of course, Hulk imagines there are those of you out there who think that a film trying to "say something" is annoying, who feel it is didactic. Pretentious. Esoteric... Hulk also rejects this notion, for saying something, *anything* is the very purpose of art. And narrative is the best vehicle in the world for conveying meaning. It's so good it can do it incidentally.

So what do you want to say? What is it that you want to tell the world? That's what inspiration is. It is something that is inspirational to you.

So Hulk will now ask you a better question: *what compels you?*

There are a lot of different avenues you can go down while trying to answer that question, but let's try the most literal and concrete first. First let us try to answer it on a macro, issue-based level: are you concerned with problems facing our nation's youth? The conditions of farm animals? Crooked politicians? The unsung plight of nurses and other people trying to do good in a bureaucracy? Corrupt practices of corporate business? Mundane heroisms? Gender inequality? Sexual politics? Really, you are just asking yourself, *what do I have a strong opinion about?*

The funny thing is that people use these topics in making documentaries all the time, but Hulk wants to convey to you that this is also a great way to find inspiration for fiction. Of course, the prime worry of doing so is that you'll just end up making a political essay in the form of a movie. Or that you will retroactively create a narrative that only fits what you want to say, and thus it will feel like a mouthpiece and not an organic story. But the point of embracing these kinds of broad issues from the get-go is that they always seem to have some sort of personal relevance, one that will help drive the creative voice of your work. Plus it speaks to the old adage "write what you know." The one problem with that old adage, however, is that the phrasing stinks because it tends to breed a lack of courageous thinking and research. It breeds the idea that we can *only* tell the uber-personal. Thus, Hulk thinks *write what compels you* is a much more functional way to discover your own ideas.

The main reason this issue-centric approach works is that it tends to naturally imbue your film with the thematic backbone a strong narrative requires. And because, come on, you should freaking care about the story you are telling. Otherwise, why even do it? When a writer/ filmmaker genuinely cares, it radiates off the page or screen. The audience really can tell. And if you don't care? That comes across plain as day, too (look at the career arc of Brett Ratner, for instance. Aesthetically everything is pleasing enough - or at least a carbon copy of what he intends to mimic, but the films are soulless. And the one film of his he was excited about was **Rush Hour**, which actually connected with people in a valid popcorn way.) Most writers and filmmakers care for something within the film's identity, whether it is the genre, audience effect, or craft implementation. Are you telling a scary story? You should delight in scaring your audience. Going back to our definition of "what is a story?", you should treat the screen the same way you would if you were telling the story at the proverbial campfire. You should engage the audience. And in order to do that:

You have to have something to say, even if that something is ambivalent or esoteric.

But remember, this large-scale, issue-first approach is just one half of the deal. Even if you have a strong, interesting opinion on a subject, the idea still has to be explored through the context of storytelling, which is 100% more important to the effectiveness of your message.

So you essentially need a second inspiration to go along with your issue. You need to craft a story that is achingly human as a partner to your themes. And that means you have to craft organic characters, characters that are not mere props to larger ideas, making the story reek of being hollow and manufactured. You can't just reverse engineer some characters that fit your ideal situation and have them act out what you want to say and do. Everything is grounded in character. They make it all feel human. Hulk will explain in the upcoming sections on empathy, but it's just how the best stories resonate with us. So for the same question of making a human film...

What compels you?

This time let us answer it on a micro level and think of specific life details that reveal larger ideas. For instance: "My friend so-and-so is amazing. She volunteers at a hospital and...", or, "I read this great article about so-and-so." Heck, it doesn't even have to be people-centric. You can be like "I thought of this great scenario where..." or "Here's this really neat sci-fi world where so-and-so is possible." Or heck, you can just have a single line or image that you find compelling. These micro-level details are a *much more common* form of inspiration. They are wonderful, tiny little nuggets of inspiration that invite you and excite you to larger possibilities of storytelling.

... But they alone are not narratives.

That is so important to understand. In fact, it is the reason Hulk put the two halves of inspiration in that order. So often people think to start with the tiny nuggets and then figure out what you want to say later, but it is Hulk's experience that people don't really know how to do that. Again, so many films are voiceless. So many films simply say "I want to write about this textured, interesting person," and think that it will somehow magically produce a textured, interesting story. A good narrative has to be created. Crafted. Slaved over. Worked through time and time again before it is something so much more. What this dynamic actually speaks to is the great lesson that singular details are not stand-ins for

characterization. For example, there have been a lot of recent movies that have gotten into trouble for assuming texture and character detail somehow is the same thing as character motive. We don't need details to tell us who characters are and what they like, we need details to show us what characters *want and need* and what they will likely *do*. This is the heart of drama (well... Hulk will use this phrase a lot, so it's one of them).

And thus allow Hulk to argue that the whole popular hatred for quirky indie movies has nothing to do with their being quirky, or maudlin, or saccharine. It's because they're often *empty*. People latch onto hating the quirk, insisting that it does not "feel real," but in Hulk's opinion that is a misdiagnosis. It's that so often these oblique characteristics try to hide a lack of narrative or thematic purpose. Extravagant character details are welcome if there's purpose, in fact those quirky movies with real meat to them tend to work like gangbusters, but so often we get character detail apropos of nothing. We get heavy grit apropos of nothing. You have to go further than that. Everything needs a purpose. And so with real life stories you have to also realize that sometimes the "facts" get in the way of good storytelling. Hulk will get balls-deep into why that is so true later, but Hulk just wants you to understand that when we're dealing with the moment of inspiration we have to also understand how that moment will translate into a good story from the get-go. And the more understanding of that process we have, the more capable you will become in finding inspiration.

Because ultimately, a truly good narrative is born from the combining of the macro and micro into one singular, coherent approach. Your characters and the story they inhabit should be in complete alignment with the intention of your themes. It is the sublime combination of text and subtext, which means your narrative too because that's what you are saying. And when you think all the way back to that germ of an idea that compels you, whether it's a detail, a person, a concept, or a theme, you must then zero in and figure out how that germ then becomes a story.

It would be easy for Hulk to sit here and talk about this on and on in the abstract, so let's get specific with an example. When Alan Ball created **Six Feet Under**, he had a passing thought about a family who worked as undertakers and how that must be a weird life wherein they are confronting mortality every day of their lives. That was the germ of the idea. It wasn't *just* that it was "weird" or "different," but that the characters engaged an interesting idea so plainly and tangibly. They battle a concept that is so damn pertinent to our culture, particularly one that largely avoids the topic of death altogether. And with this idea he figured out a way to immediately blend text and subtext.

But that was just the conceit. He had so much further to go before it became a story filled with purpose. He filled it out with rich, textured characters that also compelled him. Prim matriarchs, 35 year old granola transients, closeted gay adults, and disaffected teens. But again. That doesn't make a story, either. So he then came up with two devices that helped propel everything. First, their father dies in the opening moments of the show so that this show about "confronting mortality" didn't just do so on the abstract or tangential level, but on a deeply personal level too. And the second device was that every single episode would open with a different funeral client's death, which allowed him to color the show with different meanings and themes time and time again. But more importantly both story decisions helped reinforce the central theme of the show. Every detail helped confront mortality in every possible way, dramatically and philosophically, helping to marry the text and subtext.

But more importantly to our subject at hand, do you see the role that the germ of the idea plays in the story construction? We think about what compels us, and in this case it was the image of a family and the idea of "confronting mortality," and he used that as the through-line for the entire series, right up until the series' final episode, "The End." The moment of inspiration can be your guide, your proverbial North Star in the incredible journey of writing.

Notice how Hulk brought up a TV show as the prime example? Hulk did that on purpose. The first reason is to understand that a germ of an idea can carry you across five years and countless hours of story if you'll let it. And the second reason is that it is important to understand from the get-go that not every idea is a great fit for the medium of screenwriting. Some ideas make the most sense for TV. Some make sense for a novel. Some make sense for video games. Some make sense for a comedy sketch. This is important to realize because Hulk reads things every day that would really best be suited as other media. It's symptomatic of the fact that people like to box themselves in as a "screenwriter," "TV writer," etc. And it only has the ending effect of limiting the best possible articulation of your idea. And worse than that, the shape of each medium is rapidly changing into one singular, identical form of "media consumption." So get ready to embrace all of it. For we are writers, no matter what the form.

"But Hulk, how do I know what medium is best for my story?"

... Okay it's actually pretty difficult to discern and usually takes a little bit of tinkering and trial & error to see the problems, but the idea is to really zoom in on what makes the story work for its own purposes. Thus Hulk's advice is to

not think of what you are doing at first as a movie; just think of it as a story. Little story, big story, whatever. But once you understand what the story is on its own merits, you can play with it to figure out how that story best works as a movie, a TV show, comic, etc. And maybe you can find a small piece of that story that works as a movie. Or maybe you find a way to broaden that story into a running serialized TV show. The important part is to just be aware that you are not cramming one into the other. Let your ideas go where they need to go. Don't worry about shaping your inspiration into what you demand it to be. You will have plenty more inspiration, Hulk assures you.

Hulk also realizes that all these pieces of advice may seem like we are getting ahead of ourselves, as they apply more to the process of writing we will explore in later parts of the book, but Hulk thinks they are vital little bits you need to understand from the onset of inspiration. After all, inspiration is the most ethereal and least-explainable part of the process, so having some idea of the later application is critical.

But what is most important to understand is that it takes both awareness and lots of practice to effectively find inspiration. There are no people on this planet who are naturally gifted in doing so. Nor is there anyone naturally ungifted in doing so. You have no excuse either way. It just takes dedication and going through the process time and time again. Like all crafts, our expertise is a function of time invested, so we must practice the process of seeking inspiration the same way we would build any muscle.

So start now. Come up with two story ideas this week. Who cares if you use them. Just flesh them out. Pretend some Hollywood bigwig said, "Hey! Stop by the office on Friday and pitch us a couple things!" Practice the process. The next week come up with three ideas. Again, it doesn't matter if you use them. It doesn't matter if they are even good. The idea is to simply build the muscle. Build your ability to look for inspiration and form a story around it. Keep doing it. Get better.

Luckily, the place to start is always the same. Ask yourself:

What compels you?

Part Three - 6 Things Hulk Wishes Hulk Knew Over A Decade Ago

Ugh. More definitions and treading water before the actual advice?!?! Come on, Hulk! Get to the good stuff!!!

Hulk sorry, but this is important.

1. Get Your Learn On!

Yes, screenplays are just stories and all storytelling has a commonality.

But as Hulk mentioned in the inspiration section, there is a way that form and intent really matters. And not just in the sense that a story can make for a good movie or a good TV show, etc. But in that there is always a way that your specific story will work best. And to understand how to best do that, you really have to understand how movies, from big to small and high to low, *actually work*.

On the simplest level, we're talking about "cinematic effect," which is the process of understanding how a specific action, moment, camera angle, or sound cue will make an audience member have a very specific reaction. And the evolution of those actions over the course of a film combines into the overall experience. It all sounds nice, but obviously it's not simple at all.

In fact, the real problem with Hulk telling you this is that understanding how movies work is really a whole lifetime of columns and experiences. Truly understanding film is a perceptive art that takes years to get a good grasp on, but the good news for you is that this know-how is something that is already locked inside your mind if you've seen enough of them. Instinctively, you just know movies. You've been watching them your whole life. So you just need to watch as many as possible from here on in and then it is just about opening up your brain to best understand the process. It's about making the universal subconscious experience of watching a movie into a conscious one. You have to understand how they affect your body and how your synapses respond while watching them. And it's not just about being able to articulate what you know in your bones, it's about adopting a constantly evolving process of learning. And from there you can come to critically understand the ongoing process of cinematic effect.

So why is this process so important to writing?

Because if *you* intrinsically understand movies (even if you're totally unaware), then that means *the audience* intrinsically understands movies too. Which means you can't do that thing that a lot of people love to do in this town and that's just sling crap up onscreen and expect the lowest common denominator to love it. Believe it or not, the general audience instinctively knows good stuff when they see it. Ignoring obvious barriers such as a slower pace and artistic abstraction, movies can still work viscerally for everyone in the theater. Even the most general audiences walked out of the first **Pirates** film, **Rise of the Planet of the Apes**, and **Bourne Supremacy** and "got it," so to speak. And while there will always be errant cases of someone acting outside the barometer, we must understand that well-told, traditional narratives usually work very well on a general audience. Good movies resonate through time.

Now you may point to the success of the **Transformers** series as evidence that shitty stuff succeeds too, but Hulk would argue that that is a rare and special case of an audience *knowing* the brainless fodder they are about to receive and going *for it*, based on a heap of preexisting factors. Plus, Hulk would argue that the tiny bit of emotional connective tissue in the first film (*no, don't torture Bumblebee!*) actually earned the series a great deal of public goodwill going forward. Double-plus, just because a popcorn movie is light and fun doesn't mean that it doesn't take a heck of a lot of know-how and craft to make that fun movie work. Triple-plus, you cannot confuse marketing and economic success with something being successful because it was "a good story." Just because it gets butts in seats does not make it a good movie. Hulk cannot impress this on you enough: Hulk really believes that people know good traditional movies by instinct (again, for the most part) and that is because every person on the planet is implicitly affected by the functions of narrative. Quite simply: *good stories can reach them*.

So the question you have to ask when evaluating a film is simple: Did *most* people walk out of the film feeling like it "worked?"

It really is a different question than "Is it good or bad?" It removes the opaque evaluation of worth and instead gets closer to "What was the film intending?" and "Did it work on its own merit?" which are questions that better get to the heart

and purpose of storytelling.

Remember this book's mission statement? Hulk has a condensed version for you here:

This book is not about screenplays that sell, or pop, or how to pitch. These are all elements of success, but Hulk argues it is the kind of success that doesn't last. Meanwhile, knowing how to write lasts. So this column is about becoming a better writer and storyteller. It is about writing screenplays that work.

And that is so damn important because audiences instinctively know how they *should* work, even if they cannot articulate it. They instinctively know if they felt connected, or interested, or if they laughed or screamed. They know if they had fun. They know if they were *compelled*. So knowing how an audience will respond to what is onscreen is everything. You have to understand cinema at every level. You have to use that understanding to be effective. And while Hulk will delve into a whole bunch of tools and suggestions on how to be effective, you just have to understand how much work it takes. You need to watch a ton of movies. You need to read a ton of books and critics.

You need to get your learn on!

2. No, Seriously. Get Your Learn On...

Same point only a different manifestation! This time Hulk means it in the sense that Hulk wants you to start becoming an armchair expert in stuff that has nothing to do with movies. Why? Because otherwise you won't have anything to talk about.

Do you realize how smart most writers and filmmakers really are? They are very, very smart. Go ahead. Sit down for any conversation. Your mind will be blown. Even the ones who make 'dumb movies' will strike you as being incredibly aware and articulate. All of these filmmakers will not only be able to talk at length about the themes and characterization of their own films, or the absolute intention of each scene, but they will show that they are completely aware of their film's relative shortcomings and can evaluate why this or that occurred better than anyone else on the planet. But it doesn't stop there. They will be able to talk about the entire landscape of film history. They will have seen most everything. They will completely understand the audience psychology Hulk mentioned in point #1.

But more than that, writers and filmmakers are at their best when they are interested in the world *outside of film*. Stanley Kubrick was famously interested in so many fields of study: Mathematics. Engineering. History. Literature. Great storytellers tend to be marked by an insatiable curiosity about life itself. Yes, studying film as a medium is important because you have to understand the filmmaking tools, editorial cadence, and writing process, but it is a worthless pursuit unless you can convey something about the actual world.

So look to your life. Look to other people. To politics. To art. Culture. Psychology. Sociology. You should have something interesting to say about the world around you, because the world around you is what is actually compelling to an audience. You may think that playing around with film conventions is neat, but it only works for a much smaller group of people. Because the world outside doesn't live in cinemas like we do. They have their jobs, and experiences, and unique sets of dispositions. So if you want to be a writer or filmmaker, then be prepared to be a part of that world too. Be prepared to be an expert in something besides filmmaking.

Embrace the high standard!

Note: Hulk is not saying that you can't ever go meta with your story. Just understand that the meta-ness needs to have a concurrent face-value narrative level if you still want to keep folks interested. That's all. Work the layers!

Double note: some people say Tarantino only makes movies about movies. This is a falsehood. He may have a host of references at any given moment, but his story-craft and commitment to his own world-building are beyond solid.

3. What Your Experience Means For The State Of Your Own Work

Okay... So at this point you may be wondering why Hulk feels like Hulk can even talk about this particular screenwriting subject with any kind of authority. In the introduction, Hulk briefly discussed Hulk's humble feelings on the nature of advice and the needs to share in the struggle of writing. But what is it about screenwriting specifically that makes Hulk

able to contribute?

Know this: Hulk is more familiar with the craft of screenwriting than probably any other element of filmmaking. Specifically, Hulk has a solid foot in all the needed worlds that combine to five elements that make Hulk think that Hulk can help you.

I) On the writing side, Hulk has not only written a deluge of the screenplays, but yes, has gone down the concrete path of selling them and knows how they manifest in this business and all that jazz. But again, that's not what this book is about. It's about the writing process itself. It goes without saying, however, that there are a litany of vastly more accomplished screenwriters out there whom Hulk considers heroes, but a book like this isn't about Hulk's abilities in professional life. It's about Hulk's ability to communicate what is vital to your learning. And that's important because there are thousands of scripts out there that have no real understanding of storytelling.

II) What Hulk thinks is far more important to helping you is that Hulk has read *a metric fuck ton* of scripts. Not for Hulk's own casual learning either, but for real-deal professional purposes of development and production centering around a plethora of A-grade material Hulk can pretty much guarantee you've seen and probably liked, big budget material, independent material, television material, you name it. And Hulk wasn't just there to read and evaluate, but hone into it and deep-tissue analyze and then communicate about it. Meaning Hulk's ability to look at a screenplay and identify why it works and why it doesn't is quite literally *Hulk's trade*. Hulk's done this for years and years. And Hulk swears that this experience has given Hulk a unique window that many other screenwriters may not have. After all, would you want to know what works for one person dealing with something in a very limited set of personal circumstances? Or would you want to know what works from someone ingrained with hundreds of experienced writers, overseeing thousands of hours of top tier content, dealing with every possible kind of storytelling, and doing so at a tremendously frequent rate? This is simply what Hulk can offer. And please know:

III) The intention of this book is... well... pure. Hulk is not using any of this experience as an excuse to pose Hulk-self as some kind of authority (beyond simply qualifying Hulk-self), but merely using it to offer up some help based on what Hulk has known and experienced. And that just may be of some use to you. This is the joy of sharing. Not the joy of telling.

IV) Because the most important thing about any of this background is that Hulk believes Hulk can offer you something so much more and that is *clarity of expression*. Which is important because Hulk listens to so many truly great writers out there who try to explain their process and impart advice and... well... Hulk finds that so much of their advice comes off as esoteric, vague, and utterly unhelpful. They may be great writers. They may have all the qualifications in the world and some deeply personal process of their own. *But they have no idea how to teach*. And that matters more than anything. So please understand that Hulk effectively views this book as a practical teaching platform. Sure, it's from some Hulk with a really solid background, but it is also from some Hulk with an understanding of the methodology of teaching and the will and determination to try and tell you nothing but the truth.

V) And that means you will find no blindly reductive how-tos in this book. Heck, at this point you probably noticed that Hulk is still talking about writing philosophy and background without a hint of practicality yet. And while this book will get rather specific and practical, you must understand that Hulk will never lie to you. Hulk is not willing to give you overly pat Syd Field-esque "solutions." Writing is something so much more expansive than that.

Still, you may be curious as to why would Hulk go on and on about qualifications and background in the middle of the third part of this book? Surely, this would make more sense in an introduction? You're right, of course, but Hulk has done this for a reason...

It may sound critical, but one of the best things you can do as a writer is come to an understanding about where you are currently falling in the grand scheme of things.

This isn't about not having confidence in your ability. It is because there are thousands and thousands of people in Los Angeles who have claimed to have written a screenplay and are now trying to sell it. And in complete honesty, what they have written is more than likely not up-to-snuff. They may have a good idea. They may have a good sense of movies. They may have good intentions. They may have even done a decent job. But they have not even put in close to 1/100th the work that so many working professionals in this industry actually have. And sorry, but Hulk respects those working professionals too much to not acknowledge the stunning gap in quality and (much more importantly) hard work and hours put into the work. You really have no idea how hard most of their paths were in getting to where they are now.

They work at the craft of writing the same way one works at any truly demanding job. And they are really good at it.

So imagine if you suddenly hopped on a major league field and just went up to bat saying "I can do this too!" Hulk realizes that may sound like a ridiculous analogy, but that's really what this is like. Only this happens all the time in Los Angeles and nobody thinks twice about it. There is this weird assumption that just because anyone can write a screenplay it means *anyone can write a screenplay deserving of consideration*. Now, Hulk knows this is not like other fields and is instead more of a democratic meritocracy and that is actually one of the great things about the industry. Anyone with the right connection or the means to their own production can have a shot at being a screenwriter.

But Hulk's obvious problem is with the lack of awareness. The blind assumption that somebody's *literal first attempt* to write a screenplay could somehow be wholly worthy is downright strange (Note: it doesn't fully apply to writers of other narrative forms, but still might more than you'd think). So many people just have no awareness of where they stand. Hence: delusion. And it's a kind of delusion that suffocates the industry and makes it harder for folks who can actually write. The delusion helps foster a culture where it's more difficult for qualified people to have confidence to sell themselves because they don't want to be like the rest of the delusional, uber-pressuring jerks who are unaware just how far away they really are.

Hulk doesn't want to sound like Hulk is stifling your ambition. But knowing where you really stand, and how far you have to go, is actually a critical element to understanding how to proceed in your writing development. This isn't accusatory. Hulk totally includes Hulk-self in this one too. Really, Hulk totally sees how this entire section could reek of elitism, but that's not how it's meant. The statement is meant to show you that you have to really work for it. You have to respect the craft and the effort the same way the professionals do.

Hulk really wishes younger-Hulk understood this. Like many, Hulk emerged on the sunny shores of Los Angeles certain that Hulk's smarts and gumption would do most of the work. Hulk couldn't have been further from being right. Despite having so many things go Hulk's way and years of genuine film school experience, Hulk simply did not realize the stunning gap between what Hulk could do at the time and what Hulk would be able to do all these years later. It's just nothing compared to what a true-blue working professional with a genuine adult disposition can offer. So youngins? You have to be prepared for that. You have to be patient. You have to work on your craft.

Because the thing is that Hulk really, really wants you to be a better screenwriter. Hulk wouldn't write any of this if that weren't true. And the number one thing you can do to achieve that is to take the enterprise truly seriously and approach it the way you would any other technical field that takes a great deal of learning.

Even as an industry, we need to take it more seriously.

Because in the end...

4. The Script Matters!

And don't let anyone ever tell you different.

Which may prove difficult because Hollywood has the pesky and unfortunately accurate reputation of being rather unkind to screenwriters. And not just in the gossipy way where Studio Person A does something sordid to Writer Person B, but unkind in the broader philosophical sense. Sure, some studio folk will put the time in, but often they are working toward something they don't quite understand in the way of *process*. Why, Hulk can count on hundreds of hands the many times that Hulk has heard someone in that setting refer to a script as a "blueprint," and that phrase... it just.... It ... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah... Okay. Listen to Hulk very, very carefully on this one...

Calling a script "a blueprint" is total balls.

Sure, a literal blueprint is exacting, but oftentimes the phrase is used in this way to indicate the *lack* of need for being exacting. Meaning "this is just the general guide and we will make it good later." It's terrible. Ideally, you should be able to take the screenplay as constructed and make a solid movie. Writing a good screenplay is effectively idiot-proofing. Or at least disaster-proofing.

More important is the fact that 95% of good movies have good screenplays. That is not an accident. So if you ever call a

script a blueprint chances are you are going to make a bad movie. Sorry, but Hulk feels quite strongly about this. Almost every single bad movie can be traced back to a bad script. Or maybe even *no script* at all. Do you have any idea how many summer tent-poles are green-lit and sent into heavy pre-production with an incomplete to non-existent script? Loads of them. And it is all built on the blind assumption that scripts aren't really that important and you can make due if you have the bare bones of the story in place, then you can just flesh it out during production. And in reality, accomplishing that is a miracle.

And thus Hulk would like to submit the idea that this is the single greatest fault of modern Hollywood filmmaking.

The assumption that a film's story can be simply "fleshed out" in heavy pre-production, production, or even the editing room is an increasingly laughable idea. Even in pre-production, you need to understand *what you need* in order to even have it in place. Do you know how many times productions get locked into a terrible scene, because they have already started building sets?! Hulk has seen so much money wasted in pre-production as a bunch of relative overt-tinkerers rearrange the story on the fly. They'll even hire and fire writers without thinking about the consequence this has on their production continuity. Again, Hulk does not mean to make this sound like a chastising accusation against all of studio-dom, as there are so many great people who really do know their stuff. The problem is systemic. And the "script is a blueprint" attitude tends to sweep up even the best of them.

Concerning script value you may say: "But Hulk, improv is so hot right now and there's a bunch of great actors who can make it happen!"

First off, how often do you hear about improvised dramas?

[cricket cricket]

Yeah, Hulk thought so. There hasn't been a single good one because it proves you largely need the written constructs to execute cinematically. But Hulk's "the script matters" philosophy is even true for all the popular improv comedies you see these days. Because guess what? All those heavily improvised Adam McKay movies, for instance? Have you ever read those scripts? They're pretty freaking good. And they're a lot closer to the final product than you may have realized. The character arcs, the conflicts, the relative points, the tone. It's all there. So the real function of improv is not to *find the story* or the *world of the movie*, it's just to find the *best possible jokes to punch it up*. And the only movies that manage to accomplish anything substantial with improv do so by getting some of the best comedic minds in a room together and going at it. But it's just a dialogue re-write, not an improvised narrative. So to all you budding improv-based writers, you need to write a script you're proud of first. Improv truly is a great performance tool (and can even help train your mind for constructing better written stories), but it is not a crutch for a missing story. You need the focus that real narrative brings. The script has to be the soul of your project and something you'd be proud of, then you can try to use improv to improve the surface level.

You know who agrees with this philosophy? Tina Fey. And she was wholly born from the Second City improv model, yet she bases all of her writing on the work of golden age TV and **The Simpsons**.

To reiterate: when you're actually filming a movie you can indeed change a script in the right ways to enhance, refine, and complement what is actually being filmed. You can see the way certain actors are bringing the characters to life and call the necessary audibles. But really this is just the surface-level execution stuff that comes far along in the process. It comes when everything is already set in place and you have already made all your most critical decisions. You cannot redefine your narrative. You're not even really re-constructing it. *You're refining*. And while you are in production you need to understand what you're working on and how it fits with the context, intention, and logic of the rest of the story, which automatically means the story is something that has to be carefully set and accounted for on a script level. Meaning having a completely set script that you know frontwards and backwards actually allows you to make more informed decisions on how to change it during production. This fact should be obvious. Especially because it's how people made movies for nearly 80 years.

But quite honestly the development process of screenwriting dramatically shifted the moment the corporations moved in. This isn't a knee-jerk opinion about big business being bad or anything as silly as that. This is about that "systemic problem" Hulk mentioned before: it was just a fundamental shift in the kinds of people who had oversight. The corporations approached the story the way... well... the way any corporate business would. It was all about the process of safe choices and minimizing risk and focusing on factors that had nothing to do with drama, universal truths, or the importance of stories. It became big business, where the bottom line is getting butts in seats at any cost. And while

exploring how to accomplish that, the studios discovered that through marketing, tone appeal, star power, and property recognition they could still get butts in the seats for opening weekend. It was a surefire way to get over bad storytelling, which is super-great for them and stuff because most didn't understand how scripts worked in the first place.

To be fair, Hulk is being harsh here. But Hulk isn't admonishing a system from the writer's perspective; no, this comes from Hulk's perspective of being on the studio side.

And a lot of those executives truly loved movies, but the marketing-based system they created was crippling to the import of story. Even with the good deal of executives who are stunningly brilliant, it is the system and the set of pressures that are the problem. On the studio side, keeping one's job isn't dependent on your capability to understand storytelling and its purpose. It's based on the financial success of the packages you put together. And when they have to justify their failures they have to back up their decisions with "I attached this star! And used this recent successful formula!" and when their backs are against the wall they can't go to their bosses with "my script expressed the heart of drama!" They're just trying to keep their jobs.

The biggest problem with this is that making a film that gets to the heart of drama would actually be the best way to make a film a financial success.

Raise an eyebrow or two, but it's true. Heck, in the golden age of Hollywood everyone used to understand that storytelling mattered financially to your film. The business of movies was actually based on a long-play sell for weeks and weeks where word of mouth was what managed to get audiences in theaters over time as movies spread around the country. And it didn't have much to do with opening weekend box office. Writing a good story, well told, *was your freaking business model*.

Now? It's a neat little bonus.

Which is yet another idea that Hulk would like to suggest is short-sighted balls.

Consider the following three arguments:

First, that the real-deal financial gain of a film is not actually based on opening weekend, but still the *really* long play. While the opening weekend is certainly a great starting point, the real hits (aka good movies with good scripts) are the ones that have staying power in the weeks that follow. Look at the number one and two films of all time in **Titanic** and **Avatar**. Both had solid but not jaw-dropping openings and yet both eventually went on to have incredible long plays. James Cameron gets a lot of flak for his storytelling simplicity and yet, to Hulk, he is someone who understands the value of story simplicity better than anyone. He is just doing the basics, but those basics resonate so deeply with people. Anachronistic? Maybe. But look at the way his films resonate across the board. He's showing us the value of basics and traditional storytelling.

Second, the business model doesn't just end with theatrical runs. In Hulk's working adventures, Hulk's gotten to take a few peeks at the studio books from time to time and movies make a huge deal if not most of their money on ancillary incomes. Not just in Blu/DVD sales, but TV airings, rentals, VOD windows, Netflix. And the great thing about these models is that they financially reward the very best stories we have to offer. **Jaws** isn't just a great movie that we can enjoy to this very day, it's still *financially rewarding the studio*. With a lot of money too, folks. The mega-hits last!

Third, if the most valuable thing a movie studio can get their hands on this day and age is a franchise, then doesn't that mean your central interest should be getting your audience to come back a second time? What would be the key to doing such a thing? Oh yeah, you make *a good first movie*. And that means you need, like, a good story. Not to get too smashy, but seriously people, how is this not obvious? After all, there is the common business knowledge that the box office of sequels has little to do with the quality of *the actual sequel*, but instead is a direct reaction to *the last one*. How often do we hear " _____ was so good that I can't wait for _____2!" apropos of not having a single other detail? So isn't this simple idea of getting people to love the story the way you build the franchise model?

Look. The thing about these three arguments is that Hulk understands the human element at play. Hulk knows that everyone is really trying to make a good movie and all that, but Hulk's entire point is that the errors of development are not coming from a lack of effort, but lack of understanding of what is most important. We set release dates before we even have films on the page. And the problem is that whatever the advantage of a good release date is, Hulk can guarantee it's nothing compared to the boon you get from locking down a great script. If the long play, ancillary incomes,

and franchising is the best way to make long-term money, then a good story told well is secretly *still* the business model - we're just not seeing it.

And because we don't see it, because we're looking at all the wrong things, we have one of the guys running Disney telling the press that audiences don't care about story and that "only set-pieces matter." And then he can't figure out why nobody really liked **Tron**. Hulk would like to suggest that this is the very pinnacle of "not getting it."

The script matters.

And don't let anyone tell you different.

5. Why You Still Need To Be Able To Tell An Original Story

With all this "franchise" talk, you may have also noticed that original scripts and stories aren't being made by Hollywood all that much anymore. Drew McWeeny even wrote [a great piece](#) about how we are now in the age of fan-fic. He delves into how we no longer have to look at our influences and appropriate them into our own original story, but actually get to work with those very properties that inspired us in the first place. As such, it seems like every single thing we produce is either a sequel, a remake, or based on another thing.

The main reason this happens is more industry B.S. They do it for valid marketing reasons (meaning it spikes the awareness numbers because people are already familiar with the thing itself). The other aspect goes back to that insidious reason of how the system creates a condition where executives need to justify their failures and decision by saying "*I picked something popular I swear! Economically it made sense!*" And again, the human angle on that is understandable. No one wants to be fired for crap reasons. But the complete system-wide misunderstanding of deciding what kinds of storytelling to embrace is not understandable. Storytelling needs room to embrace narrative. It cannot be a checklist of marketing points. And doing so will likely extinguish the very thing you need for your film to succeed. But alas, working with existing properties is the new reality of corporate filmmaking culture.

And here's the thing about that... You still need to know how to tell an original story.

Because if you want to be a working screenwriter this day and age, then that cool original script you wrote is not necessarily about trying to "get it made" (though that would obviously be awesome), it's about proving that you are a *good writer*. And in order to prove that you are a good writer you need to prove that you can write an original, compelling story. It matters more than anything.

Even with the films that are based on other properties or characters, the question then becomes: can you make it interesting? Can you make it engaging to an audience? Can you make the world come to life in a fully realized way? Can you make it come alive even for the people who don't know the property? Can you make it universal? And you just don't appropriate story by way of point-by-point adaptation. You have to understand exactly how an original story works and how to integrate film structure into your work. And you learn how to do that by learning to write an original story first.

So believe it or not, it goes back to the inspiration angle all the same: what is it about the property that draws you? And from there you tell the story that interests you with the details and iconography of the known property. You make it your own. It is your job to make the unoriginal *seem* original and fresh. And your success utterly depends on it.

After all, Nolan didn't make Batman for adults because it was merely "gritty." He made it for adults by making a Batman movie that was about interesting adult-minded concepts. City politics. Symbols. Anarchism. He took the Batman iconography and married it to ideas and characterizations that *interested him*. And by doing that he transcended the property through the power and know-how of original storytelling.

6. But Remember, It's Still Not About "Getting Things Made"

Hulk's talked a lot about the industry in this section and that was largely to get it out of the way. Hulk wishes Hulk could promise you all the fruits of success, all the accolades your creative soul deserves, but there are so many things that go into getting something made that have nothing to do with writing. It's a separate topic. So this book is really just about what *you can control*. And from the very start, Hulk said that this book was about writing itself and trying to become a

better writer.

So all Hulk can promise you is this: if you understand stories and screenplays, and if you want to pursue screenwriting or some kind of career in film, television, novelization, or media, then no matter what path you end up following the information contained within this piece will still be of value to you. And if you can come to a place of expertise, it will be tremendously valuable to everyone around you, too.

... Or at least it can't hurt.

So those are 6 things Hulk wishes Hulk knew over a decade ago.

Now, what the hell do you do when you're trying to write the damn thing?

Part Four - - How To Approach A Screenplay - Conceptually

So let's get away from the broadest possible ideology one needs to write and zero in on some more specific ideas / guidelines / rules / whatevers that will help you develop your story/screenplay.

After part four, Hulk will follow up with structural advice, then screenplay formatting advice, and finally Hulk will give the key to putting it all together.

The only thing that Hulk can impress upon you at this time is that while these are largely guidelines of narrative convention... they matter. Hulk just talked about James Cameron's last two films and Hulk isn't sure how you might feel about them, but Hulk can assure you that the relative success of both **Titanic** and **Avatar** is a testament to the power of conventional narrative. He blazes right past nuance and utilizes every single valid archetype, trope, and device, but not in a hollow way, instead with the nakedly precise way of how *they are meant to be used*. And what they lack in subtlety, they make up for in 100% functionality. Meaning James Cameron essentially prints you a guide for making entirely functional movies. And while they do not reach the highs of our best cinematic art, it's no surprise they are rousing successes. And better yet, they are anything but cynically made. The man is a testament to functionality.

Your instinct will either be to adhere to this functionality or to shake it off. But Hulk argues that you must understand it either way. Too many screenwriting books give you a "set way" on how to do things and say "all good scripts do this!" Hulk is going to give you more power than that. A story can be so much more than a list of set plot points. But Hulk assures you the key to transcending mere functionality is understanding how to turn that simplicity into something far more nuanced.

You can't just reject conventional narrative. *You have to transcend it*. And that means knowing it inside and out.

And so while Hulk will discuss each of the following concepts in depth, please understand there is very much a purpose to all of this. It's about understanding the function of each of these ideas so that you can best apply them to their full potential. Sometimes they are large-scale ideas, sometimes they are small devices, sometimes they are background work needed to get you in the right place. But every time, Hulk wants you think of these ideas as "mechanisms," because the word implies a certain purposeful function. So Hulk wants you to understand the mechanisms of writing so that you can best apply them in any way you wish.

This is not about Hulk telling you how a story must be. This is about unlocking your own storytelling power.

So let's get started!

7.1 The Law Of Cause And Effect

When we think about a story it's amazing how much we don't think about how it *functions*.

Hulk would argue that a lot of our conceptual understanding of stories deals more with what they look like, but finds that to be a misguided approach. Believe it or not, stories don't function in terms of beginnings, middles and ends, they simply *have* beginnings, middles, and ends. Nor are they about hitting familiar beats and doing certain things by certain page counts and filling in certain commonalities.

In fact, Hulk would argue that most problems in movies come from the fact that people mistake form for function.

They think if it looks like the thing, if it acts like the thing, if it feels like the thing, then it must *be* the thing... they are wrong. And it's why we get so many movies that try to put their value in the texture of the film without understanding the purpose or effect of any of it. It's why we get plot turns that don't fit the kind of movie the filmmakers want to make. It's why studios manufacture excitement in filmmaking style instead of manufacturing it from story. Heck, it's why we get so many movies that are nothing more than blind copycats of another. People assume these surface things are the reason these films work, the kind of thinking akin to "Vampires are so hot right now!" when that's so not the mechanism that is making any of those films work. They are simply mistaking form for function. And it means they don't actually

understand storytelling.

Other screenwriting books will tell you where to put act breaks, or give you methods on writing endearing characters, or tell you how to wow a potential buyer, but almost none of them gives you any insight to how those things actually work or why. No one asks: how does an act break affect an audience? What is an act break anyway? What is the reader experiencing on a dramatic level? Why can some movies break established “rules” whereas others can’t? These questions are not concerned with texture, they are concerned with how the mechanisms function. This is critical.

Because it’s time to take function back from form.

Stories are driven by certain core mechanisms that cause perceptible changes, which directly affect us, the proverbial viewer. That is cinematic function and no single concept is more important than the following statement.

Stories are defined by cause and effect.

Perpetually. Constantly. Vividly. Stories are built on that simplest of mechanisms. This causes that and that causes this and so on and so forth. It’s about set-ups and pay-offs. It’s about action and reaction. It’s about information followed by dramatic consequence. Cause and effect lend meaning to events. They link scenes together. They give wholeness to seemingly separated ideas. Cause and effect are the linking of your chain. They make a story a story.

7.2 Empathy Is Your New Best Friend.

When you start crafting a story and characters, there is something so crazy important that you must always keep it in the back of your mind: there is no single force on this planet more powerful than that of empathy...

Hulk knows your likely counter already: “Oh yeah, Hulk? Well what about Galactus! Galactus is totally the most powerful!!!!”

Pssssh. How does Galactus get defeated? It’s because Alicia Masters appeals to the Silver Surfer’s sense of empathy, which causes him to join the Fantastic Four and defeat his former master!

Empathy, bitches. *Empathy.*

But way more seriously, empathy is the most single powerful tool at a writer’s disposal. Even this silly Galactus example illustrates that pretty damn well (it’s no accident that it’s one of the great comic book sagas). And that is because the far-reaching value of human empathy is what Hulk considers not just *a* great universal truth, but *the* single universal truth of humanity’s survival.

... *Whoa.*

That statement may reek of hyperbole, but give Hulk a chance to explain here. You’ll have to excuse the naive-sounding loftiness of the following statement, but here goes:

In an effort to be attuned and grounded human beings, we sometimes dig so deeply into the minutiae and relativity of the human experience that we sometimes miss or forget the simple, lofty, kindergarten-level truths that stare us right in the face. And part of that grouping is what Hulk would like to suggest is the obvious yet critical truth that **empathy is what allows human beings to bind together in any meaningful way**. Not just with strangers, but with the important people in our lives. It’s what allows us to love our partners, families, and friends. And unless we’re dipping into some *schadenfreude* or something, it is even what gives us our capacity for joy and laughter. Meaning empathy isn’t just a nice thing to have in life, but a wholly necessary function. To paraphrase David Foster Wallace: The basic existence of empathy is why most of us don’t spend every second of the day clubbing each other over the head and stealing each other’s groceries. Even in a world containing crime, depravity, and war, it is empathy that allows us to sometimes refrain from those very things. Which means it’s why we survive as a species.

Seriously, do you ever think about the fact that with all the madness in the world, that it is downright remarkable we haven’t blown ourselves up in nuclear war? It can’t just be some simple matter of logic. To Hulk, it is the intrinsic reality of empathy. It’s our true nature, as is the fact that we realized it was easier to kill a mammoth as group, farm as a group,

irrigate as a group, and build great big things as a group. It is our empathy that allowed our society to best survive and declaring anything else is a complete obfuscation of truth.

And yet it's stunning how often this realization passes us by. Empathy is the foundation of culture and it is wholly embodied by the notion of storytelling itself.

So it should be no surprise that when it comes to our movies, empathy is also the very thing that involves an audience and keeps their attention. It hooks into their bones on a visceral level. It gives the audience rooting interest and perspective. It is the reason a movie is *experienced* instead of *watched*. Movies are unique in that they allow a person to actually participate in the old cliché of walking a mile in another man's shoes. We take it for granted, but isn't that kind of amazing? A great filmmaker uses empathy as their fuel. They use it to engage the audience. And Hulk truly loves that the thing that enables humanity to function is the same exact thing that enables movies to work! Nothing could be more appropriate for Hulk's favorite medium.

But now that we know empathy is important, the question then becomes: how the heck do we use it?

For that, Hulk is going to turn your attention to an old adage that you can make an audience care just by threatening to "kill the kitten."

Note: this is just a saying. You don't actually need to threaten to kill a kitten in the film (unless you wrote **The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo** or something).

The funny thing is this old saying was turned into a popular screenwriting book called **Save the Cat** in which the author created a philosophy of "saving the cat" followed by creating a story around 15 central beats amidst about 40 smaller beats. The issue is that it actually butchered what the "kill the kitten" adage was actually about. All it meant was that you take some obvious thing for your audience to empathize with (cute kitten!) and you put it in some kind of horrible danger and instantly the audience is involved in your movie. It's a momentary dramatic tactic. That's it.

But the author used the danger created by the philosophy and translated it into a way to introduce the main character. Meaning you have the main character "save the cat" - simply do something nice - and instantly the audience is on their side. This is wrong-headed. Worse, the book goes on to imply all movies work on this same structural level. It's such a massive, even-handed reduction of story that Hulk... Hulk just can't even. At this point, Hulk should admit that Hulk clearly doesn't think a whole lot of the book. Which isn't to say there aren't useful ideas to be gleaned, but as an across-the-board approach it misunderstands some core concepts of narrative and dramatic function and then is hopelessly reductive with others.

So let's start this discussion off on the right foot: empathy is not about having your characters do nice things.

It is not about sympathy or likeability, either. Empathy is about the translation of feeling. And empathy can actually be established through *struggle* more than anything else. Which is done through any of these rather human, oft-experienced sorts of things: like spilling coffee on yourself, or having parents that "just don't understand!" or, the foil of that issue, trying to raise bratty kids. Basically, you want to engage on an emotional, conflict-based level. You don't necessarily want to put a character on a pedestal. You don't want them to be flawless. You don't want them to be unflinchingly cool. Instead, you want them to have this very relatable texture or context which lets the audience say "I totally recognize and sympathize with that inclination!"

Notice Hulk said inclination and not "situation," because people make that mistake too. It's the emotions we identify with, not the specifics of the predicament. We identify with Luke Skywalker because he dreams of something bigger and his guardians won't let him do what he wants to do, not because we all grew up as moisture farmers on Tatooine (feel free to use this example any time someone tells you they can't get into a movie or television show because the characters come from an economic or regional situation that is different than theirs. Especially because finding emotional bonds from differing cultural situations is the purpose of storytelling and shit). But this empathetic connection is the heart of crafting characters that we call the "audience surrogate," which doesn't have to be as ready-made and simple as it would seem.

Notice that none of these predicaments are quite as extreme as "killing a kitten" even if the sentiment and intention is the exact same. And that's because a device as extreme as killing a kitten can come off as totally manipulative to an audience. The device may still work, but a lot of audiences will feel like the narrative is boxing them in, telling them how

to feel and think. It can be insincere. It can be cloying. And thus some people will resent it when a movie does that. In his review of Steven Spielberg's **Warhorse**, Devin Faraci wrote:

“Manipulation is the essential center of cinematic art. Every choice made in a good film - from story to casting to music to editing - is based on eliciting some sort of reaction or feeling from the audience. Every good filmmaker is aware of what they are trying to express through the manipulations of editing or score or performance.

Manipulation becomes a problem when it becomes too obvious, when the fingers pulling your strings become too insistent. Everyone has a different threshold for this; some recoil at the slightest hint of overt manipulation, while others openly get emotional about Volkswagon commercials featuring children. It's a wide spectrum.”

And given that our collective audience has a huge range of responses to manipulation, the main takeaway for you, the writer, should be to find the right balance of how to use it. And Hulk feels like the biggest key in doing that is to be sure that there are real character motivations behind the manipulative devices. What does that mean, exactly? Well, Hulk will get into it more specifically in the sections to come, but basically you should try to create conflicts and dire situations that *directly impact or comment* on the character and story at hand and are not conflicts shoved in cheaply there just to get the audience on the hero's side.

There will be obstacles in trying to do so. Sadly, there are a lot of people in the filmmaking industry who confuse "empathy" with the aforementioned "likeability." This mistake is certainly understandable (even **Save The Cat** endorses this kind of thinking), but please understand that the two ideas are not the same thing in the slightest. Empathy is about relation and understanding. And meanwhile they think likeability amounts to not having your characters do bad things. This assumption is counterproductive because without having a character ever do a wrong or fallible thing, you will end up creating some real shitty drama. In fact, this grave misunderstanding about empathy and likeability is responsible for the legions of doormat main characters that movie audiences are treated to time and time again.

Seriously! Fallibility is sympathetic.

Don't believe Hulk? Well, then let's talk about Indiana Jones.

Indiana Jones is one of Hulk's favorite topics of discussion because both the character and the movies highlight so many great things that modern films forget to do. We don't love Indiana Jones because he's perfect or an unstoppable heroic badass, we love him because he's constantly fucking up and barely making his way out of a crisis. He's afraid of things! He has false confidence! He frequently shows fear! As a result, we don't just watch Indiana Jones; we empathize with Indiana Jones. And it's that achingly human fallibility that makes him the perfect action hero. Hulk will say it now and say it forever, look to Indy for inspiration!

The other main obstacle you may find is that there is a peculiar modern tendency to go the other way with empathy and test the audience by seeing how much of a dick a character can be. These sort of jerk-ass antiheroes litter the screen nowadays (particularly on TV). Admittedly, for comedy and dark comedy purposes these characters can indeed work pretty well. But there's a whole art and nuance to it. Like the fact that the rudeness is actually meant to distance the audience from the character in order to illuminate some kind of larger point or truth about human behavior. A truth the character may learn, or they may not. And this point can be black-as-night funny and darkly poetic (think the Coen Brothers), or it can be grating as all hell (the sometimes unsuccessful work of Neil LaBute). But the key is just to have an understanding of that approach and what it is accomplishing in terms of narrative and thematic intent.

Hulk believes you have to understand the “why” of your approach because there is a real contrarian tendency these days to go the aforementioned jerk-ass direction just because it seems different or rebellious. The rebellious inclination is fine if it's what drives you, but Hulk urges you to be sure there is a point to it. Don't just make the jerk-ass main character a shortcut to being funny or edgy without any sort of real thematic exploration. Do it because you're trying to expose something real with it. Go back to that inspiration of what compels you. How does this edge and rebelliousness fit in? What is the point to it? How does it work as a dramatic mechanism? Asking these questions will point you in the right direction.

Whether you go empathetic in the traditional way or take the jerk-ass distancing route, a good deal of what you have to do is make it engaging by *exploring the human condition*.

Ask yourself bold questions: What is it that makes this character good? What is it that makes them troubled? Wait, better yet, let's get specific with an example! Ask yourself: why do we like Tony Soprano? Why do we not like Tony Soprano?

What details about this character's life make him so interesting? And doing this will set you up to understand the kinds of dilemmas, situations, conflicts, and dramatic ideas that will breed the empathy or dissonance you seek.

Now, Hulk has sat here and waxed philosophical about empathy for quite some time, but that's because there is no basic, truthful shortcut Hulk can say to make you understand the nuances of the concept. Hulk truly believes that empathy is the most powerful weapon at your disposal and how you use it is up to you. You can threaten to kill the kitten and be quite successful at it, or you can bite your thumb at the very concept of empathy all together. There is a wide spectrum of approach and all Hulk wants you to do is have a real concrete reason for why you are going in either direction. Think about it. Ground yourself in it.

Whatever you do, just don't let it be because it's easy.

And with that...

8. Beware The Lure Of Indulgence

From the onset of creating your story, Hulk wants you to ask yourself one simple question:

“Am I making art? Or am I making pornography?”

This may sound extreme, but Hulk is talking about the great spectrum of media experience. On one end there is pure art, which represents the values of giving people the ideas they need or confronting them with inalienable truths. On the other end is pornography, which represents the individual's indulgence of strictly base needs, regardless of import.

While the idea is to always strike some kind of balance, one of the biggest mistakes in all of writing is to give into the most indulgent aspects of storytelling through the vicarious power of cinema. Since empathy is what connects us and stories are the most powerful way of achieving that, sometimes the empathetic effect is so transportive that it effectively allows us to escape. In fact, Hulk is positive that if you ask most people why they like any form of entertainment it's because of that escape. They work long, hard hours and they need something that makes them happy or elated or scared or thrilled. And there is real value to providing that for people. But as a creator, you have to be cautious and thoughtful with that power.

And that's because there is a serious masturbatory element to that escapism. You can easily get an audience member to think "I'm a hero saving the world!" Or "Yay! I get the girl!" and that's wonderful and elative, but this is the sort of indulgence that can lead to some really unsavory stuff too. The kind of stuff that has nothing to do with larger truths, or mutual understanding, or the human condition, or why we tell stories in the first place. It's just about massaging the id. It is about blindly rewarding. It's about reinforcing stereotypes and feelings that are underserved. It's about placating and not communicating. And at that point, your "storytelling" is basically the facilitation of mental masturbation.

Some people don't get why that's such a big deal. They think that as long as it makes people happy, then it's all well and good. Entertainment's purpose has been served. Even if they don't care if the media is doing them any favors, the problem is that it might not be doing humanity any favors, either. If storytelling is really the best way to pass on truths that help people, then what does it say if we're passing on unhelpful, ego-massaging garbage?

This is not to overly criticize the desire to entertain. In fact, it's one of your chief responsibilities as a storyteller. But when you are engaging the indulgent aspects of storytelling, it is also important to understand what is really happening with the audience and to take responsibility of your message. If you're being indulgent then you have to contextualize it. You have to display some elements that go beyond that and confirm the artistic purpose and human condition. Otherwise you end up writing lifestyle-porn like **Entourage**.

Actually, let's talk about **Entourage** in detail because it sort of highlights these problems perfectly. If you like the show, then Hulk is sorry if Hulk is coming off as mean or something, as it is not the intention. Hulk readily admits that it can be really funny at times and has a few good performances and all that stuff that makes for good TV shows. That's not the problem. The problems with the series are about the deep-tissue purpose (which happens to be the subject at hand). And the show is perhaps the most indulgent yet well-made piece of entertainment that Hulk has ever seen. Every moment is about living vicariously through people. Which is not only a lazy approach to indulgence, but supported through a lazy approach to storytelling and conflict. The dramas are non-dramas and they readily resolve plots with purposeless deus ex

machina instead of active decisions. It is a show that actively rewards and enforces indulgence and ego-massaging at every step.

As an audience, we empathetically place ourselves into **Entourage**, lie back, and let it feel good... hence: *lifestyle porn*.

Look. Hulk is not implying that all movies have to have some Hallmark message tied into them because that would be super lame. Hulk just believes that good entertainment takes indulgence and appropriates it into some larger purpose. In fact, some really good films just go balls out and make the most *obviously* indulgent decisions. Not to get too specific too soon, but some movies embrace wholly unreal narratives (think of something like **Crank**), but the way these hyper-stories work is that the absurdity and un-reality of the presentation actually *creates a sense of distance*. It's looking to the audience and saying "This is ridiculous, isn't it?"

And with that distance, the audience can implicitly understand that the authors are criticizing or laughing at it. It enables cinematic satire and irony. You have to think of the presentation like taking on the view of the omniscient observer. Even if Salinger technically wrote in Holden Caulfield's voice, we understand what Salinger thinks about everything that Holden is saying and doing. It's just a lens. And Hulk's problem is that the lens of something like **Entourage** is not trying to provide any distance. In fact, it aids in the indulgence. It advocates the mental masturbation.

This is all getting a bit complicated, Hulk understands, but it's important for Hulk to be honest about all the ways that empathy can manifest onscreen. Because ultimately, awareness of what empathy actually is and how it works will be the key to making all of your creative decisions. It is the fundamental building block of storytelling, and will inform everything about how you want to tell your story. You just have to beware how it can be indulgent.

So ask yourself a more specific question: "Is this scene accomplishing an artistic purpose? Or a pornographic purpose?" And just be sure the answer is wherever you want it to be on the spectrum of media experience.

9. Value The Consistency Of Character Motive

The one thing Hulk hopes to impress on you over the course of this book is that, contrary to a great deal of screenwriting books that give you set formulas, you actually have a great deal of flexibility depending on the kind of film you are making. But that leaves a rather obvious question:

With the litany of story options available, what makes a story choice a good one or a bad one for your particular narrative?

Hulk would argue that the best way to decide if those story choices are worth it is to first start with another obvious question: "Would the character actually do that?"

This question matters so damn much because when a character onscreen does something they totally wouldn't do, it becomes the action that most alienates the audience. They make a subconscious decision to say "I'm no longer with you buddy! I'm just *watching* you do the wrong thing!" Notice Hulk didn't say "what the audience would do" because Hulk is not talking about literal right or wrong here or personal disposition. Hulk is talking about what *the character* would and wouldn't do. Contrary to popular belief, that's the only thing that matters.

Think about it like this: we would "follow" Tony Soprano as he killed one of his rival mobsters in a gruesome fashion. It may not be something we would do ourselves, but we understand this is something that fits within Tony's psychology and we accept it. But then we would definitely not be happy with Tony if he killed some random teenager in a gruesome fashion. While both killings are morally wrong to us, the audience, only one of them is inconsistent in terms of what the character would do. And that would make us angry with the storytelling, specifically the inconsistency of character motive.

Now, it's a good thing Hulk brought up Tony Soprano because it also highlights how these decisions are not so cut and dried. The show's creator, David Chase, was a master of playing with this moral line and had all these amazing ways of bringing Tony to the edge of that acceptance of what he would do. But the reason it worked was because he was always willing to deal with the consequences of doing so. He always looked for meaning to erupt from Tony's choices. He always brought that question of the character's morality being skewed to the forefront. Hulk actually feels that Chase was one of the most thematically responsible storytellers to grace our televisions. That responsibility never had anything

to do with simple moralizing, but the fact that everything about his characters had weight and meaning. It was just incredible. But the lesson for you should be the same (Hulk is going to underline for effect):

If you're having a character commit an inconsistency, you should be bringing that inconsistency to the forefront of the conflict. It has to add fuel to your drama and make your character motives clear. The inconsistency can't be a minor occurrence; it has to be the point! And as the point it has to be built to and dealt with extensively.

What's kind of funny (and rather telling) is how this question of "character inconsistency" even applies to how we regard our real-life figures as well. For example, Tiger Woods was someone who was popularly thought of as the paragon of hard work, success, and generic nice-guy-ness. Then he was caught cheating with multitudes of women and the public was collectively appalled. We saw him as a sham and it made us furious. But as a counterpoint, when Charles Barkley was caught doing the same exact thing (and super-drunk driving to boot!) we just shook it off and said "That's just Charles being Charles!" The takeaway can't be clearer: *we basically accept people as long as they are who we think they are*. Character consistency matters so much to our culture and thus it has to matter to our storytelling too. The narrative we give life is not far away from the narrative we give stories.

So when a character does something in your story, it has to make sense. And when they are suddenly pushing their boundaries (because all main characters should push their boundaries) it has to feel like that growth is earned. We want these characters to expand, change, and have arcs, but the story needs to give them wholly valid reasons to do so. It could be the kind of plot-based reasons that would awake something already in the character's soul. And if you don't give the characters good reasons to change, then you are essentially making your characters appear insincere. You are lying. And the audience will think of them the same way they think of Tiger Woods. The manipulation will show. We will look at the storyteller like they just wanted the character to fit some point of the story they wanted to tell... And the audience can smell that manipulation from a mile away.

Hulk knows that Hulk is making this sincere character thing sound like it's an easy thing to do, but it's obviously pretty tricky. Particularly for a writer to see in his or her own work. Not just because it is difficult to balance all the conflicting elements, but because, as the creator, it is often hard to separate oneself from the power and control over what you are writing. You instinctively think "Of course the character would do that! That's what I'm making them do and I want to do it! I have it all in my head!" But to the audience, who only gets to learn about the character through the very different lens of experiencing the film, it doesn't work like that. They don't know what is inside your head. They only see what comes out from the story. As such, they are actually *much better* at reading who the characters are and their capacities for good and bad, because they are the ones who have the objective information.

Hulk knows a few of you might find that idea to be silly, but think about it through the analogy of language. You can teach yourself French and think you have a mastery, but you won't know if you can actually communicate until a bunch of native French speakers can understand what you are saying. Cinema is an effort to communicate. And just because the perfect idea of the movie and its intentions exist in your head does not mean that is what comes through on the page or screen.

As such, when writing it's important to ground yourself in the capacities of what the audience will perceive. Remind yourself of them constantly. Remove yourself. Ask how is the audience seeing this moment? What do they know by this point? Ask what would *the characters* really do? What are *their* motivations? What do *they* want? What do *they* need? Are they smart enough to do that? Are they kind enough to do that? Are they mean enough to do that? You may like the effect of a decision, but it has to be sincere.

In the end, Hulk understands that we all want to explore storytelling in as adventurous a way as possible. We want to surprise the audience and be unconventional. But when you do that you have to do it responsibly. You still have to do what makes sense for your character. You have to account for changes with real, tangible reasons to do them. Go where the characters have to go, not where the obliquely related grand story wants them to go.

But to do that... How do you decide what your characters will do? Better yet, how do you even decide who your characters really are?

10. Character Trees!

Sweet! Actual methods of implementation! It only took Hulk 10,000 words to get there! Hurray!

Character trees are basically a handy way to organize the details of your characters and give you the right ideas on how to make them dynamic. They really can be an invaluable tool for helping you create fully-realized characters, especially in television and novels where the depths and histories of your characters can be explored in a coherent way. But even for truncated screenplays, the value of pre-thought out character details can do so much for you.

Hulk was once introduced to a smart way of keeping track of character trees by using human body parts. You start at the bottom of the feet and go all the way up to the mind, thus building a complete person.

To wit:

A) Feet – What does the person look like? What are the facts of their family history? Where have they lived? Where did they go to school? Were they poor? Do they have tattoos? Who is their best friend? What is their occupation? There are a million pertinent questions. *The feet are essentially all wholly palpable details to draw on, like physical details and facts.*

B) Groin – What does the person want? How does their sexuality manifest itself? What about them is base and puerile? Greed? Approval? Esteem? Gluttony? You can basically run toward their approach to the seven deadly sins here. *The groin covers all the things about the character that are born out of impulse and desire.*

C) Heart - What does the person need? What will make them a more functional person? Do they need to find self-confidence? Do they need to provide for their family? Do they need to find their humility? *The heart is essentially all the things they secretly need in their life to make them a better person.*

Note: notice that the heart is extremely different from the groin and what the character *wants*, which are often misguided. And so when it comes to your dramatic structure, notice how often the groin with its wants and impulses leads to conflict whereas the heart leads to resolution. So when developing the heart of your character you should understand that you are likely developing it around your ending catharsis (or tragedy or lack of catharsis, depending on the story you're telling). Simply put: since character motivation is so important, your heart and groin will really help with your plotting and character objectives!

D) Throat – How does the person sound? Not just the literal voice, but how does the person project themselves? How do they try to come off to other people? How do they actually come off to other people? What is their "surface vibe" as they say? *The throat is basically their posture, attempt at presentation, and affectation.*

E) Left cheek – What is their intelligence? How does it manifest itself? What is their practicality? How do they solve problems? Basically, *the left cheek is their methodology, exposing the "left-brained" abilities.*

F) Right cheek - What is their idealistic / artistic capacity? What is their conscience and morality? What is their un-practicality? What is their spirituality? *The right cheek is their ethics and soul and exposes their "right-brained" abilities.*

G) Crown – Now, this one is the most important because this is where we look at all the body parts listed and piece them together to see how they work as an *actual psychology*. And that's when you know you're creating a complex person with a conscious mind and a subconscious id. It's also where you can start to piece together what really matters about this character to your story. What are their defining memories? What is their pathology? The crown essentially allows you to answer the question:

Who is this character?

Ta-da! That's it! That's how you do a character tree. It's so simple and to the point. You start factual, then get emotional, then ideological, and then amalgamate those details into an actual character psychology. It is a great way to build fully textured people with whole lives unto themselves. Better yet, character trees work so well in making all your characters *truly different from one another.*

One great possible homework exercise for the more studious among you is to take a richly textured character in existing media and try retroactively filling out the character tree for them. For example, Hulk will bring you back to Tony Soprano because it's such a great example of how a popular character's psychology was brought to the forefront of the show's storytelling. It examined all the ways his wants, needs, posture, methodology, soul, and history were shown through both his conscious and subconscious existence. Try to work it out on your own!

All that being said, Hulk is going to give an honest warning: *beware the dangers of character trees too!* And that is because creating such an abundance of information before you've actually figured out your story can also lead to a lot of extraneous bullshit. For instance, the writer can feel like they are "locked in" to those details after creating the fully-textured trees. Know that you can always change it to enhance the psychology or find something more appropriate to your story!

A more common problem, however, is that a writer will feel like they need to cram in all the details of the tree in order to make the character seem fully-realized. This is also not the case! For one, it is more there for you as a comfort and support feature. Whereas other forces (that Hulk will soon get into) should be driving your story! For two, it makes the assumption that the details themselves do the heavy lifting of characterization. That is also not true! Instead characterization is more about the texture of how characters behave in dramatic context. So don't go overboard with your trees!

You will notice a running theme in this book is that of achieving balance with all these devices and helpful guides. Every benefit of a method will have a downside. And getting locked into any one form of character methodology will make you lose the organic qualities a script needs to feel natural. But completely ignoring character backgrounds will make your story seem paper thin. Like all things, it is about balance.

So even if the sanctity of character trees are not the be-all-end-all of your writing process, they really are a great technique for developing your characters and the worlds they inhabit. And they make a great continual resource to fall back on during your writing process!

11. Don't Base Your Characters On One Person; Combine Them!

Points 11 through 15 concern the effect of real-life inspiration on our writing process. Because let's face it, our friends and loved ones are a huge influence on our thoughts and experiences. There's no real way **not** to incorporate them into our writing in some form or other, but you have to be careful with it. Being extremely singular with your influences can be deeply problematic for... well... a variety of reasons.

Like did you know that it's surprisingly easy to tell when a young writer is basing a character on someone they know? Hulk sees this all the time in scripts and the reason it sucks is that the writer makes the assumption that the character's "reality" will do all the heavy lifting and provide the needed texture.

Know this: just because a character is real doesn't make them *feel* real.

An audience cannot implicitly sense what you know about this real person. They can only sense the information and characterization that is given, and unless that information actually conveys something with meaning, it is hence *meaningless*. And if you've ever been in or taught creative writing students, you will absolutely encounter the same problem every single semester:

Hulk: "Listen Jimmy, Hulk's not sure the character choice there really works for what you're trying to set up later-"

Jimmy: "But this is a real person!"

Hulk: "Okay, but-"

Jimmy: "But this really happened!"

It's a very easy thing to do as a young writer. In fact, Hulk did it back in the day too. If anything it's something we all need to get over. Because the sooner you can come to the realization that the person's reality doesn't matter for your narrative, the better off you will be. And what actually matters is whether or not the action makes sense for the character as presented.

So what to do when real-life people are inspiring you anyway? What to do if you recognize a truth in this real-life person that you want to explore it? How do you approximate the influence of real people into your script in a more organic fashion? How do you make them into something far more organic and unique?

Hulk has a surefire trick to make your characters more interesting: *combine them*.

You have that one friend who is really interesting? And that other friend who is really interesting, too? If you try to write them individually they always have a tendency to come off as flat and wooden. But if you combine the two of them? And you create a shared wealth of history and wants and needs and backgrounds to draw on? Well, suddenly the character has a brand new psychology! Seriously, you'd be shocked how quickly the character is brimming with depth and possibilities.

A long, long time ago Hulk stumbled into this dynamic (which Hulk assures you is not new). Hulk was once working on a script in film school in which two of the side-characters Hulk kind of based on real life folks were coming off flat and one-dimensional. The first was a gregarious, funny kid who loved partying and was wasting away his parents' college money. The other was an Indian student with an interesting family story who was trying to approximate some kind of fun experience in college. (Note: this movie was not **Van Wilder**.) And then it just dawned on Hulk: combine them!

Wouldn't you know it? But suddenly the character was leaping off the page. His "Indian-ness" no longer defined him, and vice-versa - the party-guy suddenly felt so much more interesting and atypical of the alpha-male figure of Americana. It removed the stereotype of *both* characters. And the gregarious party-going behavior became an interesting way for the Indian character to manifest his assimilation into American social culture. It became a fascinating over-compensation. It also made the problems with his traditional Indian parents feel much more textured instead of obligatory. Combining them completely revolutionized this character's story.

So Hulk started to do this with pretty much every single real life inspiration, and it worked like gangbusters. You force them to be filtered through a prism of other characteristics and suddenly it removes their singularity. Suddenly you're not searching for "what's there," but instead "what makes sense." And of course, this device is not some one-size-fits-all thing you can do with any two characters, but it becomes so much fun trying to find the neat combinations of people that actually fit together. Better yet, it creates new meaning to all those details. And heck, combine three characters if it makes sense!

Part of the reason this seems so counterintuitive is that we like to think that we see the people in our lives as complex, and they very much are, but believe it or not we have a tendency to still reduce them in our minds to their own kind of stereotypes of individuality. We look at them and rarely think of their totality, but just go "Oh that's just so and so!" and so often we can't help but define them in terms of *how they affect us*. So what Hulk loves about this method is that it *forces* you to remove the singular way in which you think about the people around you. It gets you to make choices. It makes you think about what is appropriate. And it absolutely breeds three-dimensional characterization.

And the great thing about this methodology is that it is not just true of characters...

12. How To Filter Your Real Life Into Storytelling

Story inspiration doesn't just come from the characters we create, it comes from our own lives, experiences, and stories whether they be hilarious, horrifying, or mundane. But again, the same lesson as point 11 applies:

Just because it happened, doesn't make it *feel* real to an audience.

Thus we must take these inspirations and events and filter them into real storytelling models and beats that make sense for dramatic purposes (we'll explore this in greater detail later in the structure section). But the same idea applies: you can't be lazy and assume the reader knows the event in question is true just because the author does.

In fact, movies can often experience something Hulk calls "the true story complex."

You ever notice how real life can have this strange way of feeling distinctly "unreal"? After all, nonfiction stories are usually filled with the grandest elements and extremes of human behavior. Rarely do you see normalcies contained within them, like the mundane heroism of getting up and going to work every day, or doing what you need to do in order to feed your family. No, our nonfiction is often immense and towering because we are naturally attracted to our extremes and grandest possibilities. And if you're trying to tell a story where you're interested in our most amazing feats then by all means have at it.

But a lot of you aren't. A lot of you are trying to tell human stories about people who have faults and fail. And as an unintended consequence, a lot of "true" elements have a funny way obscuring the thematic points you may want to make. And they can often fail to resonate with audiences. It may seem completely counterintuitive, but drawing on real life really doesn't make your writing ring true. Think about this most simple fact: the very reason we designate the entire genre as nonfiction is because we are doing something so "untrue" that we have to back it up with true-story-ism so the audience *has* to believe it.

Meanwhile, fiction is built for what *feels* true.

But why do we do it, anyway? Why do we try to color our fiction with the overt specific details of our lives?

It's not a terrible inclination if you think about it. We have to draw on experiences to have something to say about life. We need a human experience to create a human experience. It seems reasonable and necessary. But why do we rally around the specificity so much? What experiences cause us to write certain non-functional details in our art? A lot of times, the reason we do it is subconscious. And there's a sincere danger in doing so.

To illustrate, Hulk will now turn to another old adage about storytelling. And really, Hulk urges you to remember what Hulk is about to say, even if your eyes are glazing over and you have skimmed through every single other thing in this book, just take away one simple guideline:

13. Do Not Just Write The Story Of Your Life With The Lines You Wish You Said!

Not only does it reek of amateur hour, it really just leads to a lot of pure masturbatory writing. Think about it. On the most basic level, you are not supplementing a universal experience for others. You are excluding them. And you are likely creating an insincere catharsis for only yourself. As Paul Thomas Anderson once put it, "You're just working out your psychosis at everyone else's \$8.50" (that should clearly be updated to 15 bucks). The problem is that it's so natural to believe that a personal story is inherently universal. Hulk asked in the inspiration section "what compels you" and so often the experiences that hurt us are the ones that stick with us. They change our disposition. And quite often they teach us lessons and help us grow.

But we have to be sure *we are not the ones trying to teach our stories a lesson*. Do you see the difference? When we impart a desire to correct the traumatic things that happen to us, we're not letting the things that happen to us change us, we're still trying to change them... and really we're just being petty. We're exacting revenge on our experiences instead of trying to show how they helped us grow. In fact, it directly ties into Hulk's previous warnings about indulgence.

Hulk could single out a host of romantic comedies and independent movies that are most guilty of this behavior, but it's more helpful to look at the kinds of tropes that are created by this "wish" dynamic: the infallible protagonists, the magic girlfriend characters who can do no wrong, the not-so magic girlfriends who are just evil for no reason and are there to wreck the protagonist's heart, the fact that protagonists are always dudes, that they have the kinds of faults that aren't really faults ("so and so never had any time for love!"), writers turning the issues of the film and story into their own personal soapbox, video game designers automatically programming their likenesses as the heroes. Hulk could go on and on. It's all a weird form of insincere, self-aggrandizing story purposed through the justification of "sincere experience."

Actually, all of this is hinting at a pretty damn good rule that we can just use as extension:

14. Do Not Write "Yourself" As The Main Character

We always want to do it. It's human nature. But Hulk swears to you if you're a young writer it won't be a helpful tool. It just naturally skews toward all the indulgent, masturbatory stuff Hulk alluded to above. You'll assume your protagonist is likeable, because you think you are inherently likeable. You will shade experiences that make them seem bad to come out better. You will naturally be predisposed to cheat empathy and embrace posture. You will be assumptive. It's not that the storytelling can't be done well this way. It's just that it's *a terrible learning tool*, especially when you need to learn how to write other people first.

Hulk argues that picking a main character that feels distance to you in terms of experience or ethos can actually be a great learning tool. It will teach you how to use empathy. It will place you in the mind of the audience who doesn't know this

person, either. Thus you will relate to them the way the audience does, and you won't be living vicariously through them in your made-up universe. You will be eschewing indulgence. You will be best serving the purpose of storytelling.

But like every "rule" Hulk presents in this book, it's not to say you can't make the story of your life work, nor is writing a version of yourself as the main character impossible to do well... it's just that it's extremely difficult to do so. Trust Hulk on this one. It takes a special kind of self-dissonance and the desire and will to eviscerate yourself in dramatic function. Even the most lauded masturbatory works call direct attention to the callousness of writing a masturbatory work. Like with the best films in the oeuvre of Woody Allen, he weaves the problems and hang-ups of his own masturbatory writing *directly into the narrative*. Heck, at times he outright explains how insignificant it is and how it only helps the artist (this is the entire theme of **Deconstructing Harry**). There always has to be a purpose and reason for the inclusion.

Hulk keeps saying it (because it's true), but achieving balance is always the right instinct. It's about understanding the mechanism and reason we do something. And this time it is the understanding that both reality and self-story do not automatically make for good fiction. Go back and watch Kaufman and Jonze's **Adaptation**, which is 100% about this entire concept. It's all about how one cannot simply rely on the facets of truth and must search for beauty and truth and themes, and must ultimately embrace storytelling conventions to make those ideas resonate (even if one does so somewhat cheaply). And that film explains it better than Hulk ever could.

So sure, you can tell the story of your life and present yourself as the main character, but Hulk implores you to consider the reasons you are doing so. And to further consider the import of what you are giving an audience. Be sure it's not just for you to work out your drama. Instead, give us the tools to help work out our own. Give us an experience of empathy. Bridge gaps. Tell a story.

Because getting too close to real life is pretty complicated, especially when you start selling your story as "real"...

15. The Biopic / Reality Complication

If what Hulk just said is true for your fictional stories, then, believe it or not, it goes double for biopics and "true story" inspired films.

So let's just be upfront: Hulk has a great deal of reservations when it comes to the biopic as a film form, as they tend to have a really high degree of difficulty and that always leads to several reoccurring problems with the form.

Why is the form so difficult? Because recounting a life story tends to have nothing to do with how narratives actually work. Sure, every human has events that change them and natural act breaks, and sure writers do their best to try and make it a story, but it doesn't ever end up feeling like one, does it? Often it just feels like *stuff happening*. The writers will recount all the "greatest hits" in a person's life. And often attempts to cram clear narrative devices or scene purpose or recurring themes into the story feel completely disingenuous, shoehorned, and inconsistent with the otherwise "realistic" tone of the film. It's actually a helluva problem.

So as a writer / filmmaker, you have two real options.

The first is to *heavily* layer on the conventions of narrative over the story, so that the traditional storytelling elements do not feel half-assed. So they do not feel inconsistent with the overall tone of the piece. You make it feel just as tight as any fictional piece; you just have to be super confident that those narrative conventions *actually fit* the truth of the person too (otherwise you might just be making propaganda).

The best example of heavy narrative layering done right is Spike Lee's incredible **Malcolm X**. The stories in the film all have very specific narrative conventions. He expresses Malcolm's life through tried and true story tropes. He approaches each of Malcolm's life events like little mini-movies, all adding up to a much larger story. He makes the film episodic. At first there was Malcolm's hustling days. Then his jail days. Then his period of learning (education montage!). Then his rising up into power days. And ultimately, his meditative final days. There are way more sections than these, too, but each of them feels like its own specific little movie. There's so much propulsion and economy to each mini-story. Lee fully embraced the principals of narrative at every turn so that the supposedly restricting "facts" became incredibly compelling. He doesn't change the facts. He *amplifies* the facts cinematically. And in doing so he creates a biopic that isn't just true, it *feels* true.

The second option is to pretty much dismiss the concept of narrative all together and commit *solely* to the concept of accuracy. This means you tell the story through the evolution of relevant details. This works less well with a person's life, and much better with a specific event or time-frame. Hulk calls this the journo-cinematic route. You be like **All the President's Men**. You be like **Zodiac**. You be like **Zero Dark Thirty**. Even with made-up stories that still want to capture the texture of reality you can do this. You be like **The French Connection**. You be like **Contagion**. In all these films you eschew or downplay the principals of narrative and character arcs to tell the story of "an event" through the fixation of detail. The actual human characters come in and out and should be entertaining and fully-realized, but the film should be focusing on narrative propulsion, usually through the character's fixation on the event itself!

The first time Hulk realized that little nugget suddenly the entire plot-based film concept made so much sense. The character's drive help's fuel the film's drive. In all these real event films Hulk lists above, whether fiction or nonfiction, they are filled with characters that push through discovering the narrative itself. To unlock Nixon's Watergate. To find the Zodiac Killer. To find Osama Bin Laden. To find Charnier. To understand and cure the disease. Their unbending fixation is there to serve the propulsion of the narrative. So where is the arc? Where is the character change we truly need in movies?

The event becomes the character.

It absolutely blew Hulk's mind when Hulk first heard this idea. It seems to fly in the face of all the character-centric stuff Hulk said earlier, but this detail is revelatory. Even though these kinds of films are some of Hulk's favorites (and maybe yours as well), there are still a lot of people in the traditional audience that can't relate to them. There's often no central character journey, other than little subtle stuff. It is harder for the audience to empathize, but you just always have to hope they stay engaged. Always hope they could see it like Hulk does and see the event as the character, but Hulk understands why it's hard. Sure, they might be missing out, but the filmmaker just has to reconcile the fact that kind of plot-driven reality story is not for everyone.

Now, you may say to all this: "*B-but Hulk! That can't be right! Just two options?!? With nothing in the middle?!? There's gotta be a way to split the difference, Hulk, there's gotta be!!*"

Fine... There's one option. And that is you have to perfectly capture the sanctity of realistic detail and combine it with the ethos of character-driven story in complete and total harmony.

The problem is that option is so difficult to do that Hulk has only really seen one narrative perfectly capture it in the entirety of TV and film (novels are much better at it, but they have the space and clarity of intention).

That narrative is **The Wire**.

People often mistake **The Wire** for *only* having the journo-cinematic route and that's not accurate. Yes, the show was written by former journalists, who drew on their real lives and experiences. And they used those details in such a responsible way that it just seemed like the journalistic element was dominant. Everyone was like "**The Wire** is totally, like, real man." ... But that's only half the story.

Because the show also sticks so beautifully to the elements of narrative, particularly Greek drama structures. They were just so damn good at grounding those narratives in the journalistic influences and blending all of it with a kind of muted un-cinematic texture. It resisted all forms of stylization (there's a great anecdote where David Simon talks about a choice not to have the camera pan down to show an important detail because "The camera wouldn't know to do that." Point being it was an unstylized, neutral universe). Even with all the show's fixation on detail, they still used perfect story economy. They only used the level of journalistic detail they needed and the rest is traditional character arc and catharsis. And in terms of theme it may be the single most socially-conscious, thematically loaded television show that has ever existed.

"Hyperbole much, Hulk?"

Whatever. It's **The Wire**. And if you're going to try to replicate it, if you're going to try and split the difference between the influence of real, true story-ism and character-centric intention, just understand how hard it is to do cinematically... We may never see anything like this show again. But even then, perhaps there are some lessons to take away from it.

Like this one:

16. Research!

Hulk could give you a simple note here of “do your research!” and be done with that, but that would ignore what Hulk sees as a rather complex issue.

Given #1: Whatever the subject you are writing about, you should be fully researched on the topic so that you are a mini-expert and will be ready to represent it as truthfully as possible in your story.

Given #2: Don’t ever let anyone tell you that you don’t have *a little* flexibility.

The problem with talking about movies is that so often people are coming from different places when it comes to not just the effectiveness of your film but the “accuracy” of it too. There is just such a wide range to how the audience treats verisimilitude.

And Hulk will go into the following idea at great length later in the structure section, but writing a compelling narrative often doesn’t have that much to do with scientific accuracy and plot holes, but far more to do with the ideas Hulk has already mentioned regarding character consistency and thematic resonance. But just because those things are *more important* to making a good narrative doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t bother putting the effort in to make our films as accurate as possible (within reason). That would just be lazy.

And if Hulk is being honest, then a lot of writers in this industry are guilty of being lazy. Hollywood movies and glitzy television shows are filled with all sorts of nonsense. Like how often has it seemed that the writers have never used a computer and don’t understand what the term “hacking” actually means? The ‘90s are an utter graveyard of technobabble, but thankfully our research departments have gotten pretty damn good at this.

What Hulk would actually argue is a far more valid topic when it comes to your research is upholding the spirit of accuracy.

What does that mean? Well, for instance with **Lost** (which was an amazing show all things considered), it had a scientific element that was often lauded by casual viewers. And it got people excited about those concepts. Suddenly fans of the show were reading about electromagnetism and Minkowski space and how those concepts fit into the larger themes... the problem was that when you examined the science up close, it was pretty much gibberish. Hulk has a bunch of non-armchair, seriously hardcore science friends and it was really, really hard for them to watch the show. Mostly because they would reference these cool advanced concepts and then not actually understand their function. Again, Hulk doesn’t think this got in the way of making **Lost** a great show, and Hulk would argue that it actually did a very good job upholding the interest and value of science. But to the hardcore, they couldn’t abide. There is quite simply a rift in audience needs with these things, so understand that anything less than expertise will be viewed as such by certain people.

Perhaps the real boon of true research is how it can go on to inform so many great ideas and really flesh out your story. You just have to put the work in. And it may sound crazy, but Hulk honestly thinks that audiences subconsciously respond to characters when they *really* know what to call things. A lot of Hollywood producers fear having their characters talk over the heads of the audience, but in truth, the use of specific, esoteric details can actually give the air of veracity. And sometimes great truths are arrived at when you work backward from that veracity.

Going back to David Simon, **Generation Kill** is compelling because all they tried to do with the narrative was create the most accurate depiction of life as a soldier in Iraq imaginable - and that was it. And they did so in a way that was only meant to make those soldiers agree. But by pleasing those soldiers, they created a kind of detail-oriented truth that helped strike a chord with those of us looking in on the situation. It’s what allowed us to access them.

Simply put: audiences like to watch smart, talented people do their professional thing.

And it is responsible for most of the good cop, lawyer and doctor shows we see on TV. The problem is that some of them have taken to lying right through their freaking teeth when it comes to “the spirit” of the work. And Hulk thinks that this dishonest approach to portraying real-world professionalism has really bad societal consequences.

Look at **CSI**. The science may be sound and it may have a team of experts to show off real techniques, but the show is the most dishonest look at solving crime imaginable. It's an inauthentic narrative about how those sciences are actually used in the field, how those people really do their jobs. It is even utterly dishonest about the success rate of the techniques and, most importantly, the kinds of resources police actually have. And as such it creates a seriously damaging portrait of how policing actually works.

Don't believe Hulk? A lot of courts have stopped taking jurors if they are **CSI** fans... Hulk's not kidding. The show lies so badly when it comes to the reality of police procedural abilities that potential jurors expect every single case to have the kind of resources they need for high-tech on-site forensic evidence. In truth, **CSI** experts are three scientists in a little lab nowhere near the action and there is usually a six-month waiting list for only the most high profile cases. An infinitesimally small portion of cases get a whiff of that kind of science aptitude and we've turned it into B-movie pulp.

And sure, narratively speaking, **CSI** is fun, silly television with big reveals (they've patented the Act 4 to Act 5 double twist) and a hyper-stylized flare, but the real problem is that they are doing so *under the guise of realism and scientific accuracy*. It brings up a really difficult argument about the pursuit of narrative vs. the pursuit of real-life logic (and again, there is some wiggle room here), but Hulk thinks you can often push those creative liberties into the realm of creative dishonesty. They are lying about the most important thing possible.

They are lying about *the purpose*.

So what to do? On one hand, Hulk is arguing that accuracy doesn't matter for your story. On the other hand Hulk is arguing that accuracy can matter more than anything. How do you know when is when?

It's an insanely tough question, but it's actually one you have to answer for yourself. What kind of story are you telling? Does the accuracy matter to your story? Would it be dishonest to represent it as anything but accurate? Is it okay to be pulpy and use pseudo-science here? Your ultimate takeaway should be to utilize a manner of storytelling that accurately reflects the intention of your storytelling.

17. Drama vs. Story

The following would likely make more sense after Hulk has finished the structure section, but it's just so important to understand before going into the writing process that it needs to be mentioned now.

Thus far, Hulk has prepared you for a lot of story concepts in narrative. Like how characters should have motivations and psychologies. Like how there should be thematic backbones and meaning to what you unveil. But Hulk has prepared you very little for the realities of *drama*. And yes story and drama are two different things when it comes to our own particular working definition.

Think of "story" as the logical side of your narrative.

As an example, pretend one character goes and murders another. Let's say they have a reason for doing it. And the thing is that we can find out what their motivations were either before they commit the murder, during, or after. And in terms of "story sense," each option would be just as logical, right? Finding out wouldn't affect the character's psychology or logic for anything. The problem is that just because a story may make sense, doesn't mean it's necessarily engaging or the best way to experience it. And where you put information reveals very much affects the experience.

Thus it is drama that is about *the experience*.

And this is how traditional drama works: a character explains why they care about something. We put those cares into jeopardy. And then we fret and worry about the state and well-being of those cares. That's it. That's drama. It's like threatening to kill the kitten. You take a compelling character and suddenly they're hanging on a rooftop. But it's not just danger. It has to be active danger *felt by the audience*. We have to connect to it and have empathy. And so the idea of drama is to engage the most active part of the audience's brain and turn up the urgency and viscera.

And you do that by understanding the stakes.

Let's go with a hypothetical: pretend you are... well... you. This is not a movie. This is totally real life and you are on

your way to work or something. Now pretend someone suddenly showed up and said "Hi, I'm your long-lost brother. Quick, there's someone after me! Help!" ... What would your reaction be?

Answer honestly. Mostly you would be confused as all hell. You wouldn't know if you wanted to trust this person. You might go on instinct in *either* direction. The only thing that would draw you in to doing this is a sense of mystery. You would want to know the truth, right? And Hulk imagines it would be a rushed and crazy scenario! Would it be exciting? Sure! Would it be the craziest thing that could happen to you that morning? Probably! But as far as you go, meaning *the person you are*, complete with your own motivations and interests, wouldn't you mostly just be like "What the fuck!?!?!?"

Well guess what, folks? That's exactly how audiences react to new information too. We like to think the sudden reveal of information and "Let's go off and deal with it!" is the most exciting and interest-drawing approach in the universe, but it's not; it's just chaos and curiosity.

Hulk swears to you that reveals of new information just don't have the same dramatic effect as a previously established level of investment. And how could they? We may like someone and be intrigued, but if we're not *empathizing* with someone, then we're not so willing to go off on a crazy journey with them. Which, guess what, is exactly what we do when we watch movies with traditional narratives.

To back up what Hulk is saying here, imagine if you had a long-standing, great relationship with your hypothetical brother. Again, this is real life. And then all of a sudden he showed up and said someone was trying to kill him. What would your reaction be then? When it was someone with whom you had a whole history with and had built trust and genuinely loved? Why, then you'd have motivation to help. You'd even have understanding and clarity about your motives. You'd want to help him and you'd care what happened to him, because your response is based on something that *has been built and earned*.

Well guess what? That's exactly how audiences react when they have built a relationship with a character in whom they are invested.

And it's true of all drama. We need the information and defined relationships and then we need the stakes. You may have heard the phrase "dramatic irony" before and its meaning is simple. Dramatic irony is when the audience is privy to some piece of information that the characters onscreen are not privy to yet, and thus it creates tension in the audience. The most obvious example is like something out of a horror movie when we know the killer is standing in a room and the lead character walks in, unsuspecting. We may even see the killer start stalking them. And thus, we fret! But this is the clearest example of dramatic irony; you can achieve it almost any way you see fit for various models of tension and release. A character walking into a trap. A character not knowing someone is about to turn on them. It builds tension and effect. But the important thing to note is that dramatic irony is derived from *the audience knowing the information*. When you know what is going on, when you know what is at stake, it is amazing how much you can accomplish in engaging your audience.

And yet, Hulk looks around at the landscape of narrative storytelling these days and sees a complete lack of understanding when it comes to drama, both traditional and ironic. Seriously, Hulk thinks it is the number one bad habit of our *good writers*. It's like the entirety of Hollywood needs to take a playwriting class.

Last year, **John Carter** was released and it was concocted by a handful of certified storytelling geniuses (Stanton, Andrews, and Chabon). Every bit of storytelling in the film is logical. Every bit of plotting eventually makes sense. All the actors were compelling and filled with personality. But why was the movie inert? Why did it fail to capture our collective interest? Hulk knows it has its fans, but on the popular level it didn't quite engage the audience at large. Why?

It's because almost every bit of story information and character motivation was saved for later reveals, often given right as the dramatic action *was actually happening*. Meaning the entire movie was essentially the brother appearing out of nowhere and then explaining to us the "how" hours later, long after we really needed to care.

People just don't watch movies with rapt dramatic interest when clarity is delayed. They may be curious, but curiosity is not a long-term plan. People would much rather watch films actively, with subconscious understanding. They follow the actor's body language and feelings. We need to understand what they care about. We need to see the world through them, not at them. Thus we need drama, plain and simple. Empathy is based on clarity. We need to understand.

We need stories that give us reasons to care and then just step back and let us care.

What's rather ironic about this point is that nothing makes the case more than one of Stanton's previous films, **Finding Nemo**. That film opens with a short scene in which two fish, Marlon and his wife, are deciding what to name their big batch of children who rest below them in egg form. But suddenly there is a horrific barracuda attack - Marlon's wife is killed and their eggs are eaten, save one (who will become our titular Nemo). It's a deeply compelling scene, one that engages the audience and makes Marlon extremely empathetic (notice he's not just doing a nice thing - instead, the movie killed the cat). But the real import of the scene is that we then understand why Marlon spends the next two hours of the film being overprotective. He was so haunted by that experience that his over-parenting is kicking in. And even if we don't agree with his behavior, we, the audience, completely understand why he's doing it. We can empathize. And we will follow him through the depths of hell to get Nemo back. It's all a genius bit of dramatic storytelling.

And Stanton didn't want to do it.

He wanted to put the opening scene two-thirds of the way into the movie so that it was a reveal. So that we would understand everything in this late moment and go "Aha! There was a reason! The filmmaker knew what he was doing all along!" But the filmmaker also did not realize this "aha" moment might not be worth sitting through an hour and a half of your main character being an over-parenting, non-relatable asshole. It is just such a complete misunderstanding of how drama works. It's late information for no functional reason. The movie works a thousand times better playing the information straight ahead at the very beginning. And the Pixar story team knew this and adamantly insisted Stanton put the scene at the beginning. They were right.

But Hulk guesses that Stanton wanted to prove he was right all these years later and so **John Carter** uses the *same exact* device of a dead family, only Stanton reveals this two-thirds of the way into the movie in the middle of a big fight. The scene itself is rousing and pretty and... completely ineffectual when it comes to the film's overall drama. Worse, the damage is already done. We just spent most of the film trying to be empathetic to our main character who just seemed to be a withdrawn jerk to everyone he met. There is no understanding. There are no stakes. And this poor decision is symptomatic of everything in the film. It's all logical story information with no real dramatic experience. There's no stakes or motivation. The film has three prologues of nothing but information. None of which are character-based or reveal motivation (like a certain dead family one would allow for), but instead are just moving bits of plot that will only make sense by the end. But they won't be compelling.

Hulk does not mean to single out Stanton by any means. The frustrating thing is he is so damn talented with almost everything else that it's frustrating he can't get this basic concept of story experience. And he is far from alone in this tendency, as so many writers and directors do it too these days. Why does this happen? Hulk's not too sure. Often the storyteller wants it to be... different, maybe? The method of traditional drama and how it just lays out all the information might just be seen as too straightforward. Instead, they want the allure of mystery and delighting in the reveal, like performing a cinematic magic trick or something. Honestly, Hulk thinks this tends to be a show-offy way of displaying an understanding of narrative. A way of saying "look how smart my writing is!" Like they want to show that they understood this confusing thing all along and you should have trusted them. But as one of Hulk's favorite old adages of this business goes:

"Don't impress me, convince me."

And drama convinces the audience every time.

"But Hulk... isn't there a place for mystery, too? Can't curiosity work? Can't a reveal be an awesome thing?"

Sure thing... you just gotta understand the mechanisms.

18. The JJ Abrams Question - Mystery? vs. Urgency!

JJ Abrams has built a career off the power of mystery.

Hulk feels pretty comfortable saying that. He knows that a well-built mystery can engage an audience, propel further discussion, create a beautiful atmosphere, and lock into your sense of curiosity. What obviously helps is that his work has tremendous energy, but far more importantly, all of his projects absolutely *commit* to the power of mystery. He outlines

the whole theory in his now-famous (infamous?) TED speech about how mystery can command a story all the way through the story-telling and especially the marketing presence. Even his frequent co-writer and collaborator Damon Lindelof often talks about his writing strategy where every character he writes has a secret, which informs and guides their depth.

Make no mistake, these tactics have great value. Hulk has even used the “secret” tip a number of times too... But both these guys tend to use the power of mystery and secrecy to a fault.

Like first and foremost, how sometimes “mystery” is just not the required tone or choice for narrative propulsion and yet they use it anyway. Yes, when used correctly mystery can hang over a scene to wonderful effect, but it can also hang over a scene to an incredibly muting effect too. Like the heart of drama, sometimes scenes just need to be functional. Sometimes they just need to be clear.

Sometimes they need to have urgency.

Urgency is simple. Urgency is born from clarity. *We have to stop that thing or the bomb goes off and we both die!* The thing Hulk really likes about this kind of storytelling is that it is a visceral engagement. Mystery makes an audience member go “Oooh, what the heck is going on here?” and brings people into their minds to ponder. This is admittedly a vital engagement that doesn't happen often enough in cinema. But it is often *just* a cerebral engagement. And urgency, with all its dull simplicity, allows the audience to skip the use of their brain and just experience the film in the most primal and exciting way. That may sound like Hulk is advocating being a philistine, but not it all. Different scenes and films just call for different things. And Hulk thinks urgency is geared to how best use filmmaking's natural power.

And don't think that urgency only applies to action and world-ending circumstances. It works just as well for two characters talking about something that is important to each of them. It is wholly functional. Think back to how many conversations on **Lost** had two people waxing philosophical about something we never actually understood the specifics of. Sure, we wondered what the heck they were talking about as they tip-toed around vague concepts, but we were not necessarily *engaged* on a character or story level. And the moving shell game of “mystery!” became more and more tiresome with every passing season. It wasn't that we wanted “answers,” it was that we wanted clear stakes and something that felt like it mattered. Mystery is great, but it truly has a short-term lifespan. If you try to sustain it for too long, you're sunk.

So if Lindelof needs to give every character a secret, do we then lose the power of two characters arguing with all their information out in the open? When there are stakes we understand? Hulk understands that **Lost** was often interested on a thematic level in subverting the very idea of what one can actually know (focusing on the need to place one's energy into faith), but so often this wishy-washy mysteriousness overpowered the mechanics of basic conventional narrative. What's funny is that the first season really did understand how to balance (there's that word again) that mystery with the power of clear stakes and perceptible character motivation. But the deeper down the well they went, the more they lost sight of that balance, so much so that it even ruined some of the power of the central mystery... And please keep in mind this is coming from a Hulk that really, really, really loved the show. It's just a good example because so many people are familiar with it.

Ultimately, there are clear reasons to use both mystery and urgency, but Hulk just wants you to be aware of, you know, *how to use them and why*. Again, it's the mechanisms. So ask yourself, what would make this scene work better? Not understanding the urgency and engaging the audience on a cerebral level, or totally understanding it and engaging the audience viscerally? That is the central question.

Believe it or not, the best example Hulk can think of when it comes to late character reveals is **Planes, Trains, and Automobiles**. You see, the film's central conflict is driven by the fact that this crazy guy (John Candy) seems one-dimensional and annoying. And this provides comedic conflict for the main character (our audience surrogate, Steve Martin) as we tag along with him on his journey. And then when the movie calls for catharsis, we are given the information that the annoying travel companion's wife recently died and all this behavior is symptomatic of the fact that he is lonely. Why does this late reveal pay off here and not in **John Carter**? Because the conflict we get from *not* knowing is what drives the movie. If we knew his wife was dead at the beginning it would be hard for us to laugh at him while empathizing with our main character's situation. And when it's time for that conflict to be resolved? The information is revealed, and it works.

The following will sound confusing, but for your own work: you have to gauge the validity of the conflicts that are given

to the audience from characters *not knowing* that information and you compare them to the kinds of conflicts that are created by the audience *knowing* that information. Does that make sense? And Hulk wholly argues that if we knew from the beginning that John Carter's wife had died, we would have understood why he was pushing others away from him, felt awful for him, and followed him happily on his journey to Mars where he would find a new lease on life, and ultimately would have relished in the depths of conflict the moment he was put in harm's way. The film's narrative didn't require mystery.

It required empathy.

And going back to Abrams, perhaps nothing highlights the differences of the two approaches like the stark difference between Abram's **Mission Impossible III** and Brad Bird's **Mission Impossible IV: Ghost Protocol**. The first steepes every single character and even the film's central nameless MacGuffin in the total shroud of secrecy. The second example eschews mystery altogether and explains absolutely everything involved, gives you all the tangible stakes, and takes you on one hell of a compelling ride.

19. Don't Over-Mythologize

Hulk is always deeply reluctant to give vague personal anecdotes, but sometimes a situation speaks directly to a great point and thus it is necessary. So... Hulk once sat in on a big development meeting. It was going to be for this giant popular thing, too. We sat down and the writer starting pitching their version of the project and they immediately started talking about the mythology of the world they were creating. They went on and on and on and on and on until someone Hulk will just call "one of the smartest people in Hollywood" stopped him dead in his tracks and said:

"Look. This is all good and neat. But what's the story?"

Writer: "Oh yeah, well there's this main character and his parents die, and..."

Then they went on to tell a very formulaic, uninspired story about their characters that they didn't put half as much thought into as they did the world in which they were setting those characters.

The anecdote is symptomatic of the fact that we now live in the age of mythology. We've become fascinated with building worlds. Not stories. And yes mythologies can be very cool things, but like the background information in character trees, having a fully realized world is merely a great thing to fall back on with which to texture your world, but never forget that *narrative and character are the driving forces of your film*.

Hulk knows we've all come to love the **Star Wars** universe and mythology, but we fell in love with it because the original film was a good story, well told. It wasn't just the revolutionary effects, but that the film's narrative had a revolutionary sense of propulsion for its time (see the anecdote in Biskind's **Easy Riders, Raging Bulls** about Marcia Lucas making the call to edit for pace and not the actor's rhythms). You always have to remember that stories and drama are what bring us into a universe, not the other way around.

And for anecdotal evidence of such, that big popular thing was never made.

20. Everything You Write Is Inherently Saying Something

The following are valid arguments based on the text of each movie:

-**Transformers 3** argues for not trusting our government and advocates military autonomy.

-**Shrek** argues you can only date within your race.

-**Life of Pi** presents a story that isn't real as example of the power of religious faith, thus arguing religion is false.

-**Top Gun** argues... well... actually, Quentin Tarantino argued that one best.

All these examples are silly extremes, but proof positive that whether or not we mean to put messages in our films and

media, they are still there.

This is an inescapable fact of authorship and the anchor behind the entire field of semiotics. Everything your characters do and say automatically implies something about the way those characters view life, other people, and conflict. And the way the narrative regards those characters can't help but show how you, the proverbial author, equally view life, other people, and conflict. Even if you wrote those characters subconsciously as part of a pure automated attempt to execute your narrative, and did so only in an attempt to be entertaining, it is still true: your writing is inherently arguing for *something*.

But let's get this out of the way immediately: please do not assume this means that characters are automatically a stand-in for the author's beliefs or some silly notion like that. Often it is quite the opposite. The art of narrative is instead dependent on contextualization. It's about the way the entire portrayal of each entity adds up together through the action themselves, through the reasoning, through the tone, through the subtext, and ultimately within our ability to process it. And even if that may seem like an obfuscation of intent, the totality of everything in a narrative has consequences and supplies context. From there, the messages of a film erupt outward no matter what.

A good storyteller, however, knows how to harness those messages.

They use the story's context to create their own meaning. Sure, the nuances of semiotics are best left for the realm of criticism, but the one core thing that you, the proverbial writer, need to have is a simple awareness of what your work is saying. You don't need to understand every part of it, but there has to be an anchor. It can be some grand on-the-nose political statement, it can be a specific thought about a character's behavior, it can be a simple justification of heroism and kindness. But your work is saying something. And the sheer awareness of whatever that idea is, your theme, your purpose, often does half the job of sorting that context for you. Hulk will say it again: *The mere act of having a viewpoint and theme in your head while writing will do half the job for you.*

Hulk knows that sounds like an over-simplification, but Hulk says it all the damn time: awareness matters. Everything you write in your screenplay means something, so harness away! This is actually where we get into the "soul" concept of that popular "mind, body, soul" approach to movies Hulk mentioned in the inspiration section, but Hulk argues the intent was to provide themes that can be used to compel both your characters *and then the audience*. Meaning it is the intent of what you're arguing which is your best chance to connect to a person's soul.

And that means that thematic messages are not a burden or a responsibility, but a damn opportunity.

When looking through the lens of our most dutiful sensibility, theme allows the author to say something important. It doesn't need to be oppressive and dominate the story or sense of fun in your film. Even in the most silly of comedies like **The Other Guys**, McKay finds a way to comment on the things he finds important and he makes them work with the context of a send-up of action movies. For instance, he finds it interesting that action films often feature these crazy ethnic bad guys who operate drug cartels and murder and stuff, but whose exploits are almost nothing compared to the pervasive shame of white-collar crime (which often funds them). Sure, the film makes fun of over-the-top car chases and clichéd super-police officers, but it is also serious criticism about the simplistic way action films paint good and bad.

And in a less preachy way, it's really just saying something about human nature. So many of our films are about love, loss, hope, and heartbreak. They are universal soul-connectors, but don't forget you are inherently arguing something about those ideas, whether you mean to or not. So harness! And even if you just want your movie to be fun and not overwhelm your audience with messages, then it's just a matter of tact. Or heck, you can post-modernly thumb your nose at the idea of "saying something," and avoid what you think is trite or didactic, but isn't that just the formalization of your own message? Hulk means, if that's what you actually think, isn't the script just an opportunity to harness that message in a coherent way?

Reward behavior you think should be rewarded. Punish behavior you think should be punished. Expose the shame of how behavior that should be punished is in fact rewarded, or vice versa. Show what you think.

Theme is always an opportunity, not a burden.

Speaking of opportunities...

21. Don't Write Women Just In The Context Of Men

Okay...

Hulk is not going to get big into this, because anything that dips into the arena of sexism becomes such a difficult topic to discuss on a larger canvas. So Hulk wants to cut through all that and just say that all writers have to do a better job with how they portray women. They just do. We should all at least be able to admit that the culture of women in film is in a bad, bad way right now.

There are a lot of levels to it. There's the obvious, active sexism of a male audience that doesn't care and just argues that women only need to be in a movie so men have something to look at (this actually happens. A lot). And then there is the casual sexism of "Let's only define women through the gaze and context of the male characters!" Or even the subconscious sexism of "The girl in this movie is the way more interesting, driving force of the narrative and theme, but guys are default main characters!" Of course, getting into the how or why these tropes develop would be the subject of their own book, but suffice to say they are a problem.

And so much of it is just lack of awareness. So much of it is a failure to admit a problem.

And here's the reason it matters most of all: it is important to create interesting, vivid women *for the sake of your narrative altogether*.

It has nothing to do with politics or any "-ism." It has to do with good storytelling. You want all your characters to have their own stuff going on. You want your characters to be textured and seem human and have purpose. Notice Hulk didn't say Hulk wants you to "write strong role models!" because that's not the same thing as writing vivid characters. And the biggest problem is how often female characters are missing basic human traits. And any attempts to fix the problem are often met with a phrase Hulk hears all the time from screenwriting students (and even professional writers):

"But I don't know how to write women!"

On the most basic level that's just bullpoo because it is a simple misunderstanding of characterization that assumes a woman has to be defined by "being female" and not simply *being a female* who has her own character worth. 99% of the plotting you can do has absolutely nothing to do with gender itself. It's about people, relationships, external conflicts, or even saving the world. Yes there are a bunch of ways to talk about gender issues with your writing, but you really don't have to feel like writing "an interesting woman" automatically implies tackling gender politics. We have to start on the most basic level of improvement and that means Hulk just wants you to give female characters stuff to do! Stuff that doesn't have to do with men or passive sexuality! If you can write a man, you can write a woman. To suggest anything other than that is ridiculous and lazy.

Hulk just wants us to get the basic idea of not always writing women as vacant or damsels or passive characters. And it's not like this is some conversation reserved just for "macho" male-aimed films, either: a lot of romantic comedies starring women are particularly guilty of this. Actually, [the best thing](#) Hulk saw on the topic was from the popular blogger Bitter Gertrude who is the artistic director of Impact Theater in Berkeley. Here she addressed the strange and problematic similarity of narrative approach from young women playwrights:

"I'm seeing a significant amount of plays by women with female characters structurally positioned as the central character. However, that female character isn't driving the narrative—she is, instead, just reactive to whatever the male characters are doing. It's a woman sitting around wondering what to do about some man in her life, talking to her friends about some man, interacting with some man about his decisions or actions. It's still a story with a central male character, just told from the woman's point of view. If it's a lesbian play, just change that male character to a female character. The structurally central female character is just as reactive.

Here's the weird part: I ALMOST NEVER SEE PLAYS LIKE THIS FROM MEN. When I get a play by a man, the central character, male or female, almost always drives the narrative and has an active arc.

Ensemble pieces don't change anything— they work the same way, just in the plural.

So what the effing eff is going on here? I rarely see this from the more experienced, accomplished women playwrights, but it's shockingly common from early career women writers."

Hulk likes her use of caps! But the piece received a good amount of fallout wherein a lot of women argued that it was representative of what a lot of women's lives are like, but within the piece itself she nails why that thinking is problematic:

“Being empathetic and reactive aren't necessarily bad things, but these received narratives of how to ‘correctly’ perform our genders are having an impact on the way some playwrights are writing, and that impact is working against some women playwrights’ ability to tell their stories.”

It's not that passivity can't be part of the character's operational method, but good storytelling requires that the author be conscious that passivity is the subject, either by transcending that passivity with character growth (one of Hulk's favorite movies ever, **Juliet of the Spirits**, is about traversing passiveness and the same goes for Ibsen's **A Doll's House**) or succumbing to the tragedy of passivity. Either version displays an authorial intent to say something about the reality. It's just like Hulk argued in the context section: what happens in your narrative provides a viewpoint.

And the problem Hulk sees is that the plays in question, as well as a whole host of romantic comedies and TV sitcoms about marriage, are often *rewarding* that passivity. And while that contributes horribly to the overall double standard and conditions of patriarchy and all that awful stuff, Hulk's problem for you is a bit different:

It makes for bad drama.

For you, the writer, it really is that simple. Hulk just explained to you why good drama is about the experience and understanding of stakes and motivation. But how can you do that when you skimp on the characterization and participation of 50% of the people on this planet? It is instinctually felt. Good drama is built on the foundation of character growth. It is about characters making decisions and being compelling and having active interest in their own lives. And when they don't, the audience needs to understand why that is limiting them. Context has to rule. In essence, the striving for good drama backs up the purpose of storytelling, whether through the gaining of knowledge, which is often rife with sorrow, or by how it feels for humanity, or maybe even speaks to integrity. And the great thing about drama is it can do those things even when people are being the opposite of those things. And we are simply dropping the ball when it comes to doing *any of this* with our female characters.

You may think this issue is not all that important to the story you are telling, but every film on the planet can be made better by making the female characters three-dimensional. Seriously. It's not a revolutionary concept. *Every film can benefit*. Think of all the rare films that actually manage to do it. Think about how even the most basic example of a not-embarrassing character like Princess Leia has gone on to have such cultural resonance. Think that's an accident? She's a smart, capable leader with her own opinions, her own stuff going on, displays a whole range of kindness and anger and lust and frustration and nuance. And wouldn't you know it, but it just so happens *every* audience member comes to love her. Even the most sexist dudes on earth, who insist they don't "need" interesting portrayals of women in their films, all adore Leia. It's not an accident. We can't help but enjoy when fully-ranged and interesting *people* are onscreen, no matter what gender they are. It's not magic, folks.

We are simply moved by interesting, human characters.

* * *

Note: we are finally winding down the conceptual section (hurray), so the last two points will cover the ideas behind beginnings and endings.

22. The Value of Preexisting Conflict

"Everything was just fine! And then it wasn't!"

While this description suits a number of wonderful movies, Hulk is here to tell you that it is also the first act of a whole shit load of bad movies. We get a look at some world that is built up with non-vital, non-compelling character work and then at a certain point, it's like the movie *actually decides to start*. And while there is totally a way to build up normalcy and then take a spectacular right turn with your narrative, that sort of writing takes a lot of deft understanding of rhythms and some serious craft. So instead, Hulk is addressing the problems of a lot of our more traditional Hollywood narratives, like action films and romantic comedies.

So many of those films don't use that time for anything important or critical to the story. This has become our modus operandi. Even with scripts that try to start off with some big action scene or attention-grabbing device, it is often an empty gesture. It is often energy without purpose. It is often not even part of the real story. They assume just because we're watching our characters that we're building relationships with them and it takes so much more than that to ingrain story purpose.

And thus so many movies pass up on the opportunity to ingrain their films from the very onset with a sense of weight. All they have to do is start people in the midst of a world *already in conflict*. Doing this gives your story immediacy, importance, stakes, *meaning*.

Think about how many great movies start right in the middle of a larger conflict. There's big, bold examples like **Star Wars**, which famously starts in the middle of a space battle (with *that* epic shot too) and there are hugely underrated movies like Mann's **Miami Vice** (it's a super plotty, less-accessible movie that was using digital too early, but it's still great). It doesn't even need to be some grand scale thing. We can start in the middle of intimate human problems too. A parent's death. A relationship at odds. A past psychological trauma. Starting off with these problems gives your script immediacy.

This isn't some rule that inherently works better, it's just that Hulk thinks people treat the opposite as the rule. So don't be afraid to jump right into it. It's no accident that the greatest writer of all time, William Shakespeare, loved dropping us right down in the middle of a larger conflict. That way one enters a world that already feels lived-in and rife with history. It creates a world that we already know has consequences and importance.

This isn't to say preexisting conflict should be required for every movie, not for a second! Just that so many stories seem to miss out on an opportunity to use it. And that's a shame.

So keep it in mind!

23. The Ending Is The Conceit

If all the ideas in our films mean something, then your ending should say *everything*.

We often look at endings as those things that just wrap up the story and make us feel better after the conflict is over, but a better way to think of an ending is for it to hammer in *everything you ever meant*. All the story, all those themes, all those ideas, all that work, it should resonate as the audience leaves the theater. It should not be extinguished in a merciful, placating whimper.

Sometimes it doesn't even need to be a big thing, but a small human moment. For instance, Hulk adores the endings of Paul Thomas Anderson, which always seem to end on a slight gesture of sorts. With **Sydney (Hard Eight)** our titular character covers the blood on his cuff, as he is a man who has always kept his violence under a surface of shine and propriety. With **Boogie Nights** we have Eddie Adams from Tarrant staring at a mirror with his junk out, but he has completely lost himself: he's delivering a monologue not even as Dirk Diggler, but his character's character Brock Landers, finally pumping his ego / id / weiner up with "You're a star! You're a star!" Or with **Magnolia**, where the saddest, most tragic character finally earns the ability to smile. Or with **There Will Be Blood**, wherein Plainview's megalomania is finally sated when he has completely ruined and ultimately killed an insignificant, yet ethically bothersome figure from his past, citing "I'm finished." And most recently with **The Master**, in which our sincerely damaged and psychologically-played-with protagonist of Freddie Quell has finally made a tangible (if puerile) connection with a lady in the bar, the figurative sand castle figure made real. All these movies end with truly striking moments that don't fit in a lot of conventional "resolution" models, but they connect with us because they hammer home the entire theme of their respective movies with great character moments.

One film Hulk loves to use as an example of the ending being the conceit is James Gunn's excellent **Super**, wherein he didn't just use the ending to ram home all his ideas, but used it to reveal what the thematic idea of what the film was *really* about the whole time. And it wasn't some cheap plot trick or a twist or anything as trite as that. The film just took on a bigger, more human and emotional scope. The film, often hard-edged and satirical, was transformed by a real emotional sensitivity to what had transpired and then was driven home by the thematic hammer. It was downright resonant and re-shaped the entire film you saw. And the movie could have so easily placated us and alleviated our

worries after the climax, but Gunn really understood how much you could say with an ending.

Endings always matter and they matter thematically, dammit. Why else would Shakespeare (the aforementioned greatest writer of all time) *always* end his plays with some haunting or beautiful monologue? One which was delivered by an actor *right to the audience*? One in which they would ruminate on the events that have transpired, what it meant, and how they should resonate going forward?... Hulk mean... He is basically saying the conceit right at the end!!!

Like Hulk keeps saying with most of these points, do not look at the ending of your piece as a burden, but as an opportunity. An opportunity to say everything you want to say in your movie. It is an opportunity to be poetic, resonant, and interesting. It is an opportunity to be soulful and underline the purpose of storytelling.

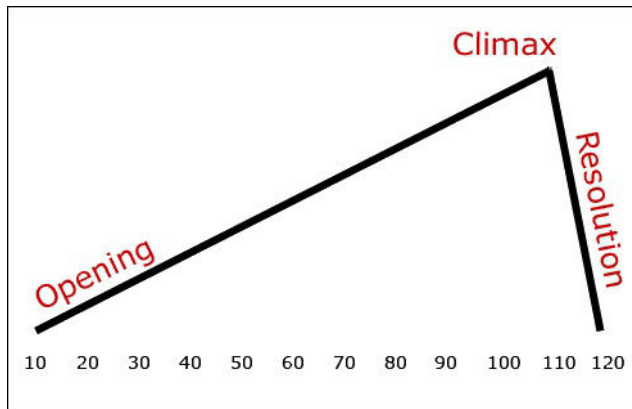
And if you skirt on that opportunity? And just wrap a few things up without living up to the rest of your film? Then that might be a bit of a problem because that's what the audience leaves with. Hulk swears this is why so many people forget movies so quickly. They may have a smile on their face as the credits roll, but they need something to stay with them. So give them a reason to remember it all on their way out of the theater.

The ending is the conceit.

So hammer home your points. End strong. Say something.

Now let's quit this conceptual shit and get into part five and how to use structure!

Part Five - - How To Tell The Story – Structurally



Note: The corresponding picture of screenplay management, shown above, can die in a fire.

Most screenplay books are obsessed with telling you exactly how to structure your screenplay. They give you charts and graphs and tell you all stories work in the same way and give you paint-by-numbers guides to doing the same.

Hulk rejects that crap.

Because the sad truth is, that approach doesn't actually teach you how a story works at all. It just tells you what a story sometimes looks like and how to copy it. And that won't help you understand how to write one bit. It's like using a single recipe without actually understanding how to cook.

So Hulk is going to dive headlong into structure too (because, yeah, it's super important), but it's going to be focused on understanding how it works! This is going to be about giving you the mechanisms you need to craft and tell the stories you want to tell and say what you want to say. Understand the "why" of how all these tactics work and suddenly you will be able to cook, so to speak. And Hulk assures you that Hulk's approach is not going to feel restrictive.

It's hopefully going to free you.

* * *

So the parsing out of a screenplay's structure (aka deciding how to tell your story) is commonly referred to as "breaking a story." Hulk likes that phrase better than "constructing a story" because that word reminds Hulk of the idea of logistical assemblage, whereas breaking a story is about taking the idea itself, almost as if it was a raw chunk of marble, and carving it down to your immaculate sculpture. It's like you are taking your inclination and the story already locked in your mind, and breaking it down so you understand it on a structural level. It's like you are manipulating what you already know on an instinctual level. Heck, maybe it's like working with Play-Doh or something. Whatever your metaphor, Hulk likes this kind of thinking much, much better than the notion of "construction."

Anycrap, let's look at the best ways to break a story!

24. Economy Is Your New Second Best Friend

A friend of Hulk's said something fascinating recently. He made the comment that there's not a single summer tent-pole released in the last ten years that couldn't stand to lose at least 15-20 minutes.

This is a truth.

It is stunning how many movies today tell their stories with a ton of fat. And no, Hulk not talking about mere "pacing"

which is built in the edit and direction (and something that is actually executed faster than ever these days). Hulk is talking about script-level fat. Hulk is talking about whole scenes that have no purpose other than to be funny or cool. Hulk will get into the inclinations that create this story fat in the next few chapters, but the point is that you really, really need to embrace the concept of economy. It should be the huge thought in the back of your head. Repeat it again and again: *tell only as much story as you need...* And if you're telling more than you need, if you're delving into chewing on the proverbial fat, well, then there better be a damn good reason for it.

Look, Hulk already knows that you might be suspicious of writing without that kind of loose freedom, as there are exceptions to every rule. Some movies excel in how they are able to revel in the fat. Quentin Tarantino and the Coens have long-running tangents and jokes, but Hulk wants you to keep one very important fact in mind: they are some of the best writers on the planet and can do what Hulk is arguing for here in their sleep. And by comparison, Hulk reads four scripts a week of people indulging the fat for no other purpose than 1) padding stuff out or 2) because they don't know how to get whatever is funny or interesting about that fat into more purposeful methods of storytelling.

But the real value of keeping economy in mind as you write is that it's a perfect learning tool. By focusing on economy as a developing writer, you will force yourself into moments where you learn how to combine thematic ideas with character. How to link a "fun" scene directly into the plot. And Hulk guarantees you that by valuing economy from the onset, it will help you create a tighter, more focused, exciting script.

Better yet, if you do manage to write a crackling, economical narrative, then Hulk is here to tell you that it will be far easier to integrate characterization, texture and theme than it would be to go in the other direction. Trust when Hulk says it is far more difficult to take a lumbering story, full of thorough characterization and thematic exploration, and then somehow parse it down into a tight story. So why not go the other direction?

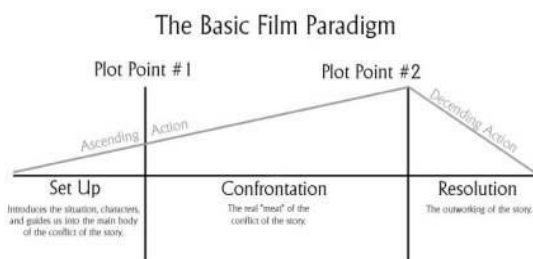
In every kind of story, even the most casual character pieces, even films with a leisurely editing pace, you still want the character's evolution to secretly be propulsive. Even with the most intimate, human stories, you always want to enter each scene with a new sense of purpose and interest. And then you want to do it over and over and over again. You want the film to feel like it should never end.

"Okay, Hulk! I should write a propulsive story. But what's the best way of doing that!?"

Well... in order to do that you are first going to have to unlearn two of the most popular storytelling models in screenwriting. Why? Because they are just totally bogus.

Luckily, Hulk is here to help you do that.

25. The Myth Of The 3 Act Structure



Hulk hears it all the time when people complain about movies: "It's the problems in the film's second act!"

All... the fucking... time.

Now, Hulk understands what the complainers mean by the statement. It is usually used to imply when a film is treading water, or losing track of characters, or running out of steam, or cramming stuff in, or whatever story-fault you can think of. Oh, Hulk gets how the comment is intended. But the problem with this generic "second act" designation is that it can imply a problem with virtually anything in the middle part of storytelling. Meaning it is a *beyond* vague way to talk about story structure.

So what creates such wishy-washy storytelling? And the even wishy-washier way of explaining it?

It is because of the ever-popular notion of **The 3 Act Structure**, which Hulk personally finds to be the most abominable way to both explain and instruct storytelling. So false in what it describes, so false in what it achieves, that even though the phrase is used to near ubiquity, and even though there are thousands of writers using the 3 act model as their guide at this very moment...

Hulk argues it is still, essentially, *a myth*.

* * *

Question: what is an act?

People use the word all the time without really bothering to think about what it actually means. Isn't that a little fucking weird? Any time Hulk hears people complaining about problems in a film's act structure or talking about their own, Hulk will just ask them that same question: what is an act? Hulk will ask young students, film journalists, even working writers and most don't have an answer. Sometimes they'll fall over their words. Sometimes they'll be hit by a bolt of speechlessness. But their answers basically amount to an act being a term that's a general placeholder for chunks of story that usually separate "beginning, middle, and end." And well... that doesn't actually *mean* anything, does it?

No. No, it doesn't.

So Hulk's got another of Hulk's famous working definitions for you. And it's not out of Hulk's butt here. It's one used by many great screenwriters, professors, and other way-smart people. And the best way to put it is to define an act by its point of separation from the next. Thus:

The end of an act is a point in the story where a character(s) makes a choice and can no longer "go back."

The first thing to understand is that the use of the word "point" is purposely vague. After all, there are many different kinds of stories, all with many different kinds goals, and that means it can sort of be any kind of moment.

"But Hulk! Couldn't that point really be anything? Like a character just leaving his house and grabbing coffee or something?!?"

Okay it has to be *slightly* more valid than a simple change in action or the environment. The act break can be a new and interesting plot development, a poignant character realization, a personality reveal, two previously un-met characters becoming friends, or even, if handled correctly, something as insipid as *"No! The bad guys are here! Run!"* ... an act break can be anything as long as it has a significant changing effect on the narrative resulting in the character choosing an action defined by that change; one that causes them to move forward in this new reality with understanding.

More importantly, an act break creates *propulsion*.

What has Hulk said about character and empathy and all this good amazing stuff so far? How much has Hulk talked about characters being our gateways into experience? The more we ground the story changes into those reasons for connecting, the more we involve the audience. It's not just killing the cat, it's bringing the audience into a character, which brings them into the story. It's giving the audience the stakes and meaning. It's not just "stuff happening." It is storytelling with purpose.

Better yet, with this working definition, it means a film can have *any number of acts* depending on what it's trying to say and do. Hulk talked about it before, but a movie like **Malcolm X** has about 9 distinguishable acts in Hulk's estimation, each focusing on a time in his life where Malcolm could go through periods of focus and come to a new kind of enlightenment or character reality. It is a truly epic film that takes the standard biopic and separates those events into very obvious "sections" of character development. And at the end of each of those acts he makes a choice and goes forth into a vastly different situation, full of change and new conflicts. Hulk seriously cannot advise you enough to go back and watch this and sort out all the act breaks. Write down the choices being made and how it helps the character grow and go on their journey. It will be such a useful learning tool in understanding the mechanism of acts and act breaks. Plus, it's just an amazing film!

Heck, some movies have upwards of 20 acts. It's all a question of what story you want to tell and the better you

understand this definition of propulsive, character decision-centric act breaks, the better your screenplay will be at propelling the narrative in meaningful ways.

Look. It's not like the action movie staple of "*Oh no, it's the bad guys! Run!*" can't work in terms of changing the situation and making things interesting for a moment. After all, Raymond Chandler had the funniest quote ever when he said: "In writing a novel, when in doubt, have two guys come through the door with guns," but that statement was purposefully a little bit flip. He's literally talking about a quick story inversion that gives energy when you've got nothing else going on. And the real reason you have to be careful with that stuff is that it becomes so dull and repetitive that we get tired of the chase after only two instances or so.

That's why character is the fundamental and ideal driving force of act breaks. You need more interesting things to be going on than surface-level conflicts and external threats. By the way, this is probably the chief reason Michael Bay movies don't actually work. He fills them with all this hooplah and mayhem, but he's *only* interested in the chase. Sure, he'll sometimes be able to mask this MacGuffin / set-piece-jumping with distracting visuals (or attempts at quasi-racist comedy), but the chase is always his focus and it will *always* become boring without actual character propulsion. In promoting **Transformers 2** he touted the epicness of the 45 minute end battle, but it might have been one of the most boring things Hulk has ever seen because it so lacked in purpose and character decision. It was chaos. Meanwhile go back and look at the hour-long battle of Helms Deep in **The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers** and count how many choices were character-centric. Look how the moments of the battle were given pauses and consideration, punctuation marks in the longer rhythms of story and character. It was anything but "the chase."

It's strange when you look at certain not-so-good movies with this definition of an act and you realize how many of our big summer tent-poles just do nothing like that. And Hulk honestly feels like this tiny bit of advice, this tiny rethinking of a popular convention, this way of finally ignoring 3 act structure in favor of constant character development, could save hundreds of movies. Hulk really does.

For example, the recent debacle with **The Green Lantern** was entirely due to the fact that the film has one real, genuine act break. Repeat. **One.**

Oh sure, there's lots of *stuff that happens*, but in terms of main character propulsion and decision-making? Nope. The main character makes one decision in the entire film. In fact, no other film quite highlights the failure to create purposeful story changes quite like this one. And no other film quite highlights how our traditional, purposeless understanding of three act structure results in a story that is. So. Damn. Boring.

But let Hulk reiterate the film's plot for you in an effort to make it clear: Hal Jordan starts as a pissy-ass fighter pilot who is then given a lantern ring by a dying alien cause, like, destinyorwhatever, and is then zapped to planet Oa (neither of which is his decision). He then trains for all of two seconds only to then *quit and not embrace his new situation* (with no discernible consequences and gets to keep his ring) wherein he goes back to being a pissy-ass fighter pilot who doesn't even fly planes anymore and instead needs about 10 pep talks in his apartment. And it is not until 90 different scenes of relative moping, futzing around in his suit, and *fucking rejecting Blake Lively's advances* that he finally embraces being a lantern or whatever and makes an *actual fucking decision* to change things and go back to Oa. Then he just fights a giant face-cloud in the entire third act. A few times. Repetitively.

Now... Hulk brought this "one act break" thing up to everyone in a group after we saw the movie and they said "No, the second act starts when he gets the ring and goes to Oa!" ... but after everything Hulk has just told you, do not tell Hulk that Hal Jordan getting the ring is equal to an act break. Even though it's the shift that comes one-third of the way into the movie and thus *feels* like an act break, there's no real point to it, nor character urgency of change. There definitely *should be* in that moment, but there isn't. And that's because the filmmakers defined an act break as lazily as this group that was evaluating it. They just figured a change in environment and some obligatory hero journey nonsense would do all the story work. And that's why the filmmakers let their main character spend literally the entire middle of the movie *going back on that action*. They never understood what the act transition meant in the first place.

Hulk can't remember the last time a film had **one** real act break. Everything else, outside of Hector Hammond (who was lucky enough to get an actual mini-story arc), is just stuff happening. There is no clear character motivation at play in any one other character. Meaning the film, along with hundreds of other movies like it, simply does not realize what an act actually requires. They don't realize that characters have to make decisions.

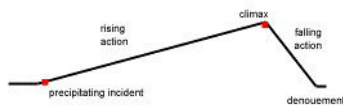
And Hulk blames this stringent, ubiquitous Hollywood belief in the existence of the 3 act structure for crap like this. Hulk

really does. By indoctrinating what might seem logical, we have endorsed that which makes for terrible movies.

And it's not just the fact that they can't define what act breaks mean whatsoever. It's actually the entire array of language we use in talking about story structure. It's this whole dull focus on beginning, middle, and end, which makes some basic sense in terms of "summarizing" a plot, but it gives zero indication of how to actually *write* that story.

And shouldn't that be the most important part?

Think about it. Think about Hulk's example from the beginning, the complaint about second acts being purposeless. If we were using the traditional model of 3 act structure, then the first act is all introduction and set up and the third act is the climax. These terms are both vague but still self-explanatory, and when you look at that pesky second act, which is often just defined as "rising action" or "a rise in conflict," you begin to see why so much "middle" storytelling has a lack of real purpose... seriously, what the fuck does "rise" even mean on an instructional level?



"You know... *the conflict!* Just, um, rise it!"

Whatever it means, it's certainly not good storytelling. Sure, it can be an accurate summary of what's happening onscreen (or at least how it feels). But in terms of the actual mechanism it is still incredibly vague on the broadest of levels. Worse, it is not instructing you *how to actually write*. It provides none of the good stuff that is critical to understanding narrative. Stuff like character arcs, personal motivation, relationships, conflicts, turns, reveals, and propulsion. None of it is in there!

"But, Hulk doesn't that exist separately from structure? Can't you just ldo all that stuff within the 3 act guide?"

No! You can't!

Because that's exactly what structure *secretly* is. Story structure is inherently dependent on understanding purpose and all that good narrative stuff listed above. Good structure is about taking those qualities and applying them in the most economical, functional, and dramatic way possible. And for that you need real specificity when it comes to understanding the purpose.

90% of 3 act models lack that specificity. And every single other highly-detailed 3 act model automatically creates so much dead air and purposeless space-filling that it makes for terrible propulsion. Those models focus on page counts and tricks and things that are supposedly universal applications of "what should be happening to a character" that may have absolutely nothing to do with how to make a movie. Hulk can always tell when Hulk is reading a Syd Field devotee screenplay and they all fail in the exact same ways.

And that's because a 3 act structure leads writers to just try to make connecting points between the beginning and ending of their story. That's really about all it does. Which means your characters are **not** moving forward in any discernible way. They're just waiting around for the 80 minute mark so that they can begin that whole ending thingy. It descends into a shell game of unmotivated events and it's all because the definition of the 3 act structure is complete ass.

As a result, we hear it all the time: "The problems in the film's second act."

Sorry if Hulk has been coming off as too smashy here. It's just such a personal issue. Hulk has never seen something so unhelpful become so widely accepted. Sure, it makes sense and is a simple way to see stories from afar, but it's also so simple that it's taught to elementary school kids when they're first grasping the concept of narrative. And while Hulk argues that the simple truths are oft times the most important ones, the expression of those truths should be far more complicated. And the 3 act structure is not even "a truth." It's a writing model attempting to help you get at one. So Hulk thinks that Hollywood could maybe stand to do a little better than a *third grade grasp of story*.

So let's get serious.

If 1) the 3 act model sucks. 2) We define acts as something where the characters can't go back. And 3) A film can have any number of acts it wants - how do we actually approach structure? Well, Hulk's gonna tell you for the whole rest of

part five!

But the first step in doing so is comparing the traditional 3 act model with the storytelling model that erupted out of the legacy of the greatest storytelling genius of all time...

William Shakespeare.

Fact: while Shakespeare's plays were not officially written with act designations, he did talk a great deal about his view of essential storytelling. And when his works were later preserved they were all broken up into 5 acts and studied extensively as to the purpose of how his stories worked. And in doing that, we identified all the brilliant ways that Shakespeare (again, the greatest storytelling genius of all time) used structure to make it work.

For sake of explanation, Hulk will use most Shakespeare's most popular play, **Romeo and Juliet** as an example-

"audible groooooooan!"

Hey, it's a sneaky good play that's way more satirical than people realize! And far more importantly, it is his best known play so it helps vastly when trying to explain something.

So Shakespeare's **1st acts** were always comprised of introductions and the establishing of a *preexisting* central main conflict (i.e. two families are at odds, Romeo is a lovesick pup over Rosaline, Juliet is a naive and lovelorn girl). Now, Hulk talked about it before, but this preexisting conflict in the background is so important because it creates a conditional world for the audience who is entering it. Shakespeare didn't have cinema's neat tricks of landscape shots and voiceover prologues. So he started us immediately in the story and it was an amazing way of creating a sense of space, history, and believability. And it's a big surprise to Hulk how often this practice is ignored in blockbuster filmmaking. And heck, even if it is some intricate human drama or something, a preexisting conflict could do so much. Mostly because it gives you a great situation to spur the main conflict into effect!

And that's because the **2nd act** is usually comprised of some kind of central event that challenges or deeply worsens the main conflict. It's usually in the form of relationship development, a fight, a reveal, or a surprise (i.e. star-crossed teenagers Romeo and Juliet meet and go ga-ga over one another, which is a huge problem given the nature of the preexisting conflict of their families' feud). Basically this act features the main surface plot of the story coming into effect. Meaning if you had to explain what the movie was about, the conflict being created in the 2nd act could easily describe the main conflict of the entire film, i.e. "two star crossed lovers fall in love while their families are at war with each other." And however this conflict is revealed, it should be done in whichever way would benefit the story most.

Then the **3rd act** comprises a turning point. Now, Hulk reminds you that this need not be a "twist" per se, but more of a spurring incident or action that makes the conflict infinitely more complicated (i.e. Mercutio getting killed by Tybalt then Romeo killing Tybalt). Often these moments are surprising. They deeply affect not only the level of seriousness of main conflict, but dramatically alter the actual direction of it. This is the sort of thing alluded to in the "rise in conflict" statement, but you know, way more specific. It requires that you think intensely about the nature of your conflict: why does it exist? What is perpetrating it? What would make it worse? And have the story respond accordingly. And the Shakespearean 3rd act is such a great opportunity in storytelling because:

It's a way to hit the audience with climax-like drama before they're ready for it. Before they expect it. And it's not mere "gotcha" tactics. If done right, you can create the kind of emotion to carry you right through to the end.

Shakespeare's 3rd acts were often filled with such moments of storytelling beauty: great inversions of fortune. Best intentions gone awry. Deaths! Loss! Confusion! Sudden chaos! Even though these 3rd acts don't finish the arc of the whole story, they are often the most resonant moments and they are still climax-worthy in scale.

What does Hollywood tend to do in their big adventures? They have "2nd act problems," that's what they do. They say "hey, let's put an action scene here!" Or spin their wheels and lose all sense of purpose, often saving what could happen now for some inevitable 3rd act obligatory conclusion. They fuck up the middle of their storytelling. Meanwhile the Shakespearean 3rd act is perfect. It makes for a "turning point" that is both deeply affecting and provides change to the arc of the entire story. And it is something far more important than what 3-act-structure argues is just putting things in place for climax. Speaking of which...

The **4th act** of Shakespeare's model was known as "the spiral" and it is actually *full of character decisions* that cause characters to sink toward the real climax (i.e. Romeo and Juliet decide to go on the lam, hatch a plan to fake their deaths, etc). These decisions are rapid. Fast-paced. Poorly conceived. And hugely dramatic. In truth, this is the point where you are really arranging and setting up the climax.

But in that goal it is equally important to remember that you have to stay true to the character arcs and flaws, otherwise it will feel like things are flying off the rails instead of simply getting more intense. And this feverish, intense climate is the best place to expose the deep character flaws that will either bring down our heroes or allow them to succeed.

(Meanwhile, the Shakespearean 3rd act turning point can sometimes allow for a main character acting *out of character*. It's a neat little distinction to keep in mind when you are trying to decide what a character would do in a situation versus what they didn't do).

The Shakespearean 4th act also provides a great opportunity for a quiet moment of reflection before the finale, before they make the kinds of grave decisions that seal their fate. But it can't just be *all* reflection and pausing (cough cough **Green Lantern**). Again, it should really feel full of decisions. The pace should quicken. Things should feel like they are falling out of control for our character. It is "the spiral," after all. And it should feel like it's all happening in a very short amount of time before we get to...

The **5th act** is where the audience gets the climax / resolutions / weddings / tragedy / fallout/ etc. (i.e. Romeo and Juliet have a fatal miscommunication, kill themselves, and leave their families to be heartbroken and declare peace). The most important thing to remember is that this last act is not just wrapping things up, but is the encapsulation of the story and should exhibit all the points one is trying to make in your movie. As Hulk said earlier, the ending is the conceit so the climax and resolution are the very goal of your movie. While Shakespeare would have a character talk directly to the audience and sum up the lessons they should take away from the story, Hulk gets why that same methodology might not fly in screenplay form. But screw it, modern writers are so dreadfully afraid to be didactic that they forget to incorporate their purpose and intent in their endings. They opt for alleviation or obfuscation. Most of them could do with a fair bit of direct moralizing. Heck, **No Country for Old Men** ends with the Shakespearean soliloquy to the audience, so you should be less afraid of it too. No matter what, your ending should be the summation of *everything* you have written so far. It should not be a freakin' afterthought.

No matter what the story - tragedy, comedy, or history - Shakespeare's plays were imbued with this specific 5 act structure every time. The intro, the establishing of the conceit, the turn, the spiral, and the climax (which hammers home the conceit). Sure, he gets heaped with praise over his mastery of language and the deep resonance of themes, some justifiably credit him as the father of psychology, but Hulk wants to make it clear to you that he was just so fucking brilliant at story structure to boot... it's sort of unfair. And Hulk knows it may seem lame bring up such an obvious choice as "best writer ever" but, well, he was.

But while Hulk clearly adores the way that Shakespeare's 5 act structure can help you unlearn 3 act structure, chiefly in how it gives import and meaning to "the middle" of storytelling, it is important to remember that this Shakespearean 5 act model is just another possible example and not the rule. You can honestly do whatever you think best in terms of number of act breaks. It's whatever works for your story, like the use of 9 acts in **Malcolm X**. But hey, if you're looking for a tool to help better structure your story, or if you are a student looking to get better and learn how to write with purpose and intent... well... one could do a lot worse than that Shakespeare guy.

So now then.

After reviewing all this, Hulk wants you to go back to the traditional 3 act structure model for a second. You may notice something very important when comparing it to Shakespeare's model. You may notice the way the second act described in the 3 act structure *is the exact same way* act 4 is defined in Shakespeare's model, minus the whole important "decisions" part. Shakespeare's "spiral" with its increasing of intensity and positioning of details before the climax is really similar to the 2nd act's rise in conflict.

Hulk argues that this is so telling that it's not even funny. It means that this little, short moment that Shakespeare used for escalating the final stakes and positioning the endgame is the same exact way Hollywood screenwriters *handle the entire central section of their goddamn movies*. No wonder so many are aimless and boring.

After all, it's no accident that's Shakespeare's 4th acts are always the shortest, least interesting, and least compelling part of every single one of his plays. Name a memorable moment from any of them! Hulk's sure there's something, but Hulk

can tell you the major event of every act 3 in every single one of his plays. He kept this 4th act stuff short for a reason.

So imagine a whole Hollywood full of writers trying to expand that same tiny amount of story and purpose into the 30-60 sum odd pages that make up entire second acts... how terrible is that? It means that characters can't help but just wait around. It means the writers are simply trying come up with distractions and B.S. conflicts that don't have anything to do with the point or truly affect or alter the arc of the story. It means that writers end up cramming too much good stuff in the first act to try and establish all needed details when really they are missing great opportunity for developing a story at an organic pace.

The lessons of Shakespeare can translate to anything. You may ask: "Hulk! How does this 5 act thing work with popular movie-going? Big budget movies aren't exactly Shakespeare!"

First off, Shakespeare would totally write the best summer blockbusters ever and that's actually sort of what he was doing for his time and age!

Second off, while there are a host of great examples, let's look at Hulk's old buddy / great movie: **Iron Man**, which has an exceptional story structure. It may not have been written with this five act Shakespearean intent, but Hulk swears to you it fits and is worth talking about. After all, the one thing everyone seemed to love about that film is that it spent so long before Tony actually became Iron Man, and thus the audience got to experience all the great character development along the way. More telling, everyone lauded the fun sense of adventure that came from out of the conflicts of his trying to build the suit. It avoided so many modern pratfalls. It never rushed getting to "the action" that so many big budget movies require, because the film instinctively knew that it could take a movie about the process of invention and make it work great. The storytelling was the action. And guess how many acts the movie has, in Hulk's humble estimation?

Yup. **Five.**

Act one – intro + state of preexisting conflict – we get to know Tony as a playboy and even see him deal with the external moral conflict of supplying weapons and brush off the concerns of the fact that his weapons are falling into the wrong hands.

Act two – the conceit and being at odds with the preexisting conflict – Tony is captured and put to work in the terrorist camp. He discovers the reality about his weapons going to the bad guys and he is already at his lowest point and on the brink of survival. He decides to build the prototype suit and escape. He becomes Iron Man; conceit established!

Act three – the turning point – Tony is now back at home, and he makes a moral decision, shuts down weapons ops, and changes the direction of his life. Tony decides to continue on this path and starts building a new suit (which has a hilarious set of trials). Obadiah is revealed as the bad guy behind Tony's kidnapping. Tony goes live with his suit and helps others, not just himself.

Act four – the spiral/escalation of conflict – Tony continues to use the suit out in real war conflict, admits the truth to Rhodes, gets sidelined by Obadiah, and now faces a grim circumstance. Notice that these developments feel more of the action-y wheel-spinning activities that reek of standard act 2 developments that one sees in typical 3 act structure. But in this movie? Because it all comes after the awesome suit-building transformation of act 3? It feels so fresh and exciting to the viewer who has had to wait. The movie held out beautifully before tipping its hand. And it all goes on for a perfectly shorter length of time, before moving to the inevitable finale...

Act five - climax/conclusion/resolution – Tony's conflict with Obadiah comes to a conclusion both personally and as big-ass Iron Men fighting in death suits. The important part of this act is how all the plots come together (even though the action felt a little underwhelming). Hulk actually finds that detail to be neat, to be honest. It meant that the action was the least interesting part of a big summer blockbuster for once. And that's a serious achievement. Score one for charisma and characterization!

But Hulk understands that some of you may argue there are lots other possible act breaks in **Iron Man**. Some of you may contend that the film was not written with five acts in mind.

Both are absolutely true.

For one, writing is filled with "micro-acts" which help propel every scene forward and have different acts for all the

different stories and characters (we'll get into this later), but Tony's arc with Pepper has its own act breaks. Tony's relationship with Obadiah has its own breaks. It all comes together to make the story feel propulsive + organic. After all, every scene should have a real goal and objective to it. And going back to the point at hand, labeling all that great character development and decision-making in the middle of the movie as just the rise in conflict is just downright asinine.

For two, Hulk keeps saying it, but you can decide the act breaks are wherever you want and you'd be right. It's just about what seems the most reasonable and makes the most sense. Better yet, it is about what makes the most sense for giving your act breaks purpose and meaning. And call it a naturally occurring number, but Hulk sees movies with the 5 act structure turn up in good stories again and again. And it's not just Shakespeare and **Iron Man**, folks.

Ever notice that all one hour TV dramas are all segmented into 5 acts? Yes, it's done for commercial breaks, but that magic number is no accident. It's a tried and true system that helps make those TV shows propulsive instead of languishing. Again, like anything, you are more than allowed to break away from this model and make good television, but you'd be surprised how many non-traditional narratives utilize 5-6 acts too.

People looooooove to talk about Quentin Tarantino's non-linear storytelling as a counter example to traditional "act-based" storytelling, particularly with **Pulp Fiction**. But guess what everyone? That movie has exactly 5 acts, which are all distinctly separated with title cards. Oh, and **Reservoir Dogs**? 5 acts separated with title cards. Both **Kill Bills**? Each one has 5 acts separated with title cards. **Inglourious Basterds**? 5 acts separated with title cards. **Django Unchained**? 5 acts with super-imposed signifiers. You sense a theme here?

Hulk just cannot emphasize this enough.

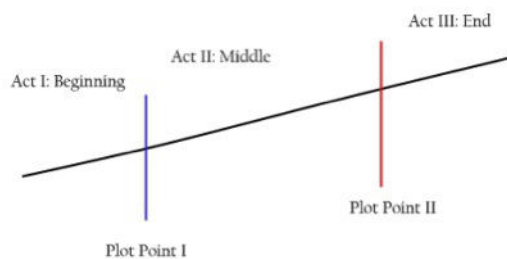
A story is a multifaceted thing. If you want to structure your story, remember to have both act structure for the main plot and act structure for each of your characters' personality developments. By having all these varying structures, each with their own beats, with each character making active decisions, it creates a constant sense of moving forward for your movie. That's why they call it "development," as it is the key to bringing your audience along for the journey.

But perhaps you think Hulk is being too hard on the 3 act structure. Perhaps you think Hulk is simplifying it in an effort to tear it down.

That's fine.

But Hulk would argue that the heavy advocates of 3 act structure do a good enough job of that on their own. In researching this topic Hulk came across so many websites that... Hulk just can't even quote them... It's too soul-crushing. It's just full of blind reductions and over-simplifications and gross amounts of lying. Entire charts where they say "No, Shakespeare was totally writing in the 3 act structure!" And then they reduce act 2-4 of his plays and just slap the "act 2" designation on it, which is not only hilarious in its over-simplification but it actually ignores 3 act structure rules because he introduced his main conceits in the second act, not the first. The whole thing is basically laughable. They'll toss out entire act structures of 4 act modern dramas, because they think it is only there to account for set changes. They'll look at entire acts that last half the running time and say "Well, you probably shouldn't do that." It's upholding a model that is not only wrong, but deeply uninformative.

Seriously, does the following image make you feel confident about your writing?



Hulk sees models like this shown to young writers all the time. So if you are writing a screenplay. Hulk is telling you. The 3 act structure is garbage.

Stop citing it in articles.

Stop talking about it with friends.

It will not help you.

It can only hurt you.

Start the dialogue. Insist that it is a myth propagated by a need for simplicity. Say “of course stories have a beginning, middle, and end, you insufferable turd!” Then throw a drink in their face and run away... okay, maybe Hulk is getting carried away here. But Hulk seriously worries that unless we really, truly change the culture of how we talk about the 3 act structure and act breaks, then all this advice may be useless.

Chances are you will find yourself in a Hollywood meeting someday, and they’ll start talking about 3 acts and to try and argue with them would be fruitless. Say what you need to, Hulk guess, but stick to a more propulsive method of narrative in your own work. Tell ‘em it’s 3, but really make it 5. Do everything you can, because in this Hulk’s opinion the strict adherence to 3 act structure is killing Hollywood.

Heck, if this book were to have any sort of real-life, substantial change, Hulk would adore if it got studios to start thinking outside of the 3 act box. It’s certainly something Hulk has tried to share every place Hulk has worked... but who knows if getting the message across is possible given its level of acceptance.

And the very worst thing is that this same Hollywood often fails at the 3 act structure they’re trying to uphold. And that’s because so many movies are green-lit on just a pitch and possibly having stars attached, so you basically have movies being made that have only figured out the conceit so far. Meaning they only know the first act or so... and that’s fucking it. The endings of these films are so barely established and uniformly tend to be terrible. So many scripts seem to start with a straight line from their starting point and pursue the fallout until they just run out of steam. It really is inconceivable to Hulk that folks can start making a movie without truly knowing the ending. So if you want to be a writer, always **know** your ending. Always uphold your purpose.

So, to summarize this rant of unlearning:

The amount of acts in a movie should be dependent on the story you want to tell. Each act should reach this moving forward point in an organic, earned way. And the total number of acts you use is dependent on how much you are trying to accomplish with the story. More importantly, they should all tie together in a coherent way. And then, it should ultimately be done with the best possible economy without losing anything critical or affecting the organic quality of the telling. It’s a lot to handle, but that’s the ideal. And if you’re starting out, try Shakespeare’s 5 act on for size. Hulk thinks it’s a wonderful learning structure.

After all, no matter who you are, storytelling is largely about problem solving. One can always come up with great ideas that motivate and excite them, but the other half of that equation is figuring out how to make it translate to a fully-formed reality on the page. How do we make this scene entertaining and yet propulsive? How do we make a movie that is true to our conceit? One that works on every character level? You need to constantly ask yourself these questions.

Which means that writing is problem-solving.

And take Hulk’s advice: the 3 act structure won’t help you solve a problem. If anything, it will create more problems. And thus, there’s nothing more important for you to unlearn in your quest to become a better writer...

... except maybe this next thing:

26. Why We Have To Quit It With The Hero Journey Shit

Ahhh, *the monomyth*.

It is a fascinating academic pursuit, a journey into our cultural history, to the ties of communication that bonded our early

civilizations. It even explains how our storytelling roots are directly born from that shared history. And the lessons at the core of the monomyth are manifold, rich, and textured; a thousand versions of a hero's journey, all bound by the human condition, all crucial to our understanding of why we tell stories in the first place. Simply put, the hero's journey is vital to our humanity.

And now it's a total fucking crutch.

A lot like Hulk's dismissal of 3 act structure, the problem with Joseph Campbell's **The Hero with a Thousand Faces** is not its lack of accuracy in a descriptive sense, but instead how we misread its intention and falsely use the information it provides. Chiefly, the fact that our society has wholly adopted the book's breakdown of the hero journey as some kind of ready-made app for paint-by-numbers storytelling.

To be honest, Hulk's not even really sure how many people who regularly cite the hero's journey as a story model have actually read the damn book past a few chapters... or read it at all.... This reality is actually quite obvious because the book's intended value is deeply, even maddeningly academic (at times it is downright anthropological). The truth about Campbell's much-lauded book is it doesn't actually have a lot to do with all those neat little diagrams you see at the beginning. Instead, it's far more interested in cultural deductions about anthropological commonalities that you can make based on those concepts. But since those diagrams are all we seem to remember, it is thus all we seem to take from it. For many, the hero's journey is just universal storytelling made easy.

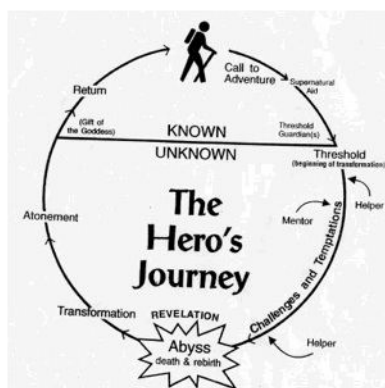
And that reality is hurting more than it's helping.

Here are the reasons why:

For starters, there is a fundamental error made in how we interpret the apparent "simplicity" of these myths, mainly in how they are not simple whatsoever. The universal breakdown of them may render them as seemingly simple, but the structure on display is anything but that. For instance, you'll notice that one of the main referenced myths in the book, **The Epic of Gilgamesh**, is anything but a paint-by-numbers story.

In fact, the 12 tablet **Epic of Gilgamesh** is actually pretty fucking complex from a structural standpoint, even though it's somehow considered the Rosetta stone for the hero journey. Sure, it contains the familiar big picture reference points (the passing into the strange world, the call/return, etc), but these amount to nothing but loose plot points or actions and are by no means *the engine of the narrative*. No, what drives the narrative and the plot are the basic methods of cause and effect storytelling (which we will talk about soon) as well as its focus on the dynamic themes in place. Like with the in-flux relationship with Enkidu, which is born out of stopping Gilgamesh from engaging in his more, um, sordid activities (rape mostly). There's also the quest for immortality (**L'Morte D'Arthur** alert!), some other stuff about religion, prostitution, dream states, you name it. Hulk has even read more analysisesss of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as hidden lovers than you would imagine is possible (oh, college papers!... actually, they may have a point with that one). The point is there's a shit ton going on with how the story is functioning on a moment-to-moment level that goes beyond its fun little ability to be vaguely outlined in terms of the hero's journey. And it is those things that make the myth a compelling and interesting classic, not the mere fact that it mostly fits within the confines of monomyth classification.

And yet, **Gilgamesh** only seems to survive in our cultural consciousness because of the Campbellian hero diagram and our desire to talk about it in those very specific and universal terms: the call! The refusal! The trials! The return! Yay!



Yay!

Now, is most of that stuff above in **Gilgamesh**? Absolutely.

Is that what makes it a story worth telling? Eh, maybe when it comes to thematic purpose.

Is that what makes it a good story? No.

Is that what makes it a well-told, well-structured story? Fuck no. But many assume it does.

And this misunderstanding speaks directly to what Hulk believes is the great fundamental error of how we interpret academia. Chiefly, that when you boil down storytelling to its most basic elements, you are therefore **boiling down storytelling to its most basic elements!** Hulk mean... gaaahhh. That's what you are actually doing! The intention of this breakdown is to find similarities and make deductions about our cultural and psychological inclinations! Which means this breakdown is *not* the key to unlocking universal storytelling, but a key to making your story *as similar as possible* to everything else out there.

To reiterate: there is great value to the Campbellian hero breakdown, specifically concerning the formative nature of culture and *why* we value and tell these stories, but it is actually the furthest thing away from a how-to guide for story structure. Whoever are the folks responsible for the oral traditions behind stuff like **Beowulf** and **Gilgamesh**, they weren't sitting down saying "okay, okay, now he has to refuse the call and then by tablet 2 the next beat should..." gaaaah. Hulk smashy! It was all primal and constructed from a completely different sense. What's so interesting about the hero's journey is the way these themes and dynamics seeped naturally out of these *different* stories, not that everyone felt obligated to uphold the model *or were purposely trying to do it*. The hero's journey secretly has nothing to do whatsoever with good story structure! Just thematic content and iconography!

If there is anything that Hulk so desperately wants to convey to all of you in this screenwriting book it is that **there is a stark difference between the language we should use in the broad strokes of description and analysis versus the language we should use in terms of creation and practical application.**

It's like the myth of the 3 act structure. Just because you can break a story down easily into a beginning, middle, and end does not mean that it is the best way to approach structuring a story. You don't want to start from those broad, reductive elements and work backwards. We will get to Hulk's preferred method of structure called "multi-act flow structure" soon, by the way, but it's a complicated methodology that is meant to account for all the most important aspects of *practical application*.

For example, you can't sit down and structure your new novel saying "I'm going to base it all off being post-modern and everything will fall into place!" That's not how you build the thing. Similarly, you can't sit there and go "I'm going to make cool action scenes" when you don't know the mechanisms and function of how to do that. Action scenes work best when they construct a-to-b cause and effect visual stories, but because we think they're "cool" we just build our action around posture, disconnect, and slick imagery; which looks alluring but does not actually work dramatically. All of these problems are about the confusion of language. The way we break things down and describe them is not necessarily helpful to understanding how to best construct them or what we construct them for. Yet we constantly mistake these models of description for "how-to's" and thus we keep running into the same basic storytelling problems again and again.

As Hulk has alluded to, storytelling should be geared around the construction and evolution of *drama and character*, not the lame obligation to hitting tired, ever-present beats. We have to gear our moments around function and purpose, not obligatory servitude. We have to reform and broaden our models. We have to revise our language.

Let Hulk put this argument of categorization vs. practical application into a metaphor: knowing that a house is made from wood with plastered walls and a roof does not allow one to simply build a house. You have to understand how to literally build it and shape those things, not just know that they exist and where they should more or less go. You can't look at blueprints and just copy them to make the house feel like the real thing. Meaning, the hero stories that worked structurally worked for completely different reasons than you think.

And yet every year we see movies that desperately cling to the hero journey model, as if it is the only thing that matters.

Seriously, how many movies have we seen that are beat-for-beat the same story as **Star Wars**? It doesn't help that there are a multitude of writers who simply equate **Star Wars** with the only existing model of the hero's journey (hint: it's not at all) and then just regurgitate it as if they were photocopying the script and changing the names (**Eragon** takes the

proverbial cake on that one, though to be fair, **Star Wars** takes a stunning amount of its dynamics from **Dune**. But since it is so seeped into our consciousness, we see it all the time).

There are also the now ubiquitous comic book origin stories, which have become universal in their construction (except for Hulk's origin! Hulk's is truly unique! ... in that it's a blatant usage of **Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde**). There is rarely a super hero origin these days that feels interesting or different. The one exception? Hulk goes back to **Iron Man**! The reason that movie works so well is that it knows when to completely avoid the beats of the hero journey that don't matter to the story it wants to tell. Think of how many beats in the "hero journey" would not be called for with that character. Their solution? They just don't use them! Instead, each step of Tony's journey to becoming Shellhead is an articulated, character-based micro-step; a singular decision that deals with the moment and is directly related to the situation at hand. Which makes it real fucking writing and not paint-by-numbers.

Lastly, there's Hulk's favorite example of the formulaic version of the hero's journey... video games.

Forgive the following non-movie digression, but it's important. Hulk loves video games. They are challenging, immersive, and a ton of fun. The medium is really burgeoning now and there are a lot of companies like Valve, Bethesda, Rockstar, etc. that are producing incredible, thoughtful work. But honestly, there is nothing that showcases backward thinking quite like the oblivious writing of the video game industry taken on the whole. People like to make fun of Hollywood's poor understanding of storytelling, but this is really a whole different level of bad. And that's because most video game writing is wholly imitative, assembled without actually understanding narrative craft on any level. It wouldn't even be fit for even the worst Hollywood movies. Does this sound harsh? Hulk is sorry, but this broad characterization has merit. And that's because movies don't actually work if the characterization or plot isn't compelling in some way. Meanwhile, video games can work just fine without those things as long as it has compelling gameplay. And that difference is everything.

But Hulk wants to talk about the story of one game company in particular, for it is wholly resonant to our discussion. The company of BioWare has been lauded for a long time, but it also took them ages to escape the clutches of the hero's journey. For a long time, every single game they released had the same stories, with the same exact characters (just with slightly different proper nouns). Again, it's not a matter of things merely being similar, but that they are all so similar in the most rote, soul-crushing way possible. The problem of why it got so bad was that they thought this was the correct way to do things. They nakedly thought the monomyth Campbell model was their how-to guide. *They thought similarity was the point.*

The situation came to light for most people when a popular meme showed up in the form of a "BioWare Game Chart" that identified just *how similar* all the storytelling and characterization was. And that led to very funny situation where one of the writers at BioWare who was in part responsible for these hero-journey regurgitations came out to defend themselves in... well, let's just be honest, it was in a rather pissy way, using a level of smugness one can only get from faux-intellectualism. Hulk isn't trying to accuse the writer of perpetually being like that, just that in this instance that's how it came off. Here is exactly how the BioWare writer responded [via message board, at that]:

"So I'm supposed to believe someone is smart enough to do a big excel spreadsheet with color coding and stuff but not smart enough to know about Campbellian archetypes? Yeah, guys, every Bioware game has the same plot! See, things are kind of normal, and then things change and you have to go out and do stuff, and you go to crazy weird places! Aaaaaand so yeah, totally the same story. That's asinine."

If Hulk were to be a big fat jerk about all this, Hulk would simply reply: "Yes. Hulk too is familiar with this book you speak of. That's because we all read it in, like, 9th grade. And that's really not what the book is saying, but thanks for calling everyone an idiot for not blindly accepting its universal application and dismissing the concerns of someone who was actually making a great point. Particularly fun was the point when you start arguing for the sameness of Campbellian archetypes and then proceed to sarcastically argue the critics are over-typifying said sameness."

And here are the same writer's other comments, which followed the dust-up and were summarized in an article in Eurogamer:

"[The writer] said the 'intro, four planets, finale' structure familiar to BioWare games is picked for a number of good reasons.

Firstly, it's 'easy' in the sense of QA, as areas can be culled if they're not ready in time for launch with minimal impact on the final product.

Secondly, 'Players understand it.' Weekes explained that four is a golden number of objectives for an area that may confuse, overwhelm and frustrate once exceeded.

Thirdly, 'There's nothing wrong with it.'

'It's a structure, like any other,' he wrote. 'Humorously snarking that our games have a beginning part that is streamlined and introduces you to the game, a middle that allows you the freedom to go to several places and have adventures, and then a tightly focused ending is like riffing on how romance novels generally start out with two people being attracted to each other but having emotional issues, then gradually building trust, then having a complication that splits them up, and then in the end they get together and are happy.'

'People who create fiction in any form use a structure appropriate to that form. They do it because their audience understands and responds on an emotional level to that structure,' he concluded."

When Hulk first responded to these comments a long time ago Hulk got angry. Hulk smashed things. But Hulk has since calmed down. Because there is actually a way that his comments make perfect sense and seem reasonable, but there is a really relevant point that Hulk wants you to understand: 1. "Easy" is a never a good reason to do anything. 2. Assuming it's easy to "understand" and would frustrate your simpleton audience is not the way to relate to them, let alone build a challenging game. Plus that's an outright falsehood. Gamers adore a lot more objectives, depending on the context and execution. 3. Hulk has thus far articulated that there is plenty wrong with it (and more to come). Especially given the fact you have 30-80 hours' worth of story to tell and you're using a model built for short myths or 2 hour movies. But even all that isn't that big a point of contention. It's what he says after that completely misses the point. The problem is not that their stories were doing all the general stuff most common stories were doing...

It's that it was all they were doing.

They were grounding the mechanics of the story in those basic functions. There was no tact. No other purpose. They were clinging to the similarity as if the similarity was the important part.

And in the time since, something else has happened with BioWare games that makes Hulk's argument for Hulk...

BioWare's **Mass Effect 2** hugely abandoned the hero's model and took a much more broad approach to storytelling. They crafted new personalities outside the archetypes. They brought a ton more objectives beyond the golden number and players ate it up. They expanded the scope far beyond the "4 world" dynamic and crafted long-form storylines for the characters that were seriously more in line with well-crafted TV dramas and group dynamics instead of rote Campbellian typicality. Stories that seemed to directly comment on human ethics and get to the heart of nuanced politics. And as a result of all this hard work and model-breaking?

Mass Effect 2 was widely hailed as one of the best games of all time.

And what was stopping them was the mere belief that the rigorous, limited model they were using before was "correct." Instead, they freed themselves up to do so much more. And then with **Mass Effect 3** they went even further and crafted a game with such a stunning thematic narrative device for the ending that Hulk thought they finally brought mainstream triple A gaming into the realm of art... the problem is Hulk isn't sure how well that part translated or how much people were even ready for it.

But the fact that they largely abandoned that hero's model and suddenly started crafting not just good games, but the best damn games around *says everything*.

Hulk brought all this BioWare/video game stuff in because it was just the best possible example of the hero's journey gone horribly, horribly wrong and then how the abandoning of it allowed things to go wonderfully, wonderfully right. But maybe you think Hulk is being too hard on the hero's journey. That Hulk is seeing too many problems with movies striving for similarity. Well, Hulk argues most movies fall victim to the same exact thinking that BioWare did. Soooooo many movies.

To wit, let Hulk focus on popular movie tropes and explain the seven fun ways people use the hero's journey to ruin stories:

I) – Don't Make People Heroes Simply Because They Are The Main Characters And They Are Getting Called To An Adventure! Or Something.

What makes someone worthy of being a hero? There seems to be some confusion over the matter. We know one of the great things about heroism is that a hero could literally be anyone, even you! It's a nice thought and has significant narrative and thematic value, but the problem is that we mistake the nature of this assessment and say therefore that any old human qualities will do for our heroic character... even "none." It's the falsehood of what an everyman means. We do this apparently to ensure that the main character is a conduit that the audience desires, but as a result we are creating main characters who are just vacuous, blank slates. Sometimes it's far lazier than that and these characters are picked to be heroes for no other reason than "well, that's what has to happen in order to tell a hero story." Again, the obligatory nature of having to hit these beats and tropes rears its ugly head.

Do you remember the end of **Ratatouille** where the critic character Anton Ego surmises that he was mistaken about something of grave importance: it's not that anyone can cook but that a great cook can truly come from anywhere? It directly speaks to this issue. It's not that anyone can be a hero, but that a hero can come from anywhere. But the key is that they have to have something inside them. A spark. A sense of morality. A yearning. Remy the rat was someone with an innate ability (smell), an interest (appreciation of the taste of food), and a desire to go far beyond himself. He never had a sense of belonging. The point is that Remy was truly dynamic.

Everyone likes to point to Luke Skywalker as why the vanilla hero is what works "best" because of the success of **Star Wars**, but remember correlation does not mean cause. He just seems vanilla because he's often standing next to one of the greatest scoundrels of all time in Han Solo. Meanwhile, Luke was still a strong, forceful personality with the same human yearning for adventure beyond his farm. He was also human, frustrated, and flawed. He soon came to know tragedy and trauma. And yet we constantly misapply this "anyone can be a hero" trope to mean that anyone with a vacuous personality can become a hero/main character simply because some old man shows up and hands them a magic thingamajig. As a result, we are treated to hero after hero you could basically rename Milquetoast McBlanderson.

So now Hulk is going to do one of Hulk's favorite things and bring it back to Indiana fucking Jones!

The great thing about Indy is that he's a hero and yet the dude's *a fucking character*. Funny, smart, flawed, goofy, troublesome, and awesome. Yes, you want your main character to work as a conduit, but that doesn't mean they have to be an empty shell - it means they are a flesh and blood person who we can *be human with*, not *human for*. Do you see the crucial difference? If the projection of our desire to be in the same situation as the hero is our only means of identification with them, then the character is a complete failure. There *has to be a reason we want to be like them* or empathize with them other than context. Therefore, they should have a damn personality. So don't be afraid to throw in some drama into that conduit! Don't waste your personality on secondary characters just because you think you should (though they should obviously have good stuff going on too). Don't use your main character as someone who is only functional in terms of plotting. And ooh, ooh, and don't forget! When writing heroic characters always remember: exasperated = good! But whining = bad! So toe the line!

II) – Don't Have The Characters Refuse The Call For The Entire Duration Of The Movie

cough **Green Lantern** cough. So how many movies, in an effort to slavishly stick to the hero's journey model, throw in an obligatory and wholly unnecessary scene(s) where the character denies answering the call for no good reason whatsoever? It is this Hulk's opinion that there is no more a hollow exercise in writing.

So why does this happen so much? Either because (a) they are following the hero's journey and think they are supposed to, or (b) because the writer thinks it will manufacture drama, when really they are giving us no set up for this behavior whatsoever. Cue imaginary **Green Lantern** discussion:

Guy: "We need a new lantern! C'mon ring, pick the most fearless guy on this planet!"

Other guy: "But this guy is secretly afraid of everything and kind of moany and shit!"

Guy: "Right, we can't just have him kick ass immediately because he has to fit in the hero model and deny the call! So have him deny what he can obviously do, because... um, some reason... that... doesn't... make sense, but who cares! We need the character to have the illusion of growth!"

Other guy: "Oh okay, but does this seriously have to be the plot of the entire movie?"

Guy: "Yes!"

Audience: "... shit."

Okay, okay, this isn't how it works for every movie. Occasionally, a movie can handle the refusal in an okay way and give legitimate reasons why the main character wouldn't want to just abandon their life and go to this crazy adventure, but those occasions are far rarer than you'd think. Because usually the reasons expressed are: "I can't go with you, it's crazy! This is weird!" Or something. Hint: it's not weird. In fact, your audience will already know that this is exactly where it is going *so embrace economy* and get it on with it

Remember, one of the delightful things that no one seems to realize is that in **Star Wars**, Luke Skywalker refuses the call for approximately 38 seconds of total screen time. Seriously. Watch the fucking movie. He says no to Ben Kenobi, and then in their next scene he immediately realizes his aunt and uncle are in danger, so he runs home and sees their charred corpses and says, "There is nothing for me here now." And he makes the decision to go with Ben to Alderaan to become a Jedi like his father. It's like, 38 seconds of logical A, B, C storytelling, done with economy. And it does wonders, folks.

So why are we turning that little bit of needed doubt and tiny conflict into entire "act twos" wherein nothing happens but a character's inaction? It is so misguided. And so many people try to develop their main character with one singular refusal too, as if answering the call is the solution to all their problems. Develop their character evolution incrementally and based on other issues, whether personal, moral, or relationship bound instead! There should be so much more going on than just the willingness to be a hero!

III) – Don't Over-Rely On The Wise Old Crone

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda. Wonderful characters. And now every movie has their not-nearly-as-good version of them. Worse, the things they are really good at have now become their sole, grating duty in movies: they've basically become exposition machines. Being a movie's "Yoda" has actually become shorthand for audiences. Of course anytime this is too painfully obvious, we do the equally obvious thing and try to brush off this lazy writing with a dumb joke: "Do this thing. It's your destiny." / "Hey, easy, Yoda!" ... Seriously, that was an actual interaction from **Spawn**.

You know, that actually brings up a good little tangent: how many times have you said to yourself "I'll forgive this blatant aping of [insert popular movie] because at least it is self-aware blatant aping!" ... Hulk's gonna wager not a lot. Of course, this does not include films that directly use these touchstones to invert the meanings for comedy purposes and yet still inform their own stories. Think of Emperor Zerg's "I am your father" moment from **Toy Story 2** or the **Point Break** scream-and-fire-your-gun-into-the-air reference in **Hot Fuzz**. Those have a great deal of grounding and purpose. But so often, it feels like a cheap shortcut. There are ways to do everything, but guile and intention are key. Your use of these devices and figures need either tact or invisibility.

Hulk can usually tell the exact moment each one these crone mentors will be killed off to send the main hero on his way alone (just because they're supposed to and that's what **Star Wars** did). Look, Hulk doesn't mean to imply that using a crone figure in your story isn't super-useful, but for Pete's sake, try to hide what you're doing. Try to understand the function of that action and what it did for the characters. Do not just use a Yoda for Yoda's sake.

In case Hulk has to keep reminding you, those characters in **Star Wars** weren't solely exposition machines, either. Remember that Yoda was first introduced to us not as Yoda but as a batshit insane little animal, and the evolution to our understanding worked beautifully. So in your own stories give them interesting and unique stuff to do. Go far beyond exposition and an occasional joke. Don't be meta, either. Give them a role in the story's function *besides* being the crone. Ask yourself, "How can I make this crone unique?" Or even further, "How can I make them not feel like a crone at all?"

IV) – Don't Mistake The Notion Of "The Trials" For "The Hero Fighting A Bunch Of Things"

Hulk hopes this one is pretty self-evident, but here goes: the trials are just not a series of fights.

This is not to imply that the trials cannot *contain* a series of fights. In fact, a series of fights is usually a pretty sweet thing, cinematically speaking. But what each fight should do is have some sort of thematic resonance and reflect on a personality development of the main character. For example, one fight could address his pride. One fight could address his lust (in general, the seven deadly sins work well for these personality-made-physical brand of obstacles). One could address his acceptance of defeat, teach him/her loss, humility, or whatever they may need to go forward as a better, more complete person.

The point is that the trials cannot be empty exercises in neat-o action. This is a story and stories *develop*. Going back to **Star Wars**, remember how fucking psychological Luke's trials were during his time on Dagobah? There's, like, no actual fighting. And that's when it hits you: he's battling his personality and his mind. He's trying to move rocks and gain self-control. It's character development made literal and it's all so incredibly fantastic. So really each trial should be

treated as its own mini-story addressing the character components of the larger journey... and yes you can use action to do that, but integrate them together.

V) – Don't Just Fall Back On Meeting The Goddess / Woman As Temptress For Your Female Roles

Hulk, you got your feminism in my hero's journey chapter! Darn tootin' Hulk did. Deal with it cause it's important.

While writing their stories so many people look at the hero journey model and go: "Well, when it comes to our women figures we can just write them as the goddess/temptress! (read: Madonna/whore), because that's how we've been doing it forever. Sweet! Thanks monomyth!" Seriously, that's the sum total of female approximation when looking at the chart (Campbell's book actually has a lot of good maternal and sacred feminine stuff in the back once you get past the model thing. What? No one reads that far? Oh, okay.)

Ugh. Honestly, these tropes are as old as the dawn of time because a lot of men have not been able to get over this dynamic since the dawn of time. And please know Hulk is not deriding this bad habit out of some modern, revisionist P.C. inclination. As Hulk said in point #20, the truth is that writing dynamic women just makes for better plots and better movies.

Plus, the other truth is that there have been interesting, human depictions of women since just about forever, too (proof? Atalanta for one, not a misspelled city but that figure of Greek myth. Also Semiramis, and as far as actual goddess conduits go Hathor was pretty cool). Hulk argues that the goddess/temptress model has *always* been outdated. It's always been a male-centric, archaic view of gender and it's all about what "women can do to men" and not "what women can do." So if you're still writing women with only these basic Madonna / whore archetypes in mind, just stop it already. It won't make your writing better.

Again, going back to **Star Wars**, that movie actually did a fine job of avoiding that shit. Well...okay, there's only Leia and it's not like she's the perfect example of feminism, but as Hulk talked about before she's at least pretty damn good. She's a fully-formed and interesting character who has her own stuff going on and a whole range of personality. And best of all, she wasn't interested in being either goddess or temptress, but she still had the innate capacity to be strong, maternal, and sexual. Which made her, you know, a human being. And she just so happened to transcend the entire awful dynamic. Again, she's not perfect, but compared to what the Campbell model dictates, Hulk would go so far to say that Leia stands as a direct attack on the values of the hero's journey and is symbolic of so many attributes that the women's movement valued in the seventies.

And despite Leia's near unanimous popularity, the Madonna/whore dynamic is still everywhere these days. Yes, a lot of times it's because the male writer can't help but view women with this inhuman dynamic, but Hulk's huge problem is that most of the time it's unintentional! Why does that happen? Because either that's what the hero's journey says to do or because writers just have no idea how to do anything else. So whenever Hulk reads this unintentional Madonna / whore stuff, Hulk always gives people the same advice: "Fuck it, just write her like Leia." It sounds so stupid and simple, but the person who claims to have no idea how to write women will then instantly get it every time. Leia is that much a central and positive figure in our era. This trick isn't some magic cure-all or anything, but you'd be shocked how much it instantly makes a lot of young men's female characters, like, 50% better.

You may have noticed that Hulk keeps bringing up **Star Wars** and Hulk is doing so for a reason. It's our main cultural touchstone for the hero's journey, the one that wholly popularized it, and yet we can't even seem to imitate it properly. We're looking at the most basic content and motifs and copying those elements. But we're not copying the mechanisms and engines that *really* drove its success. Structurally, we're not copying its sense of economy, its understanding of drama, the power of its characterization, the humor of its crones, the psychology at play in the trials, and its strong female lead. We're literally missing the best stuff about **Star Wars** because we're too busy looking at how it fits the hero's journey along with *everything else* we digest.

Well, guess what folks? **The Seeker: The Dark is Rising** fits the hero's journey *even better than Star Wars does*, but does that film's structure and sense of drama and excitement resonate with us? No. Because the film is not very good at all, which means no one is interested in copying *that*.

What makes the original **Star Wars** trilogy so awesome after all these years is not how it's the same as every classic hero story, but how it's still truly *different*.

VI) – Don't Blatantly Use The Elixir Remedy / Deus Ex Machina

This one sort of deals with the “return with elixir” component, but basically Hulk just wants to point out that way too many storylines resolve with deus ex machina. Let Hulk put it like this: anytime your big hero story solves problems the way **Entourage** does, you should probably just stop doing that.

Look. Deus ex machina is fucking hard. No two bones about it. Hulk recommends that even most intermediate writers should stay away (Hulk includes Hulk-self in this). That is because chances are you will do it in mediocre fashion and will thus fail. But that’s okay. Do something else. Almost every other kind of plotting is a better way to solve story problems.

But is there a way to do deus ex machina? Of course! But you have to either directly engage the theme (which Hulk will illustrate later) or you have to disguise the device in a way that totally makes sense: grounding it in character purpose and drama.

The biggest problem of which is that there is no device in popular storytelling that, when used poorly, can feel so damn cheap to even the most unaware of audiences. Conventional plotting is dependent on set-up and delivery. And nothing makes the audience more aware of a lack of set-up than the sudden saving of a character from some means that seem foreign to them. But if you set it up? And not just with some magical do-hickey, but in terms of character catharsis? When you gear it around dramatic function? Hooo boy, does it work.

Let’s go back to that same movie yet again: remember the Han Solo “yeee haw kid! Now let’s blow this joint!” moment from **Star Wars**? Of course you do. It works because they spend the entire movie showing that Han doesn’t *do stuff like that* and have the characters tug at his heart strings trying to *get him to do stuff like that*. The last moment of Luke asking for help sets it up so perfectly, as he shuffles away with all his money grumbling to a reluctant Chewy “I know what I’m doing.” Then the film then spends *the exact right* amount of time away from Han so you completely forget about him, until the very second he streams in, starlight-behind-Falcon, and saves Luke!

It’s a beautiful, gorgeous moment, but it works because of all the great character set-up. It works as a moment that is deus ex machina only... but it’s not deus ex machina at all. In that moment it is a sudden surprise, but really it’s the result of a carefully constructed character arc, not something as ethereal or random as “fate” or “interference of the gods.” It’s human. And as a result it works so damn well for the audience... it’s amazing how much Lucas took that deus ex machina moment and made it something so different and more functional. Gosh. Hulk keeps writing about **Star Wars** and kinda falling in love with it again... This after Hulk was going to swear it off. Oh well, that’s what happens with good things.

They always give you a reason to love them.

VII) – Don’t Think “The Return” Only Means That Characters Should Come Home At The End

Perhaps we can blame **The Odyssey** for this one, but there is a definite lack of understanding for what “the return” actually means and it is responsible for dozens of hyper-pointless endings. Writers get it stuck in their head that we somehow have to return home and this magically brings things full circle... yeah. The return actually implies a thematic or psychological return, not a literal one. And yet we see movies that literalize that returning to “home” and think that *inherently* implies some kind of meaning. And unless you give the return some thematic resonance, unless you have built up the meaning of that return and have truly changed the character, then it means *absolutely nothing*.

Hulk’s personal favorite example of the nonsensical literal return occurs in a series of films which are the complete opposite of the original **Star Wars** trilogy...

Hulk is talking about the prequels.

Those movies are all terrible for hundreds of reasons, but in this specific case: the literal return to Naboo in **The Phantom Menace** is downright bizarre. That is because, aside from picking up a little Anakin Skywalker, their journey to Coruscant yields absolutely zero results that affect the plot, situation, or character. Seriously. They return because they have nothing left to fail at. Absolutely nothing is different about their situation with the Trade Federation, or their personal situations or their character growth. They’re just in a different geographic place. Even when Padme showed up in the Senate and pleads her case, the Senate is basically like “What!? No! Of course not. You came all the way here to ask that? What the hell is wrong with you?” Which oddly enough is something that could be made into an interesting political statement about democracy, but they ignore that context too, shrug their shoulders, and go home to really start dealing with the issue at hand. Again. Downright bizarre.

The last thing Hulk wants to do is turn this into a fan-fic session, but since this is a screenwriting book Hulk feels it is okay to talk about different story options and what they could have done better in the prequels. There are a million things they could have done to fix it, but here's one small change that could have improved so much: Padme should have stayed on Naboo and dealt with the fact her planet was under fucking attack. Qui-Gon should have left Obi-Wan there to protect her and thus Padme and Obi-Wan could have developed a friendship and she could have had a schoolgirl crush. Meanwhile, Qui-Gon would have been the only one to go back to the Senate and get stranded along the way on Tatooine. There he finds a new, better Padawan in young Anakin. He could have freed him the same way and their stupid mission to Coruscant still could have failed. But here's the real key, when they returned it could have all come together in a way that actually made sense. Anakin enters as the dark stranger who instantly loves Padme, the Obi-Wan crush evaporates, Obi-Wan is pissed there's a new Padawan and everyone would have real motivations and emotions. This "return" would have real, serious consequence. But instead they all got to travel together in a big, useless group where everyone stands around while other people get to have actual stories. Also Hulk would have gotten rid of Jar Jar. Also they should have... done a million other things. Wait, why the hell is Hulk even doing this? You can't polish a turd. Assuming there is a singular fix to the problems of the prequels is like swatting a mosquito and assuming they are extinct. Hulk just wanted to show a way that there could have been an actual point and consequence to the return.

Which is important because we see the empty, literal return all the time. So at this point Hulk urges you to not even bother with it. It doesn't fit with most stories anyway, even for some big epics. Not to get too literal, but it makes way more sense in classic myth or an intergalactic community or something, where going on any kind of journey is some giant undertaking. But we now live in a transient, nomadic, and wholly interconnected society so Hulk argues that the effect of spatial separation is less resonant (even though it still works damn well cinematically). But modern society is interconnected *all the time*. So that means the thematic point of the return, to have a character stuck in two worlds so to speak, is actually our modern constant. It's all sort of conflicting and we don't exactly know what it means.

So in the meantime, when it comes to your ending, just hammer home your damn themes. It doesn't matter where the characters are actually located. Just be sure all your characters have hit the beats they need to hit for their stories to work, and be sure that has been executed in the name of drama. Economy and focus, folks. The return is a thematic one. Coming home should mean coming to catharsis.

VIII) – Don't Use "Cuz Destiny!"

This one isn't necessarily something Campbell talked about a lot, but we have absolutely adopted it into the hero mythos. In fact, we've adopted it into a shit load of mythoses. Destiny has gotten all up in, not just our hero stories, but storytelling in general.

And Hulk does not like it one bit.

It's not that a storyline about destiny cannot be well-executed, it's just that as a choice it tends to breed a lot of lazy drama. The first problem is that by taking the reason things happen in a narrative and chalking them up to destiny, you inherently remove both personal motivations and contextual conflict. And that's giving yourself a huge dramatic obstacle. Hmmm. How to explain it...

You remember when Hulk talked about act breaks being geared around a character's choice? Well we can then assume that character arcs are geared around a character's entire series of choices. And introducing the concept of "destiny" instantly removes the notion (or illusion) of choice from the character altogether. It effectively gives away the end to the audience, not in terms of the story of the logical "how," but most certainly in terms of drama. And drama is all about how the narrative threatens us viscerally so that *we forget* that the hero will succeed or even become a hero in the first place (again, Indiana Jones works so because he's constantly reminding you of his ability to fail). And using destiny as a device *prevents us* from ever forgetting. It may make "story sense," but it ruins the function of drama.

The irony of all this is that almost all of our ancient dramas were completely geared around the concept of destiny; albeit the key difference being that their use of the device was used mostly in tragedies. It was a commentary on the nature of choice, specifically in regards to the inevitability of death. Why did they use it that way? Well, old-school life used to be fucking hard, folks. Most of the time you just, like, died. Life was infinitely more random than it is now. A good cold would kill you. Women usually didn't survive childbirth. Famine. War. Murder. All present. Thus the idea that fate, aka death, was going to happen in our lives, regardless of our own goodness or import, was a much more persistent reality. Death was a constant (it still is now, actually). And thus every myth was directly trying to engage that central reality of life. So much so that it became the backbone of Greek drama: challenging the fates, wherein the notion of trying to cheat death was actually perceived as a character flaw.

But now we wholly forget that part of the equation. Probably because now we actively reward a character who is trying to cheat death. Heck, we are taught to value it as a virtue. We rally around characters that embrace invincibility. But back in the day? Achilles. Perseus. Gilgamesh. Our hero tales used to be cautionary. Now, those flaws are upheld as sacred virtues. Believing you are invincible is a form of heroism. But hey, perhaps it's just a sign of our prosperous age. *Damn the fates* they say. Which if we are going to be honest about our culture is probably thematically understandable all things considered.

The real problem, narratively speaking, is that we took this very specific plotting device, which was usually used for the one inevitable constant in life (death), and turned it into this cheap vehicle for ready-made plotting and objective-satisfying. Meaning to use it as we do now is a complete misunderstanding of the mechanism and purpose of that device. Now we use destiny to make us think we're born to be stars. To be heroes. To get everything in life *besides* death. It's an outright perversion of the intention of destiny. Now we use the witches from **Macbeth** to tell our heroes all the awesome things they're going to be and then just sit back and watch them as they supposedly overcome their minor bullshit and finally do it. There's no fable. There's no lesson. Our stories just have the stars in their eyes, free of consequence.

Which Hulk guesses just proves the thesis of **Macbeth** right in a way?

Ugh. The worst part is so many writers don't think about the purpose of these mechanisms. People just do it because they have no idea what drama is and they inject these tropes into storytelling because "that's what movies do." Again, it's obligatory. There was a recent announcement of a "young Han Solo" movie (oof) and Badass Digest's own Devin Faraci wrote a great little satirical piece on why a) this was likely a terrible idea and b) the way these terrible tropes we see more and more in movies overtly explain interconnections without making them dramatic. This part was great:

"We will see the origins of the Millennium Falcon. No, not just the thrilling card game where Han won the ship from Lando (although that will be in the movie and will be included in some wacky, unexpected way, like Han and Lando are playing cards in Jabba's dungeon or something). We will actually see the Falcon being built. A young Han - four or five years old - will be transfixed by the ship under construction.... Almost as if it's his destiny."

Yup. That's the ethos of our whole approach to storytelling right there. It's mistaking the notion of set-up and delivery for having obligatory destinations. It's making connections between points of a timeline without understanding all the concepts we've been talking about in this entire book. There's no propulsion and no character choices. Han had to make a choice to come back to rescue Luke. And this kind of destiny thinking? It's a hollow imitation of storytelling and it's become such a crutch. It's: "Here's the thing you were meant to do! Go do it by the end of the movie and it will seem like a journey!" But it's not a journey... It's a nothing.

So here's some advice to every screenwriter out there. Remove "destiny" from your plotting of anything you ever do. Ever. Not because it's impossible to do well. Heck **The Wire** turned the notion of challenging the fates (read: modern institutions) into the best television ever offered to us. No, it's because you're using it for traditional dramatic storytelling without realizing you're using the dramatic equivalent of:

"Why?" / "Because!"

So just avoid the trap until you can learn to navigate the other arenas of story.

IX) - Wrapping It All Up

You know... perhaps a better title for this chapter would have been "a better way of approaching the hero's journey" but again, Hulk really wanted you to unlearn the story model. We just have to loosen up the way we deal with these structural matters because this weird sense of formalism is crippling our ability to focus on more productive mechanisms of storytelling.

Still, keeping with Hulk's theme of balance: adopting less rigid models does not give us carte blanche to devolve our movies into a story-less, Bay-esque malaise of action, but are instead there to help us craft tight and dramatic stories that fit what we are trying to do. Remember, there's no "refusing the call" in Indiana Jones and he's still a damn hero. He's simply like "The ark of the covenant? Fuck yeah, I'm in." And everyone *was totally cool with that*.

Beyond that, it is important as a culture to constantly evaluate our tried and true systems. This is not an invitation to disappear up our own assholes with reflexive academic talk, but we have to be more perceptive to what actually helps us do things. And the popularization of the hero's journey is significant to our cultural understanding, but now our over-reliance on it for pragmatic storytelling has reached a kind of critical mass.

Didn't you ever find it curious that the hero's journey tells you the specific beats in a general order ***but it gives you no idea how to link them???*** Wouldn't that be an important part of any storytelling model?

That's because the hero's journey is not a storytelling model. Which means it's no accident that so many of these modern post-**Star Wars** films who base their stories on it come off like segmented nonsense, with characters hitting obvious and repeated beats with no flow for no other reason than destiny and cosmic interference. The book has only been around for 60 years and we were telling amazing hero stories without it just fine beforehand. Actually, we were doing it a lot better because we weren't trying to reduce it down to the hero's formula. Even the great **Star Wars**, which used the hero's journey as an influence, did not see it as structural model, but instead a way to build something thematically resonant. Lucas's story, meanwhile, was instead built by drama and propulsion.

Linking things together is the single most important factor in crafting a well-told story. This is what Hulk means by "flow." It's like climbing stairs: each scene should lead to the next and so on in a way that advances the plot, character, or theme. Every place should make sense. And then it should unify into a *single story* with tight, economical writing that is good for *your ideas*, rather than augmenting your story to fit something that is the equivalent of a two-thousand-year-old Cliff's Notes analysis, which again, was really something that was made to investigate why we created myth and not intended as how-to instruction.

Christopher Nolan's **The Dark Knight** is 1) about a superhero 2) one of the most respected and successful superhero films ever and 3) and it doesn't even really touch the Campbell model in any strong way. Instead, it's built around moment-to-moment propulsion of story. It grounds its characterization in theme and keeps things going in a far more involving and modern way. So, if by comparison, you are taking whatever ideas you have and just plugging them into the hero's journey then Hulk would argue you are most definitely doing it wrong. In a way, you are actually butchering the purpose and intent of Joseph Campbell's incredible academic work.

At this point Hulk would like to apologize for the length of points #25 and #26, but you have no idea how important it is to unlearn these two popular storytelling models and doing so takes a lot of work and analysis.

The reward? You now have access to the vast number of other storytelling models that will be far more helpful in helping you write.

So let's look at them, shall we?

27. The Sequential Approach

The sequential approach is more detailed than what follows, but it basically amounts to "sit down and start writing the story logically from point A to point B, beginning to ending."

... Yeah... This is a horrible way to write screenplays. Especially, if you've never written one before.

Chances are it will create a run-on, purposeless story. It will show a lack of forethought. Ideas will be lost and the story will simply meander to places where it doesn't belong. Hulk sees scripts that were clearly written this way time and time again, where the story just plain runs out of steam with no real sense of how to resolve it.

But the value of the sequential approach becomes startlingly apparent later on in your development. Once you've already had a good deal of experience with structure and heavy outlining, the sequential approach can re-introduce the most basic form of logical writing:

Cause and effect storytelling.

This happens so this happens. Cause and effect. There's nothing more propulsive to a story in the world. And yet you see so many intermediate writers get caught up in the game of beats and structure and character points and arranging all their little chunks that they'll end up writing these disconnected scenes. The story is just this scene and then it's that scene, etc. And they'll each work like their own little plays. And it may ultimately fit together in a logical way, but it can be problematic.

The problem is that it works in terms of making your outline look good and well-realized, but over-relying on those methods also hurts the overall flow. Because no matter what, most overtly structural outlines create flow problems. They

just do. And in comparison, the logical process of writing sequentially can be so helpful when you finish a scene and say "Well now I go here of course!"

It's all about dramatic transitions, y'all!

That's what creates propulsion in a script. Every time you have to enter a new scene where you have no idea what's going on, the audience's brain will have to "reset" for a moment. And so when you give information in one scene about where it's going next and then a transition makes it clear that it's happening and then you let the drama play out, the audience will be rapt with attention. It's A, B, C storytelling and it works. And with it, you can make a 3 hour movie feel like it passes by in minutes. Still, sometimes it's impossible. Sometimes you need to interrupt to bring up important information or a viable tangent, but never forget that transitional storytelling with clear beats is the heart of structural propulsion. And if you can tie those transitions in with the evolution of your character? The sky is the limit.

So how do you combine the sequential approach with a more rigid form of outlining? The sequential approach is best used as a kind of intermittent tool. Start with heavily planned arcs, but don't be afraid to momentarily lose yourself in the flow of the writing (particularly if it's the first draft). Then just always take pit stops to refocus. Be sure that where you're going fits in with the spirit of the outline, but it's not the letter of the law. Go back and forth. Negotiate with yourself. See what really works. But never be afraid to give into what the scene itself dictates might happen next.

And once you're done, you still keep going back working it into your beats. The whole process of writing is a difficult balancing act (and once Hulk explains the next few beats, achieving this balance will make much more sense), but the really important thing is to realize that story flow and transitions are always critical to creating an organic sense of propulsion.

But a good question remains: how do you know which transitions and beats actually make sense for that flow?

28. Trey Parker + Matt Stone's "Therefore / Buts" Not "Ands"

Trey Parker and Matt Stone are perhaps best known as the **South Park** guys. A few years ago, they unexpectedly showed up in an NYU screenwriting class and dropped some knowledge bombs. There was a little two minute video of the highlights, but here's the best section:

TREY: "... [WE SAY] well this would be a funny scene if we had this. Each individual scene has to work as a funny sketch. You don't want to have one scene and go 'well, what was the point of that scene?' So we found out this rule that maybe you guys have all heard before, but it took us a long time to learn it. But we can take these beats, which are basically the beats of your outline. And if the words 'and then' belong between those beats... you're fucked. Basically. You got something pretty boring. What should happen between every beat that you've written down is either the word "therefore" or "but," right? So what I'm saying is that you come up with an idea and it's like 'okay, this happens' and then 'THIS happens.' No no no. It should be 'this happens' and THEREFORE 'this happens.' BUT 'this happens' THEREFORE 'this happens.' ... And sometimes we will literally write it out to make sure we're doing it. We'll have our beats and we'll say okay 'this happens' but 'then this happens' and that affects this and that does to that and that's why you get a show that feels okay ... and there's so many scripts we read from new writers and things that we see--"

MATT: "FUCK that, we see movies that do it! It's just like 'this happened and then this happened' and that's when you're 'the fuck I'm watching this movie for???' That's not a movie. Therefore/buts give you the causation. And that's a story."

Okay... it comes across much more clearly in video form, but this is effectively one of the most succinct and helpful things that Hulk has ever come across in explaining the process of structural writing. Since finding it, Hulk has not only spread the gospel of its message, but used the concept time and time again in Hulk's own writing. It was something Hulk instinctually understood for a long time, but this newfound clarity just gave it such better focus. And Hulk really doesn't even need to expand on it because it is just so freaking clear. It even addresses the single most relevant problem in today's writing and that is a *lack of narrative purpose to the action one is seeing onscreen*.

Simply put: "therefores" and "buts" create the sense of propulsion.

The "and thens" stop the narrative cold.

It's no accident that the **South Park** guys have become better writers with every passing season of the show. They have always been funny and smart, but after a decade and a half they have finally learned to shape their storytelling. Meaning the show has gone from being flippant and funny, to becoming something downright resonant. It's a show from a punk-rock mentality that can now tell stories for the mind, body, and soul. And that's really something. It doesn't seem to be an accident that **The Book of Mormon** has gone on to win every award imaginable and it is without a doubt their best pure story work to date. The guys are on to something there.

So look at your own stories. Look at every scene. If the only way to line up the beats is with "and then" then you're in trouble. So find your "therefores" and "buts" and start reshaping your purpose!

29. Dan Harmon's Circles

There are, of course, far more complex models to create a sense of propulsion. It doesn't have to only be causality. Earlier Hulk talked about the value of having your characters evolve and grow, and nowhere is that more clear than with Dan Harmon's "circles."

There was a recent **Wired** article where the incredible Mr. Harmon, creator of **Community**, delved into his structural approach for writing the show. The funny thing is that his structural model is actually very much inspired by the hero's journey, which is something that you may think sets off alarm bells given what Hulk said earlier, but instead it is wonderful. And that's because it inspired *his own* methodology. He took what he liked about the hero journey and augmented and applied it to a different situation that was not only better for the kinds of stories he was telling, but incorporated the triggers of plotting and conflict, not just the iconography and tropes. He made it his own. And that's exactly how it *should* work!

Now this model has a very specific purpose to the episodic-yet-somewhat-serialized nature of TV sitcoms, but it does some truly neat things that can be applied to many other forms of storytelling. The short version of his character-conflict-circles look like this:

1. A character is in a zone of comfort
2. But they want something
3. They enter an unfamiliar situation
4. Adapt to it
5. Get what they want
6. Pay a heavy price for it
7. Then return to their familiar situation
8. Having changed

It is a wonderful way to look at storytelling because it is a direct model for showing how a character changes and learns, based on their wants and needs. That's right! We're going back to Hulk's character trees, wherein we built psychology and catharsis. So by approaching story structure from this character-centric angle, Harmon is actually giving you a perfect model *for how to achieve catharsis*.

Isn't that really cool?

The other great thing about this model is it not only fosters good characterization, not only gets into great dynamics of human nature, but also helps produce traditional narrative propulsion and purpose to each scene. Notice how all those 8 beats can be linked with "therefores" and "buts"? Isn't that also cool? Meaning you now have 8 little characters beats that can be manifested over a whole movie, an episode of television, 8 scenes in a novel, 8 scenes outside of that context, 8 little moments, or even, if you're really good, you can get those 8 beats out in a single brief interaction (Tarantino and the Coens are the masters of going through this full cycle in a single series of exchanges).

Still, Harmon talks a lot about how difficult it is to always make the circles work or come off organically. But when it does work? It's responsible for some of the best episodes of television ever produced (in this Hulk's humble opinion).

See, the complexity of Harmon's system is that it requires a lot of plotting built outward from character instead of ever allowing for vice-versa. Which is probably good for your writing overall, but Hulk assures you that you will run into

plenty of times where it's hard to engineer these character beats into the plot that you're trying to execute, which may need to be a certain way for a host of other reasons. This is where flexibility comes in. Dan Harmon took the hero's journey and found a way to apply it to his sitcom writing, wherein characters have to change and yet establish reconciliation time and time again for an episodic format. So you can take Dan's circles and find a way to apply them to other structural models. Particularly regarding character catharsis, it may just help you solve a whole bunch of problems in your scripts.

But perhaps the real lesson to take from Dan Harmon's circles is how much work and thought he puts into his character arcs, and how hard he works at getting his stories to break to them. Whichever structural methods you end up incorporating, you should be working just as hard.

Moving on!

30. Vladimir Proppisms!

Let's talk about fairy tales, y'all! So Vladimir Propp is probably Hulk's favorite story analyst. He was a Russian guy who did a lot of Russian things, but he also took a look at Russian folk tales and labeled 31 possible functions. Now, it should be mentioned that once again everyone took Propp's functions and applied them in the wrong way, assuming this was a freaking how-to for story structure, instead of just all the possible angles for thematic analysis, but our understanding of this should be well-versed at this point.

Case in point: modes of deduction are not the same as modes of construction. In fact, Propp always said he was trying to get to their "irreducible elements," which is a great way of putting it because when crafting your story you want it to be the opposite of irreducible. You want it be thick and sumptuous and complicated and organic.

But still, this can be uber-helpful not in terms of creating cut and paste dynamics, but for giving you 31 ideas on the kinds of conflicts you can create! So much more plot-dynamic specific than the hero's journey.

"1. ABSENTATION: a member of a family leaves the security of the home environment. This may be the hero or some other member of the family that the hero will later need to rescue. This division of the cohesive family injects initial tension into the storyline. The hero may also be introduced here, often being shown as an ordinary person.

2. INTERDICTION: an interdiction is addressed to the hero ('don't go there', 'don't do this'). The hero is warned against some action (given an 'interdiction').

3. VIOLATION OF INTERDICTION: the interdiction is violated (villain enters the tale). This generally proves to be a bad move and the villain enters the story, although not necessarily confronting the hero. Perhaps they are just a lurking presence or perhaps they attack the family whilst the hero is away.

4. RECONNAISSANCE: the villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance (either villain tries to find the children/jewels etc.; or intended victim questions the villain). The villain (often in disguise) makes an active attempt at seeking information, for example searching for something valuable or trying to actively capture someone. They may speak with a member of the family who innocently divulges information. They may also seek to meet the hero, perhaps knowing already the hero is special in some way.

5. DELIVERY : the villain gains information about the victim. The villain's seeking now pays off and he or she now acquires some form of information, often about the hero or victim. Other information can be gained, for example about a map or treasure location.

6. TRICKERY: the villain attempts to deceive the victim to take possession of victim or victim's belongings (trickery; villain disguised, tries to win confidence of victim). The villain now presses further, often using the information gained in seeking to deceive the hero or victim in some way, perhaps appearing in disguise. This may include capture of the victim, getting the hero to give the villain something or persuading them that the villain is actually a friend and thereby gaining collaboration.

7. COMPLICITY: victim taken in by deception, unwittingly helping the enemy. The trickery of the villain now works and the hero or victim naively acts in a way that helps the villain. This may range from providing the villain with

something (perhaps a map or magical weapon) to actively working against good people (perhaps the villain has persuaded the hero that these other people are actually bad).

8. **VILLAINY OR LACK:** villain causes harm/injury to family member (by abduction, theft of magical agent, spoiling crops, plunders in other forms, causes a disappearance, expels someone, casts spell on someone, substitutes child etc., commits murder, imprisons/detains someone, threatens forced marriage, provides nightly torments); alternatively, a member of family lacks something or desires something (magical potion etc.). There are two options for this function, either or both of which may appear in the story. In the first option, the villain causes some kind of harm, for example carrying away a victim or the desired magical object (which must be then be retrieved). In the second option, a sense of lack is identified, for example in the hero's family or within a community, whereby something is identified as lost or something becomes desirable for some reason, for example a magical object that will save people in some way.

9. **MEDITATION:** misfortune or lack is made known, (hero is dispatched, hears call for help etc./ alternative is that victimized hero is sent away, freed from imprisonment). The hero now discovers the act of villainy or lack, perhaps finding their family or community devastated or caught up in a state of anguish and woe.

10. **BEGINNING ACTION SEEKER:** seeker agrees to, or decides upon counter-action. The hero now decides to act in a way that will resolve the lack, for example finding a needed magical item, rescuing those who are captured or otherwise defeating the villain. This is a defining moment for the hero as this is the decision that sets the course of future actions and by which a previously ordinary person takes on the mantle of heroism.

11. **DEPARTURE:** hero leaves home;

12. **FIRST FUNCTION OF THE DONOR:** hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc., preparing the way for his/her receiving magical agent or helper (donor);

13. **HERO'S REACTION:** hero reacts to actions of future donor (withstands/fails the test, frees captive, reconciles disputants, performs service, uses adversary's powers against him);

14. **RECEIPT OF MAGICAL AGENT:** hero acquires use of a magical agent (directly transferred, located, purchased, prepared, spontaneously appears, eaten/drank, help offered by other characters);

15. **GUIDANCE:** hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts of an object of the search;

16. **STRUGGLE:** hero and villain join in direct combat;

17. **BRANDING:** hero is branded (wounded/marked, receives ring or scarf);

18. **VICTORY:** villain is defeated (killed in combat, defeated in contest, killed while asleep, banished);

19. **LIQUIDATION:** initial misfortune or lack is resolved (object of search distributed, spell broken, slain person revived, captive freed);

20. **RETURN:** hero returns;

21. **PURSUIT:** hero is pursued (pursuer tries to kill, eat, undermine the hero);

22. **RESCUE:** hero is rescued from pursuit (obstacles delay pursuer, hero hides or is hidden, hero transforms unrecognizably, hero saved from attempt on his/her life);

23. **UNRECOGNIZED ARRIVAL:** hero unrecognized, arrives home or in another country;

24. **UNFOUNDED CLAIMS:** false hero presents unfounded claims;

25. **DIFFICULT TASK:** difficult task proposed to the hero (trial by ordeal, riddles, test of strength/endurance, other tasks);

26. **SOLUTION:** task is resolved;

27. RECOGNITION: hero is recognized (by mark, brand, or thing given to him/her);

28. EXPOSURE: false hero or villain is exposed;

29. TRANSFIGURATION: hero is given a new appearance (is made whole, handsome, new garments etc.);

30. PUNISHMENT: villain is punished;

31. WEDDING: hero marries and ascends the throne (is rewarded/promoted).

Occasionally, some of these functions are inverted, as when the hero receives something whilst still at home, the function of a donor occurring early. More often, a function is negated twice, so that it must be repeated three times in western cultures.”

To restate: this list is not a how-to on story structure. In fact, you do not need to have these beats in your story whatsoever. What Hulk simply wants you to do is look at the kinds of cause and effect that these actions have on the story. Meaning what Hulk wants you to actually understand is the mechanism of these story devices, not just the surface description. For the value of these devices lies in the fact that they create certain dramatic reactions in the audience and create certain meanings toward the themes, not in their mere presence. And thus the expression of the notions themselves, here represented in their “irreducible elements,” are meant for something else entirely.

Now, you may be curious: why fairy and folk tales?

Why are they so important? After all, when we think “fairy tale” we think of something like Cinderella, with handsome princes and dreams coming true. The truth is that we’re really talking about is an even simpler version of storytelling than that: fables. Remember when Hulk talked about them way back in 7.1? Fables are so important.

Look at how many of those Proppisms hold up the basic value of fables. Look at how many of these story functions link together off cause and effect. Look at how many function in terms of therefore / buts. Isn’t it amazing?

So if you want to uphold that same purpose you should take those 31 mechanisms from Mr. Propp and use them to suit your own purposes. Make them feel modern. Invert the genders. Apply it to a situation outside of good and evil. Address topical concerns. Make them nuanced. Every story needs mediation. Or complicity. Use your ingenuity to make them apply to something completely different. David Simon used Greek drama (challenging the fates, etc) as the conflict methodology of his uber-modern television show **The Wire**, and ended up revolutionizing the way those constructs felt.

So why can’t you do the same with the 31 Proppisms?

Be bold. Be purposeful.

Also looking over that list... is Hulk crazy, or was Vladimir Propp the main inspiration behind the **Scooby Doo** cartoons?

... sorry, let’s move on.

31. The snowflake method

A lot of times, particularly when approaching longer stories like season-long TV arcs or novels, people will have trouble finding ways to enrich the story with detail while still remaining relevant to the initial or central conceit. Sure, we have point #10's character trees to help us flesh things out, but that's doesn't solve a lot of long-form structure problems.

That's when Hulk finds the snowflake method helpful.

The terminology comes from the idea that snowflake starts dense in the center of condensation and continues to crystallize outward forming new, more detailed shapes. Thus, the story is developed the same way. Here’s an excerpt from advancedfictionwriting.com that Hulk has truncated to make more palatable for this book:

“**Step 1**) Take an hour and write a one-sentence summary of your novel...

Step 2) Take another hour and expand that sentence to a full paragraph describing the story setup, major disasters, and ending of the novel...

Step 3) The above gives you a high-level view of your novel. Now you need something similar for the storylines of each of your characters. Characters are the most important part of any novel, and the time you invest in designing them up front will pay off ten-fold when you start writing. For each of your major characters, take an hour and write a one-page summary sheet that tells:

- The character's name
- A one-sentence summary of the character's storyline
- The character's motivation (what does he/she want abstractly?)
- The character's goal (what does he/she want concretely?)
- The character's conflict (what prevents him/her from reaching this goal?)
- The character's epiphany (what will he/she learn, how will he/she change?)
- A one-paragraph summary of the character's storyline...

Step 4) By this stage, you should have a good idea of the large-scale structure of your novel, and you have only spent a day or two. Well, truthfully, you may have spent as much as a week, but it doesn't matter. If the story is broken, you know it now, rather than after investing 500 hours in a rambling first draft. So now just keep growing the story. Take several hours and expand each sentence of your summary paragraph into a full paragraph. All but the last paragraph should end in a disaster. The final paragraph should tell how the book ends...

Step 5) Take a day or two and write up a one-page description of each major character and a half-page description of the other important characters. These "character synopses" should tell the story from the point of view of each character. As always, feel free to cycle back to the earlier steps and make revisions as you learn cool stuff about your characters...

Step 6) By now, you have a solid story and several story-threads, one for each character. Now take a week and expand the one-page plot synopsis of the novel to a four-page synopsis. Basically, you will again be expanding each paragraph from step (4) into a full page...

Step 7) Take another week and expand your character descriptions into full-fledged character charts detailing everything there is to know about each character. The standard stuff such as birthdate, description, history, motivation, goal, etc. Most importantly, how will this character change by the end of the novel?...

Step 8) You may or may not take a hiatus here, waiting for the book to sell. At some point, you've got to actually write the novel. Before you do that, there are a couple of things you can do to make that traumatic first draft easier. The first thing to do is to take that four-page synopsis and make a list of all the scenes that you'll need to turn the story into a novel. And the easiest way to make that list is . . . With a spreadsheet....

Step 9) (Optional. I don't do this step anymore.) Switch back to your word processor and begin writing a narrative description of the story. Take each line of the spreadsheet and expand it to a multi-paragraph description of the scene. Put in any cool lines of dialogue you think of, and sketch out the essential conflict of that scene. If there's no conflict, you'll know it here and you should either add conflict or scrub the scene...

Step 10) At this point, just sit down and start pounding out the real first draft of the novel..."

Now if this rigorous methodology seems like your sort of thing then Hulk recommends you do more research on the snowflake method. The thing Hulk likes about this approach is that it really helps you flesh out the ideas in through-lines for *every single facet* of the story construction. It really can be a fascinating exercise in taking your core idea (the one sentence of what your novel is about) and extrapolating it into the singular details that make up the story. You basically ask yourself:

"What are the scenarios in which my core idea would best manifest itself?"

It's all coming back to you, isn't it? The core idea. The idea that compels you. The source of inspiration. All this time later, we're looking at the most detailed structural model to date and it brings us right back to the beginning of the book. It brings us to why we wanted to tell the story in the first place!

Let's also go back to our awesome **Six Feet Under** example, as it really seems to hammer home the cool, practical use of the snowflake method. We established that Alan Ball asked himself: in what scenarios would confronting mortality best manifest itself? And he found answers: working in a funeral home, father dying, constantly taking in dead bodies, dealing with grieving loved ones, even having imaginary conversations with the dead. Of course, Hulk has no idea if Ball is a snowflake-method guy or what, but when Hulk looks at his work it sure seems like it. All of his central themes are directly extrapolated into plotting, character, and singular details.

Even if you don't use the methodology, the idea at the center of the snowflake method is gold, folks!

32. Individuality and Hulk's "multi-act flow structure"

Okay... time to get serious.

At this juncture, you may have realized that Hulk has brought up a whole bunch of different possible structural takes. The whole point of doing so is to have as many different ways of attacking different kinds of story problems, which is perfect because writing is largely about problem solving.

First we *unlearned* 3 act structure and the hero's journey, because they tend to lead to more bad habits than good writing. Then we built our own definition of what constitutes an act. Then we turned to the sequential approach to help us understand logical A, B, C storytelling. Then we learned how to understand the way to connect those A's B's and C's by turning to Trey Parker and Matt Stone for the "therefores and buts" they use in transitional plotting. We then turned to Dan Harmon to understand how plotting should center around character motive and catharsis. We then turned to Vladimir Propp to best understand the different kinds of story mechanisms that best express those conflicts. We then turned to the sequential approach to fully flesh out our details, while still keeping them grounded in the conceit of story, the original nugget of inspiration.

It makes sense, but they all seem so different don't they? How would you ever condense all that?

Once you hit a certain level of expertise, when you've really worked out a lot of this stuff and used the methodology many times over (and you really have to have done this: no cheating), then you need to evolve into something different. After all, the process of actually writing is rather different. Often times, you just write. It just springs forth from your brain and everything seems great. Then you hit a snag. And you try and figure it out. It's problem solving.

So what kind of method best accounts for that process? What kind of method best accounts for all the structural models we've seen so far?

For that, we turn to Hulk's favorite method of story-breaking because... well, Hulk kind of invented it. The term "inventing it" sounds really official, doesn't it? We could also just go with "Hulk made it up!"

Anycrap, it's called "multi act flow structure" (Hulk will use M.A.F.S. for short) and Hulk finds it to be the best way to keep things propulsive while still trying to juggle all the respective arcs of plot, character, and theme.

At its core: multi-act flow structure is predicated on the idea that *each scene* works best as sort of its own mini-act, complete with a mini-act break. Earlier, we defined the end of a true act as being a moment where characters can no longer "go back." And this is a slightly more lenient version of that. The idea is that each scene should really accomplish something that changes the narrative, either on a character, plot, or thematic level. It doesn't always have to be a major thing, but each scene should feel like the world of your film is now somewhat different.

Does it have to be 100% true for every scene? Of course not, but the more central it is to your operation the more propulsive and meaningful a film you will create.

As to how to execute it? It's really a two part process...

33. M.A.F.S. Part 1 - Breaking Into Concurrent Arcs

One of the best places to start really organizing your structure is to look at all the arcs in your story and lay them out as

individual stories.

Now... Hulk could come up with a fun analysis of a movie that we all know and could work with, but because Hulk keeps talking about the problems of reverse engineering, let's go in a different direction instead. Hulk will now come up with a made-up story right here on the spot... Hulk swears this is what Hulk is doing and it probably isn't going to be very good. Hulk even swears Hulk won't refine the idea so you can see the spark of story generation as it happens in real-time. This is the value of the organic process:

Um... So, like, a doctor has journeyed to a small AIDS hospital in Africa, to rebuild his life after a painful divorce... You know this kinda story. It makes up the world of melodrama and such. So in this story, the doctor has to face his own past and pain and yadda yadda yadda, you get it, but also, there's a boss who runs the hospital in a very counterintuitive way that is different from the doctor's own experience. And this is not just in terms of medical logistics, but regard for human life and what is best for everyone. The boss won't take certain risks and will only do what they can do to keep the system in balance. And there is also another main character and she is a co-worker at the hospital and love interest to help him rebuild his life. That sounds like three good places to start.

Now... Hulk's not just interested in something as simple as those character archetypes. Hulk really wants to explore the real-life concepts of compassion vs. practicality in a bureaucracy. Plus, Hulk's really interested in the state of health and politics in Africa. So now we have some themes Hulk finds compelling. So the main character and the boss will have a disagreement over the proper treatment of AIDS, where the main character is pro-practicality with safe sex and the boss is religious with the old stance of abstinence. But Hulk doesn't want it to be this simple good / bad dynamic. Let's reverse it then. The boss will also have a very practical approach to not helping folks who can't be helped, believing it will only get others sick, whereas the main character sees that as lacking compassion. They both have their ideals, and they both have their sense of practicality. Okay, cool.

So Hulk begins to work with these ideas, but at a certain point in the brainstorming process Hulk would sit down to map out the three concurrent arcs:

- Relationship with boss
- Relationship with co-worker
- Relationship with himself / his past

And for each of these arcs Hulk would plan out a story that makes sense on its own. They would not simply be "elements" of a larger story, but their own complete stories, independent of anything else. Also, Hulk would not waste anything. Hulk would list out each scene, which would comprise each beat of the story. This would allow Hulk to be sure that each beat really accomplished something.

Hulk won't do it for all of them, as it would just be a waste of your reading time, but here's a quick + dirty treatment (that again is unedited) of what the story beats would look like for one of those concurrent arcs.

Relationship with boss:

- The doctor meets boss and notices their different life approaches.
- The doctor feels alienated.
- The doctor then sees the boss's pragmatic uncompassionate style in action and it gives him ethical concern
- So they come into a conflict over it.
- The doctor sticks to his guns on a different case and saves a patient who is a danger to others.
- It is a success and everyone else is fine, much to the dismay of the boss.
- The main doctor feels emboldened by this success, so the next time the doctor does this same thing, it is less successful.
- His emboldened attitude was misplaced so he then sees negative consequences of this decision.
- The decision causes others to get sick, the doctor sees how his emboldened attitude has undermined the boss's ability to run the hospital.
- The negative consequences spiral, the problems are righted by the two appreciating one other and coming to work together.

Now this example isn't that good or focused, and in fact it is the kind of hospital plot line we've seen a million times before, but that's just makes it perfect for our purposes. Since they are all familiar story beats you implicitly "get" the bare bones of the story and the mechanisms, and we can now talk about where it can properly go.

The first step would be that these beats need to be fleshed out in an organic and accurate manner. The story, like any story, could easily feel forced. But the beats could feel natural as anything too. Either way, we have what we need. We don't need any more scenes than what is conveyed in that description of the arc. So we have *economy*. Notice Hulk does not double up on conflicts which say the same thing. There is an incident that shows a good reaction. And incident that shows a bad reaction. We don't need any more than that. Those two cases alone will propel the story where it needs to go. Next. Hulk would do this for the other arc with the coworker relationship and the arc with his past / self. Again, we do this to be sure each element is a singular, complete story.

... But these are not three separate stories, are they? Not at all. This is a movie, or a TV show, or a novel, or whatever. And as such it is *one thing*. Which means the arcs need to be ingrained into a singular story.

This is where you do the second part of the breaking process:

34. M.A.F.S. Part 2 - Merge Into Conflicting Arcs

Hulk could just launch right into the example we just used, but Hulk actually wants to use a real-movie example to show what "conflicting arcs" actually means. What's funny is that Hulk uses the following movie all the time when talking about screenwriting, not because it's a stunning example of innovation and lyrical prose, but because it only tries to do the most basic things right.... And boy it gets them so, so right.

The movie is **Kung Fu Panda**.

Really? Yes.

The thing Hulk loves about the film is how it balances the relationships and plot mechanics to keep them all very unified. There is Po, the dim-witted panda chosen to be the Dragon Warrior by Master Oogway and meant to unlock the power of the Dragon Scroll. There is Tigress, the one who was in line to be the Dragon Warrior and is now deeply disappointed at not being chosen. There is Tai Lung, the villainous former pupil who wants to unlock the power of the Dragon Scroll for himself. And all three are linked to Master Shifu who failed in training Tai Lung because he loved him too much and gave into all of Tai Lung's indulgent behaviors. To correct his mistakes, Shifu was then far too hard on his next pupil, Tigress, from whom he is detached, which in turn imbues her with far too much desire to please him. And then Shifu is faced with training the idiotic but well-meaning Po, a task he does not want or understand, especially because the Dragon Scroll was meant for Tigress. And then guiding over all of them, particularly Shifu's frustrations, is Master Oogway, the one who chose Po as Dragon Warrior and guides all five of these characters with a quiet sense of zen and destiny.

5 main characters. 5 different sets of relationships. They all have motives to relate to each other. They all have reasons to dislike each other and provide conflict. But best of all they are all "interested parties" in the main plot of obtaining the Dragon scroll. Meaning they all have real stakes in the story and action. They are not characters simply made to be foils for each other. They are all real characters with their own wants and needs. The film does not waste any of these great dynamics either. When the Dragon Scroll is unlocked, in a singular moment of converging plot, it really allows each

character to come to a real catharsis about the understanding of themselves and their relationship to one another, whether it's Po's embracing of his own zen-like abilities, Tigress's will to accept Po as Dragon Warrior, Shifu's realization of his blinding pre-judgment of Po, and even in the case of revealing Tai Lung's own pride and vanity as his core weakness. The movie comes together for every character arc and every relationship, all in a singular narrative moment.

Hulk just has to say it: on the surface, **Kung Fu Panda** is a somewhat funny movie with some really good Kung fu animation... but in terms of the basic mechanics of how this film integrates plotting and character... it's fucking perfect.

You hear that? *Perfect*.

So go and watch it again with all those things mind! Constantly be aware of the relationships and how the wants and needs of each character adjust with every turn of plot. Notice the way everything is in conflict with each other, often at once. It's a spectacular learning tool!

So now that we've established a great example of what "merging into conflicting arcs" actually means let's return to Hulk's silly African doctor movie that we just made up and is nowhere near as good. We don't want it feel like three separate movies, we want to go all **Kung Fu Panda** on this shit. We want it to converge.

So we essentially "start over" with the multiple arcs. That's right, we don't just augment what is already there to make it work. That would be half-assed and ultimately make things still feel disconnected. We need to start over. We need to converge the relationships. We need interested parties. We need stakes and different wants all centering around the central setting and narrative. We need to find our unifying concept of a "Dragon Scroll," even though it probably won't be a tangible object and instead some concept or theme that is far more ethereal.

We need to make it *one story*.

Which means all those arcs we just made in point #33? They don't matter. They were a rough draft to help us be sure we didn't skirt anyone's relationships. Now is the time to completely assimilate them together by starting over.

For instance, the Tai Lung example above made Hulk think about adding another character to the mix who would complicate the whole thing and add another layer of conflict. They could be another co-worker in the hospital. They could create a love triangle and have a radically different, inhumane idea of how the hospital should be run, one that would surely sink the hospital's direction. The inclusion of this character would be productive. It would make for a clear foil in the scenario. It would provide the audience with empathy for the other main characters and hate for this jerk-face. It would basically set up the default rooting scenarios we want in the film. It would be totally effective and worthwhile.

... It is also not the kind of human story Hulk's interested in telling.

For one, it's just too damn manipulative. Hulk knows this melodramatic story likely can't be turned into high art or anything, but Hulk's particular inclination would be to make this script more quiet, nuanced, and well-observed. And that means no abject villains. But since we still want the sense of conflict and drama that the villain provides, it would then make sense to take some of those same 3rd party clashing motives, and give it to a non-evil character. Like... how about the love interest co-worker?

This would be good because before this Hulk hadn't really a strong idea of the character's faults. Sadly, she was just one of those foils who could make the doctor realize he needs love or something stupid like that (thus violating Hulk's rule about not writing women in the context of men), but instead we should give her a contention and differing view point on what direction the hospital should go in. Doing this will provide stakes and conflict. It would make her relevant to the story and not just relevant to the main doctor's catharsis. It would help make her textured and real. We would get the same conflict the villain would have provided, but in this version her humanity would make her view seem more human.

But what could this third direction for the hospital actually be? Well, Hulk's very interested in the politics of Africa as well, so maybe the 3rd character should want to reach out to the local army or despot who, despite their atrocities, have resources that could help. Both the boss and the main character should want to stick to the hospital's crucial independence. It would make for a story in which all 3 main characters had significant interest in the direction of the hospital (i.e. the plot, which is a direct commentary on U.S. involvement in African politics), but also the main theme of idealism vs. practicality. It would give all three characters different relationships with one another. Plus by adding this army/despot character we would then have an outside force, which helps us automatically empathize with everyone

within the hospital's team. But again, none of this would be so cut and dried by the end. They would all come to understand each other's' view of idealism vs. practicality.

It is the merging of conflicting arcs. And it is how one writes one singular story.

But guess what? Hulk's African doctor movie is still not done talking about the treatment of women in film. Hulk is stopping for a moment to ask questions of the state of the story. For instance, you'll notice Hulk immediately went to the "default male protagonist" and also the default "female support figure." Neither of these options makes a good first inclination. You may even realize that this story, with all its capacity for melodrama and by total admission a somewhat **Grey's Anatomy**-like plot, really makes more sense if the main character was female, right? Hulk totally agrees... That's even a good sell for this movie... But here's where it gets reflexive! Because the tone of the story could feel so much like fodder for a kind of exploitative female story (something almost Lifetime-esque), Hulk could also try to push it in a different direction and embrace an attraditional tonal approach. It would be a male doctor in touch with his emotions and a simple relatable story.

Hulk wouldn't want it to be aimed at an audience but something aimed at everyone. It could be a case where Hulk would go the opposite of his intuition for the main character's gender, but all for a very specific effect of thematic gender commentary. Still, there are ways that what happens could play as positive and ways it could play negative. Hulk really has to think carefully about what Hulk wants to say about gender in this scenario and it's altering Hulk's entire sense of plot and character.

This is what Hulk means when talking about the responsibility of the author and taking responsibility for what your films say. Hulk wants you to think about these kinds of interpretative matters and thematic effects constantly. Doing so will totally inform your stories and implications in the best possible way. Again, it's not about having your characters avoid anything haphazard. It's not about upholding the paragon of gender identities. It's about awareness. And with that awareness you have room to make a million decisions. Just like how Hulk would easily be open to switching back the sexes of the two coworkers, so that the female was the protagonist. Hulk wouldn't worry about doing that in the slightest. Do you know why?

Because they're people. Not genders. And writing them as people makes for better characterization. You can switch genders in scripts all the time and unless you're making penis and vagina jokes or something (which is something Hulk would totally do), the effects aren't that big a deal. Gender matters, but it often doesn't matter in the way you think it does. It doesn't matter when it comes to who should be doing what or who would reach out to the dictator or how "men are like this and women are like that." So don't worry so much about writing them as a typified gender. Because in the end, they will either be played by an actor or an actress so the audience will be able to tell what sex they are. You don't have to write it to tell them.

But even as Hulk eschews gender lines and espouses on the principals of melodrama here, the important thing Hulk wants you take from multi-act flow structure is that it really, truly has the ability to be augmented.

Because it is concerned with functionality and conflicting purpose, it does not hold you to rigid ideals of doing certain things by certain pages. It doesn't say your character has to be like this, or they have to do that.

It takes a look at the whole of storytelling and focuses on the main five tenets: purpose, character, conflict, drama, and theme and makes you break a story in a way that values economy, propulsion, and audience investment.

Multi-act flow structure gives you the tools you need to do what you want to do, and gives you the flexibility to change on the fly depending on your purpose and intent.

Every kind of story is different. Every one of them works with a certain set of expectations and catharsis. And part of being able to write any kind of story means you should know how to write *every* kind of story. And forgive the rough transition here, but that's why you really should:

35. Learn Your Genre Conventions!

Do you realize how many mysteries and procedurals Hulk reads where it is completely clear that the author has never actually studied mysteries? As in they don't seem to understand what propels a mystery and makes it work? And are

possibly / totally just copying what they see on TV? It is honestly about half the time. All Hulk wants is for them to pick up any damn book on the subject and learn the conventions of noir or mystery or detective work or whatever the heck they're writing, just to have a little more functionality. Not so they can ape all the "correct" beats.

There is some misguided belief that doing this will create regurgitated stories. To be fair, that's exactly how we got in the hero journey mess, but if you keep your head on your shoulders this soooooo will not be true. What studying the genre will allow you to do is understand the mechanisms that propel mystery or intrigue or whatever kind of mood each genre is intending to create. And when you understand the mechanisms? When you understand how mystery works?

Then you can use it any way you see fit.

Think of it like cooking. Hulk could give you a really tricky recipe and you could practice it 50 times until you got it perfect and it would totally seem like you are a great cook. But does that make you a great cook? Do you understand the process? Would you understand that cooking is essentially dehydration? Or why the searing of meat is important to taste? Would you be able to apply those basic concepts to other dishes? Would you be able to make substitutions to the dish if you needed to? Nope!

And that's exactly why understanding what's really propelling things is the key to innovation. It's true of every scientific arena. It's true of every art. With cinema, an artist like David Lynch is able to create the most interesting, vivid, and original movies on the planet because he understands genre and can apply genre mechanisms at a moment's notice to get an immediate visceral effect on the viewer. Notice Hulk didn't say "style" either. But *mechanisms*. Look at the films of Edgar Wright, which are often lauded for the way they will suddenly become "different movies" at a moment's notice and you'll see that he's not just using the style of those genres, but using *the purpose*. It always informs a character's decisions or a change in the plot.

It's always about the effect on the viewer. Understanding genres allows you play with them in a way that will help you create new meanings and worlds. Quentin Tarantino is the clear master of this, where he takes all these cinematic worlds and uses them to construct something vibrant and original.

Meanwhile, Hulk can spot a genre Xerox instantly. It may look like the genre at hand. It may sound like the genre at hand, but unless it understands the purpose it goes nowhere. That's the exact reason there are so many bad procedurals out there in script land. But it's also the reason that good procedurals are so much fun. There's a way the plotting just works, dammit.

But what are all the procedural conventions? What are all the conventions of mystery?

The truth is that to even begin trying to discuss all the rules of genre conventions would entail writing a giant book about each genre separately. Which doesn't mean that it's an insurmountable amount of knowledge for you to acquire. Heck, you already have a lifetime's worth of movies you've watched. You instinctually understand it. But instead of copying the iconography, you really should ask yourself a different set of questions: how is this affecting me? Why is it working? What is this plot saying? What does that mean for me? What am I getting out of this?

If you're writing a western, it should seem like you understand the effect of westerns. Hulk doesn't mean to take a cheap shot at **Cowboys and Aliens**, but it really didn't seem like it knew the first thing about how the genre actually worked on a dramatic level. Which might seem odd, given that it was made by a bunch of smart people who apparently watched a lot of westerns as research (and you can see all the references on the screen), but instead of understanding the function of the genre conventions, they instead just aped tropes and iconography. Then it took those tropes and assembled them in a way that didn't understand how they would relate together on the plotting level, nor the effect on the audience!

For instance, Daniel Craig's character is clearly influenced by "The Man with No Name" archetype that made Clint Eastwood famous. That character had no past and was a total mystery, but here's the thing... *that's not what the films were about*. His history didn't matter. The convention allowed The Man with No Name to roll into town as a disconnected entity and then the plot would connect him, usually based on morality and ethos. But **Cowboys and Aliens** took Daniel Craig's character history and turned it into the big driving mystery at the center of the plot.

Worse, it had no idea how to actually do that. He's essentially an investigator, but he has no actual memory... which means he's just wandering around doing stuff as more stuff happens. By combining The Man with No Name with The Man with No Memory and then also characterizing him as a silent, unstoppable badass with no agency and whose core

details (that would make you empathize with him) don't come around until two-thirds of the way through the movie, well, they inadvertently created one of the most detached characters ever written, and by grounding the film in that character they wrote one of the least effective storylines ever written. There's no empathy. There's nothing to follow. We're just *watching*. Sadly, everyone started calling it Craig's worst performance, but of course it was his worst performance! He had absolutely nothing to do and was given no personality!

All the lessons we've talked about apply: the film has no agency. We don't understand anything until later. Each scene transitions poorly. The entire movie is one big "and then!" The entire movie is hell-bent on using reveals and not drama. The entire film even misunderstands the purpose of storytelling. Take Harrison Ford's character. They know all the tropes he's supposed to be, but they mash them together ineffectively and without the needed transitions. At first, he's the nasty villain. Then when the aliens show up he just instantly starts acting like an anti-hero. Then he's treated to a scoundrel's evolution and is suddenly just a decent guy for reasons that don't expressly work. Mostly because the way Ford eventually came around was not fit for who the character was in the beginning. And there weren't significant enough events to make him change. Remember earlier when we talked about Han Solo's great redeeming moment at the end of **Star Wars**? It was about the way that moment was set up and used for perfect dramatic purpose... and this film didn't know the purpose.

Even with every other character in the film, it knew it wanted to use the **Stagecoach** model of giving secondary characters a lot of background and screen-time... but the thing about **Stagecoach** is all the action was centralized together into the same ongoing plot of their journey. It was like **Kung Fu Panda**, where everyone's action or inaction was contributing to the main plot. It knew how to merge all those arcs into a conflicting singularity. In **Cowboys and Aliens**? Every plot is effectively its own movie. None of it ever seems to affect anything else and barely even intersects!

Sorry, Hulk will stop talking about that movie. It's just such a great learning example of a film that did all its research, knew its iconography, had smart people and good actors behind it, but so clearly didn't understand the mechanisms or the purpose behind the kinds of stories it was trying to use. And that's everything.

While Hulk isn't a diehard fan of the genre or anything, one of the reasons Hulk really appreciates horror films is that most of the filmmakers really do understand the conventions and purpose of the genre. They understand the mechanics of a scare and how to lay the mechanics on thick or light, depending on the tone and rhythm. They understand how to unnerve and build distrust. They play right into your visceral experience and they do so with an impeccable sense of craft. There's a reason a lot of horror filmmakers are suspicious when an "outsider" filmmaker tries their hand at the genre and so often it's because they don't do it all that well. The outsider may like the effect of horror, but they often don't understand the mechanics and the craft. They would rather be esoteric and moody. But there's an entire rhythm to horror films and you'd be shocked how often the outsiders misuse and abuse it... or don't even understand it.

Hulk's lookin' at you, **Wicker Man** remake!

But the real reason you need to know your genre conventions isn't just for these tonal reasons, but because they each have a psychology to how they work. Most of the time it is about the psychology of release. For example, all genres and films use similar cause + effect models to achieve some form of anticipation and release. Each genre then lines up with a different emotion: horror films use this two ways. When you are excited for the kill, it utilizes anticipation and then uses a moment of shock to send you into elation. The other way is fright, which wants to you *fear the kill* so it tries to establish tension followed by a moment of releasing the audience from tension, which then makes it "okay" to watch the film again. The two psychologies completely inform how one should write and stage the action of the horror in any given moment. You have to ask the question, does the audience want this particular character to die? Or not want this particular character to die? And go from there. *That's mechanics*.

Or if you look at action films you will notice that cause and effect needs to manifest itself by creating tension followed by a moment of elation and impact (*Are they going to do it?!? Yes!! They did it!!!*) Even though you know that in most action films, the heroes will succeed, that doesn't actually matter. The film's success is in tricking the audience's brain, through wholly visceral filmmaking techniques, to feel that, just for a split second, the action hero maybe won't survive because "that fall is too high!" Or "that gun is pointed right at them!" Again, it shouldn't be about the hero being an unstoppable badass, but about all the ways the hero is in danger. All our lessons apply. It goes back to urgency and drama. There is a reason that action films work well with clear stakes and completely obvious plotting. It's always, always, always, about the visceral effect on the audience.

These cause + effect models are part of every kind of genre. Even melodrama. And to understand them is paramount to

your ability to write. It even applies to thematic motifs, like understanding how good westerns are often about the end of things. Or that romantic comedies depend on the audiences falling in love with the characters before the characters do with each other. There's a reason that so many romantic comedies fail when the characters sleep with each other and now they have to figure it out. It doesn't play into the basic sense of how the cause + effect works (**Knocked Up** notwithstanding because that movie actually goes for other avenues of narrative resonance and succeeds brilliantly).

Understanding the psychology of how a genre works will give you precisely what you need to make your own individual, creative, and original film work.... And yes, Hulk believes that every film is, in some way, technically a genre film.

So guess what, folks? We've covered the "breaking stories" section of this book! Hurray! But now it's time to address a little troubleshooting, and take a look at a few, small structural problems and odd devices that show up in writing...

36. "Page 17"

The term "Page 17" is a strange phenomenon revealed to Hulk by an old mentor.

He said that if you look through most good screenplays, for some reason the movie's main plot or action kicks into place on exactly page 17... He spent a career looking into it... And since then, Hulk checked into it too... He's pretty much right.

It's almost bizarre, but if you read a ton of scripts then "page 17" of these 90-120+ page screenplays seems to be this naturally occurring point in the main plot where the story really gets going. Even something as non-traditional as the first chapter of **Inglourious Basterds** is 17.5 pages. It's like the screenwriting pi or something. It's this naturally occurring page number where it feels right to really start embarking down the main narrative path. It's like in the Shakespearean second act where the main conflict kicks into gear.

Perhaps this is apropos of nothing, but Hulk sees it as yet another tool at your disposal. Have you started your main plot too fast? Have you delayed it for too long? If it's page 33 and the main plot of your story hasn't gotten going yet, all because you're still "setting things up," then chances are that it is a bad thing.

It's not as if you absolutely *have* to get your main story cooking by page 17, but Hulk would like to suggest if you're going much earlier or much later than that page number, then perhaps you should probably have a really good reason to do so, that's all. It's simply a question you can ask yourself in trying to decide what it is you want to do.

37. If You Use Characters, They Should Likely Be Reused

Again, these are guidelines. But so often we are introduced to certain characters in a story who achieve some temporary goal in a scene. Comic relief. Exposition. Spurring forth a new plot. Whatever. And often they will then disappear... It doesn't work that well for your story arcs, mostly because it fails to meet our inherent standards for set-up / delivery and cause + effect.

Hulk knows Hulk keeps picking on the movie (perhaps fairly so), but in **Green Lantern** we are introduced to Hal Jordan's family in an opening scene. They clearly do it to make him seem all human and caring and stuff. Even then, it feels so immediately, blatantly manipulative. But then... *We promptly never hear from the family ever again...*

Sorry, but it was one of the most laughable things Hulk's ever seen in a giant film. Not just for in-movie logic terms, but in terms of character consistency too. You figure he'd care about his family when all of a sudden shit started going down with the city getting eaten by parallax, but hey whatever, he can spend that time moping. Hulk guesses there's far more boring things to do when your family is in trouble. But hey, it's just one offense from a terrible script (who knows though, maybe something ended up in the cutting room floor and it was cut by the studio and Hulk is just being mean. Still, all we can go off of is the finished result).

Not only does abandoning the family feel like we lose a bond we might be interested in, but the real reason it sucks is that it feels like *wasted narrative time*. The audience can inherently sense messy and scattered storytelling. They subconsciously sense when things don't feel important or necessary. Like in Hulk's example with how the characters in

Kung Fu Panda converge and have stakes in each other because it makes for a relevant story. Simply put, there should be reasons characters are part of the story. They should serve purposes beyond "I like what they do for the hero in this one particular scene."

The stories we weave always have connections. Even something as silly as **Animal House**, doesn't just bring in Otis Day and the Knights for a good times sequence, but later returns to them to make a very different impression (complete with criticism of white-assumption, but also some old-school racist overtones!... Okay, really it's the "primitive cultures" joke that is truly dated, but it's fucking awful. Meanwhile, the rest of the movie is still pretty amazing. Sorry for the tangent, but Hulk can't talk about that movie without bringing up that mean-as-hell line). Anycrap, the point is you should always try to look for opportunities to make all the characters have as much relevancy to the story as possible.

And that means finding fun and interesting ways to bring them back. As a great example, think about the way **Curb Your Enthusiasm** plots are constructed where everything always seems to come back and be relevant. Whether comedy, drama, short or long-form narrative, find ways to do that. It doesn't have to be so perfect and have little neat bows on it, but there is surely an organic way to not waste characters.

Because the more characters feel like tangents, *the more they'll feel like tangents.*

38. How To Actually Use Deus Ex Machina!

Deus ex machina works when it is the point.

Wait, didn't Hulk already talk about this??? You betcha, but it's that important. There are so many stories where at the last second the hand of "god" or fate or whatever comes in and saves the characters from certain doom. These moments are so out of nowhere and often undeserved that even the most unaware audience member will be tempted to yell "bullshit!" There are the ritual worst offenders of this device (like Hulk mentioned with lazy old **Entourage**), but there is of course an effective way to use it. As Hulk illustrated earlier with the Han Solo saving Luke moment, the last minute "saving throw" works best when it is grounded in character and plotting.

But Hulk wanted to take an extra moment and talk about a way to make deus ex machina work by engaging the theme directly.

As Hulk said above, deus ex machina works best if it is the point of the story. Usually this requires some sort of engagement of the idea of faith. For example, a character espouses some belief that the universe is trying to guide him, or that he trusts he will be saved. For example, **Lost** was a show that had amazing characterization and deep-tissue thematic resonance. They were also quite good in how they handled this particular device. The best example of which was in a season one episode appropriately titled "Deus Ex Machina." Spoilers and such, but in that episode the character of John Locke, a man who has recently found his faith through extraordinary means, once again begins to question it. A vision had brought him to a mysterious hatch on the island, one he desperately has tried to open in order to unlock the mysteries within. Over a great deal of time he finds no success in trying to open it. His anger grows. And one night he stares down into the hatch and slams his fists against the window. He screams and yells to whatever is within. He then yells out to the universe: *Why had they cursed him with the vision? What did the world want from him? Why was he supposed to open this hatch? Why would the universe be so cruel as to taunt him with this impossible task?* He screams and cries into the hatch as the music swells. He is at his wits end with his very sense of faith shattered... And then...

Ever so quietly... A light comes on within the hatch... It shines on John's face and up into the night sky.... The episode ends.

And it's one of the most beautiful moments Hulk has ever seen on television.

And that is because it finds such meaning in this tiniest of gestures, one that speaks so deeply to the narrative and themes at play. It is not a big gesture that makes it clear the heavens are interfering... it is the simple device of a light turning on, which we can read as we want. More importantly, the device coming into eventual play is the focus of the entire episode. It is an episode about *the very purpose of deus ex machina itself*. And for that reason they turn the device not just into something that "works" within the narrative context of the show, but something that swells with meaning and resonance. It is perfect writing.

So when you consider using deus ex machina in your own work, think of this one stunning example. And think of the Han Solo moment. Ask yourself: *why am I using this device? Is it just an easy solution? Is this the only way I can solve the problem? Does it say anything about my characters or change them? Have I questioned the very nature of the character's beliefs or the nature of faith? Is there any reason I am using this?* And if so, think about the nature of the device and what it actually means on a thematic level.

Deus ex machina works when it is the point.

39. Beware The Opening Flash-Forward

So this isn't more **Lost** analysis because the flashback and flash-forward system they used was actually pretty damn purposeful on the whole!

No, the kind of opening flash-forward Hulk's talking here is the kind you see all the time in movies. Hulk even mentioned it briefly before in the preexisting conflict chapter. It's when a movie will start off with some moment from the climax or a later scene, when events are all heightened and dramatic. It's like this big tease, and then the movie just starts as normal.

Hulk has a simple question: why is this happening?

Possible (bad) answer: *because it lets the audience know that stuff is going to go down in this movie! That it will get all serious! That the protagonist will end up in some crazy situation! That's, you know, full of drama and stuff! It shows conflict and is exciting!*

Hulk not-so-politely asks in return: so the fuck what?

What is the real point of doing that? How much are you actually accomplishing? Hulk means, 9 times out of 10, of course the audience knows that the movie will get exciting and climaxy because that's what movies do. That's probably why they bought a ticket. Hulk understands the desire to let an audience know what kind of craziness is in store so it doesn't take them off guard, but so often that sort of flash-forward is unnecessary. And after it's over, the narrative will just jump back to the real beginning of the story, showcasing how unimportant it really was. Hulk sees the device used so damn much these days and it's not only everywhere, but also poorly done. It's a quick-seeming and cheap solution to imbuing a film with the illusion of conflict.

Aren't there so many better ways of doing that? To introduce real and actual conflict? Like with the whole "preexisting conflict" thing Hulk mentioned?

Now this isn't to make it seem like the device is completely unusable, as there are some ways it can work. For instance, it was a common device on the first few seasons of **Breaking Bad** and sometimes it worked spectacularly. They'd start with a few scattered images we barely understand. They will build a complete sense of mystery as to what we're even seeing. And since there is literally no comprehension, it works like a mystery to be pieced together later. "Oh, that's that object from..." etc. The flash-forwards were used as clues. It's not just jumping ahead, showing off the answer to everything and then asking "how are these characters going to end up in this crazy situation?" the way so many bad scripts do. And the few times **Breaking Bad** did give away actual context and information in the flash-forward scene, it was often total misdirection.

Like everything, you have to be sure there's a reason for it. If your movie begins with a lot of normalcy (and Hulk means a lot), then perhaps it's worth thinking about. But it should also be there to express some idea of the themes at play or possibly to create a sense of dramatic irony. You have to be sure there's a reason. It can't just be an "and then." You have to be sure you are not wasting the audience's time, nor robbing your climax of important urgency.

Because sometimes the unintended effect of the flash-forward is that you're subconsciously making the audience feel like they're just sitting there waiting to get to the climax again. It can become a strangely hollow exercise. Even **Breaking Bad**, who used the device well for two whole years, ended up phasing it out. It can be a real preventative burden. So be wary.

Honestly, a lot of time Hulk feels like writers use the opening flash-forward because "that's what movies do." How many

times can we talk about movies that use devices, or imagery, or style that are devoid of tact and understanding?

How often can Hulk argue in this book that the biggest problem is the common misapplication of a story mechanism and not the mechanism itself?

Understand the thing you are doing. Understand the mechanism and what it's accomplishing. Don't assume. Ask yourself the right questions.

Ask: "What is this really accomplishing?"

40. Don't Try To Be "Cool"

The following is Hulk's general piece of advice about life: if you start any sentence with "Wouldn't it be cool if... ", don't do it. Just don't do it.

The word "cool" is so troublesome and Hulk finds it really problematic in storytelling. A lot of people don't understand why Hulk makes such a big fuss about it. It's just a word that is synonymous with "good" to them. But Hulk doesn't see it that way at all. So let's try a little experiment.

Define "cool."

Again, we think of it as being synonymous with good, but that's not really the case, is it? The things we think are "cool" usually relate to our understanding of early social dynamics. Cool people and cool things are often detached, flippant, and rebellious. And while those traits are certainly *alluring*, the problem is that it's not all that emotional or empathetic. Heck, the reason we try to be like that is that emotional connections scare us. We don't want to get hurt. We don't want to be vulnerable. And that's why we project coolness. That's why we want to seem like we don't give a fuck. We think it's alluring, and hey, sometimes it is.

But Hulk's problem is not that being cool is alluring, it's that it isn't emotional. It isn't dramatic. And it isn't empathetic. Meaning: *it isn't good cinema*. Think about those words: flippant and detached. Is that how you want your movie to come across? Is that what you're interested in making? Sometimes people are interested in making movies like that and they're often terrible. They're aloof bits of slick cinema, completely distant and unemotional, and altogether shitty. And the only way they tend to be successful is by indulging the audience and making them want to be like those cool things through wish-fulfillment.

The other problem with "cool" is that it's often an evaluative concept, not a visceral one, which also makes for bad cinema. We just sit there with our brains and we decide "oh that's cool" and even then it's not all that helpful because we regularly disagree on what is cool or what makes things cool. It's so damn ephemeral and that makes it impossible to construct! It's like trying to bottle lightning.

Isn't that such an important thing to realize? That coolness is so transitive that it changes constantly and can't ever be constant? And soon after it is effective it will be considered passé? And if we can't define such a nebulous concept, then we can only rely on how we *know it when we see it*. Which brings Hulk to another important point, when you are still writing and constructing the idea, the idea doesn't exist yet.

You're just trying to be cool.

And you ever see a guy trying too hard to be cool? Oof. Do you want your movie to be like that guy? It's the parents who try to keep up with their kids' music, not in an effort to connect with their children, but to adopt their tastes as their own and to stay relevant, trying to be cool. It's the guy at the party still wearing the scorpion jacket from **Drive**. Trying to be cool results in taking benevolent, good-guy, zen leader Optimus Prime and turning him into a government-hating badass hell-bent on executing motherfuckers. Trying to be cool is how we got pretty much all of the early '90s with cartoon characters in sunglasses.

It is the Poochie-fication of cinema.

It just always reeks of blatant and false intention. It seems desperate and unearned. More importantly, it never has

anything to do with being a valid option for the story. It will be like a marketing executive trying to identify what the hip kids are into. It's true. Even if you really are a cool, forward-thinking, progressive person, it will feel calculated and cold. It will be disingenuous.

So Hulk swears to you: the second you are trying to be cool, you're in trouble.

People think that Tarantino is always trying to be cool or that he makes "cool" films, but if you ask Hulk this is a spectacular misdiagnosis. Yes, Quentin wants his films to be cool, but that's not how he actually constructs them! Seriously! Oftentimes, his characters are grounded in a kind of regularity and focus on the mundane. He obsesses in the obscure and the uncool. More than that, he constructs his films in terms of function: his long-form dialogues are just as much about classic innovations of drama and build up and tension. He's a guy who knows his craft and knows *the purpose* of every single cinematic mechanism he's employing. The real truth is that Tarantino is actually super dorky. He's referencing the most obscure nerdy things, favors flights of dialogue fancy over action. He much prefers careful characterization and intelligence over posture. He understands that no matter how much you dress stuff up in awesomeness...

Cinema is secretly about being dorky and earnest.

And that is what makes his films *so damn cool*.

But this whole predicament brings us to our next big "don't"...

41. Don't Fuck With The Audience Just To Fuck With The Audience

Stories should be earnest.

Even if the story is about a lack of earnestness. Even if the material is frivolous or superficial. Even if it's the most un-Spielberg-ian material on the planet. The storytelling itself, in whatever path you choose to go, should be earnest. It should come from a place of genuine connection and empathy to the experience of your audience. So when it comes to constructing your narrative, there is a huge difference between wanting to be inventive and *just* trying to be different for different's sake... do that and it will just end up seeming like you're fucking with the audience.

And the audience *does not* like to be fucked with.

Look no further than the recent debacle with the ending of **The Devil Inside**. In case you are unfamiliar, the filmmakers / studio said they wanted to do something "different" and, in moment of complete stupidity, they did something they thought might be cool: you see, the film ends abruptly with a car crash and a cut to black with a story card that tells the audience that they can continue the story... on a website.

People reacted as if the film had just leapt off the screen and killed all their mothers.

Look. The decision was essentially just a misguided attempt at trans-media lameness. But in the filmmakers' desire to be different, they did not realize that, narratively speaking, they were doing the most ridiculous thing possible. Even if unintentional, that title card made it seem like they were effectively cheating the audience out of seeing the end of the film and making them catch up later through another form of "payment." But the point Hulk really wants to hammer home is that by shifting to u.r.l. the film was calling attention the fact they were crafting an *incomplete narrative*. Even if the story was complete (and it wasn't), they were still implying there was a more important narrative to be held elsewhere. They did something worse than just having an unresolved ending... They made it seem like the narrative was purposefully *incomplete*.

Here's the filmmakers' explanation of what happened (via [Bloody Disgusting](#)):

"Stories always have a very Hollywood ending. And we're doing the antithesis of that. I know some people love it and some people f*cking hate it but it gets people talking. We're just trying to make it realistic. Not every situation ends perfectly or the way you want it to end."

...

...

...What!?!?!?!? Like... seriously?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?

Okay please understand something right now. Hulk wants to run out into the streets and start smashing cars and punching Chitauri... but instead of Hulk smashing things, Hulk will do the more civilized thing and analyze why that comment might be the worst thing ever said by a filmmaker.

The first problem is that he's making it clear he's just fucking with the audience to get a reaction.

Second, "it gets people talking" is the chief phrase people use in marketing. Not storytelling. And if that's your approach to storytelling you can just get the hell out of here and work in marketing. Which is fine, by the way. Hulk's worked in marketing. It's a super-valid business, but it works in a completely different way from storytelling.

Third, what the hell does getting people talking and cutting a story short so they can go to a website have to do with realism? Nothing, that's what. In fact, all you did was get people to talk about how awful that story decision was.

Fourth, he's misunderstanding what "Not every situation ends perfectly or the way you want it to end" actually means in how it should affect your narrative. His words imply that we're just mad at the ending because the film didn't end how we wanted it to, thus implying we're just a bunch of hapless dumb-farts who need to be placated.

Gahhhhhhh... there's so much to say here.

Let's start with the fact he's obviously not trying to tell a story but just do "the opposite" of storytelling as if that both made sense and was somehow enough. He seems to think that by doing so, he is being attractive or cool or badass or worse, "artistic" (go back to Hulk's comments on art to see how untrue that one is). And in the end, it is just contrarianism in service of nothing. It showcases exactly what Hulk is talking about with the false pursuits of fucking with your audience and doing the opposite for opposite's sake.

But the bigger problem with all these statements is that there is clearly no understanding of what "narrative" even means. None. His "Hollywood ending" comment shows that he actually perceives nothing about how endings work. He seems to think that anything with resolution is akin to having the characters ride off into the sunset hand-in-hand. It's asinine. Remember what Hulk said earlier about how the ending is a chance to ram home themes? Well most found footage films tend to end abruptly, but at least most of them have an ending gesture like that manages to, like, do something. This one just ends on another action beat indistinguishable from other action beats before. Both the film and his ensuing comments are enough evidence to showcase that this person could not possibly understand less of what a story is, how it works, or why it matters.

If "the ending is the conceit" then this film's conceit was total ineptitude.

So to all of you writers out there, Hulk wants you to know that storytelling is not some game where you mess with the audience. Storytelling is an art that is dependent on your sense of craft and audience response. So if you are going to throw an audience off-kilter or if you are going to do something rebellious... you have to do it for a good reason. And you have to know how to pull it off.

Hulk has a question for you: when Alfred Hitchcock made **Psycho**, was he just fucking with the audience?

It's an important question. The filmmakers may have had a desire to shake things up, but that great, rebellious moment in **Psycho** works because the entire film is constructed around it. We get a total creepy-as-shit build up. The film gives us every reason to believe it can happen. The only thing that stops us in our tracks is that, well, Marion was the main character. And then the film delivers a pure a Shakespearean third act turn that is worthy of climax. But the way the moment "works" does not stop with the deed itself. The event has a tremendous fall-out and consequences to the new characters. It spreads out far beyond what we see.

Hitchcock and his team didn't fuck with the audience just to fuck with the audience, they constructed an entire film around their inventive, unconventional decision. They played with expectation and then looked at what that playing-with-expectation actually meant.

The lesson is simple: if you want to go in bold narrative directions, you do it smart. You start with the familiar tropes and you carefully bring the audience on a journey, often to places that are uncomfortable, but you do so with a guiding hand. You can always bring an audience to an antagonistic place, but you can't do it in antagonistic way. And if you do? You better be damn sure that audience's angered reaction is the exact result you want (which is why in its most basic sense, **Human Centipede 2** "works" for its filmmaker). And then you have to follow it through to the end. You have to show the consequences. You have to show the audience that you made this unconventional choice for a reason. You have to prove that you aren't just fucking with them. That your decision had meaning and theme and import.

Anytime you branch away you have to have a reason. Quentin Tarantino gets away with scenes of long-running dialogue because he writes some of the best dialogue on the planet. And more importantly, his dialogue is full of its own narratives and stories and dispositions and all that good cinematic stuff. His conversations take you on a narrative journey. And then he understands instinctively when to dip right back into pure visceral cinema.

Essentially, you have to negotiate. The absence of one element of good narrative means you should fully embrace one of the other elements from our working definition listed in Part One. Dropping theme? It better make perfect sense for the texture, character, or reality. Dropping narrative economy and propulsion? Better make perfect sense for your theme or an important character point. And you can't just do that in every scene. You have to know when you're pushing it. You have to know what your effect will be.

One of the best movies to talk about in terms of innovation and embracing of unconventional story is the ending of **No Country for Old Men**. The film before the ending qualifies as a remarkably suspenseful revenge film. It's palpable. Visceral. Tight. And contains what is quite probably the best-filmed action that Hulk has ever seen. But with the ending it becomes something so much more. It subverts its genre needs and expectations and achieves this stunning thematic resonance. By removing the shackles of narrative restriction, the film is free to explore something more abstract, even downright poetic. It gets right to the heart of "what the film means." And as a result, what could have just been a tight, well-realized action film, instead becomes one of the best films of all time.

And it doesn't do this willy-nilly. It doesn't just decide to become artistic for artistic's sake. The entire movie was secretly full of this same kind of commentary. Heck, the entire opening secretly sets us up for ending. The only real problem is that the connections it was making and the place they were going works better for people who embrace subtlety and thematic storytelling. And for all the people who either weren't perceptive to thematic stuff or just were not that into it, the ending of **No Country** really rubbed them the wrong way. And it's because it eschewed the most basic expectations of narrative. But sometimes that's the price you pay for working in subtlety (notice the stark difference though, where **The Devil Inside** is anything but subtle and just rubs it in our face).

But the Coens understand and expect the limitations of their choices. They also understand their responsibility to deftly weave in and out narrative in order to create new thematic meanings. And they did a good enough job of it to make one of the best-acclaimed movies of all time.

The point Hulk wants you to take away is simple: the Coen Brothers may defy expectations of storytelling conventions constantly, but they do so only to engage deeper questions in life. They do so to create new vivid meanings and make truly interesting statements. Even their most bizarre comedic moments in films like **The Big Lebowski** are laced with topicality and subtext. They are making art. And their art is not based on getting a mere reaction, but crafting statements.

Or look to the greatest American filmmaker ever in Stanley Kubrick, who eschewed every convention ever, but did so in the name of pure art. Every inverting gesture had a meaning. Every bit of oddly staged production design had a semiotical construct. Every way his characters shied away from empathy and connection was a purposeful way of getting you to disconnect so you could engage in an idea. You may think he was thumbing his nose at conventional storytelling and emotion, but on the flip-side he was essentially being the most thematically responsible filmmaker of all time.

And whatever you think of the tactics of the Coen Brothers or Stanley Kubrick, Hulk can assure you they didn't sit around and go "wouldn't it be cool if?"

42. The Modern Difficulty Of Relativism

So for an entire book Hulk has talked a lot about having a purpose with your writing and the importance of saying

something with each gesture, and all the while Hulk has kept adding the caveat, “unless not saying something is your point,” or something to that effect. Hulk didn’t want to seem authoritarian or like a moralist. After all, a lot of times people don’t want to attack an audience with some after-school special tactics or archaic lessons or make a big artistic statement or do anything like that.

There’s a reason folks are averse to doing so this day and age, and that’s because it seems reductive to the great universal truth that *nothing is really true*. Most of the films that counter these conventional values of narrative are independent and / or valid art films and trying to reflect a certain understanding of post-modernism, wherein there is an emphasis on not being didactic. And to that purpose Hulk understands why they tell their stories in such a way. But it really goes beyond that. Sometimes it feels like there is this unspoken value among artists that, regardless of tact, trying to be didactic is the worst thing you can do.

It’s just... look. Hulk isn’t here to tell you what “compels you.” If that kind of statement compels you, then by all means you must follow your hearts and minds, but Hulk’s going to take a few seconds to try and explain why Hulk isn’t crazy about the idea or, at least, why you want to be careful with it.

The first reason is simple: look at everything we’ve talked about in this book. Act breaks are character choices. Character psychologies are based on wants and needs and projection. Inspiration comes from having something to say. Dramatic action. Dramatic function. The ending being the conceit. Good narratives have purpose to every moment in them, which all just means that good narratives have purpose. And the problem of so many movies with the traditional post-modern bent is that in trying to uphold the reflexive value of all actions they are thereby robbing those dramatic functions of their importance.

In other words, purposefully making a film seem like it doesn’t have a point at the end just makes for bad narrative. Say nothing of ambiguity, say nothing of trying to say a nuanced thing, it’s instead coming from that place of not trying to say anything. And thinking that others shouldn’t say anything either is, well, it’s trivializing.

The truth is that most people criticizing things as being didactic not because the story has the will to convey meaning and ideas, but because some people can say really broad, stupid things with that didacticism. Once again, let’s go back to **The Wire** as a great example with the problems of this thinking. Every single scene in that show is 100% trying to say something and convey a very specific lesson about sociology. Only the “what” of that lesson is extraordinarily complex. It’s often nuanced and humane. And it bounces off dozens of other messages and creates an accurate picture of a society in conflict. But it’s anything but ambivalent. In fact, it’s hyper-specific about everything it wants to say.

So once again we have a crisis of language. Hulk thinks being didactic is one of the core tenets of storytelling going back to fables, and yet we’ve bred a generation who is afraid to do it because they confuse the will to say something with after-school-specialism.

And as a result, Hulk reads scripts all the time where people are just so damn afraid of having something strong to say. Maybe they think they are reflecting truthfulness? Maybe they find anything else to be placating? Whatever their intentions Hulk just thinks that they don’t realize how much they are narrowing their own narrative effect. Deliberate pointlessness makes a story really, really inaccessible.

And the other reason Hulk isn’t a fan of this kind of relativism is because ... well, it’s kind of personal and feel free to disagree, but Hulk finds relativism to be really boring.

Not just dramatically, but, like, conceptually. Here’s a nuts and bolts version: post-modernism is largely grounded in the dissolution of truth. We are essentially talking about relativism, meaning Hulk’s view can’t be true and your view can’t be true, so therefore nothing is true, there is only what we believe. That’s a pretty crude way of putting it, but the important thing is that we use post-modernism to dissolve the certainty of absolutist thought.

On one hand, the practical application of post-modern thinking is pretty fucking important. It’s probably the best weapon humanity has against totalitarianism and extremism. But there is a caveat to that and Hulk hopes the following makes sense: the problem with post-modern relativism is that it was also humanity’s first problem.

“..... what?”

Okay how to put it... At the dawn of culture we didn’t have language. We pointed at things. We grunted. We ate things.

We instinctively knew how to do things. But how did we survive? We were in the figurative Tower of Babel and we couldn't communicate. *Everything was relative*. And the fact that we had no objective truths to agree on was a threat to our very survival. And then our little proto-versions of us created language. We pointed at rocks, aka those things we all saw every day, and agreed that they should be called "rocks." And from those rocks we made spear heads. We would point at those big food things and we called them "mammoths" and hunted them with our spear heads. We used our languages and definitions to start planting things like corn. To best relay these ideas we created a sequence of meanings, which are effectively just "stories." Those stories became channels to our understanding of the stars and universe. A calendar of celestial bodies stirring above us. We grew and survived because we could communicate. Because we could define things. Because we looked at a mammoth and simply agreed to call it a mammoth so that we could understand each other and come together. An agreement on language and stories was how we survived.

It was how we came out of the dark.

And thus, an attempt to define things, or an attempt to tell a truth, or an attempt to bare your soul and say something is *not an instinctual attempt to undermine relativism*. Of course we can't undermine it. It is the constant battle we wage every single day of our lives. We don't like to think about it, but we live in the dark. There isn't a single person on this planet who can know what happens to us after we die. Or if we have souls. This reality is crushing. And thus Hulk would like to submit the idea that trying to define things is not inherently a lie. It's a survival mechanism. It is the pursuit of knowledge and the foundation of science. It is the goal to pursue as much truth as we can possibly know.

And as much as post-modern relativism is here to save us from the crushing certainty of absolutism, we as human beings must also be here to save each other from abandoning definition all together. To do so would be to abandon the value of language. From a philosophy that often seems like it's trying to dig us right back down into the dark. Just as we pointed at the mammoth so we could give a word to it as food, we point at those unknowable concepts like love, anger, happiness, jealousy, and lust and give them names. We tell stories so that we can know these concepts and grow and pass on an understanding. We don't throw up our arms and say "it's all relative! So whatever!" What would happen to the scientific process if we ever gave up on finding the better answer?

We tell stories so they might be of some fucking use.

... but maybe that's just the working definition.

Okay, okay let's bring this back to a little less grandiose place: Hulk knows that a lot of post-modernism is geared around a less stringent version of the relativism Hulk talked about earlier, or that it embraces the new myth, but Hulk can count on Hulk's fingers and toes the number of films Hulk's seen that are interested in creating the new myth. Meanwhile, Hulk can count by the barrelful the number of student films that Hulk has seen in which relativism, reflexivism, and the impossibility of single perspective have been hurled onscreen with the same kind of ineffectual shrug befitting its lack of forethought. For every brilliant dalliance of post-modern reflexivism, for every truly great film Hulk has seen in which post-modern thought led its hero to shying away from absolutism of politics or something equally dangerous, Hulk has seen 50 times the amount of juvenile B.S. from someone who is just afraid to say something.

Do with this sentiment what you may. If you look at this and think Hulk is super-duper wrong, then by all means go for it. Do what compels you. Prove Hulk wrong. Find the great cinematic reflection of relativism or flippantly pointlessness. This is just a Hulk being honest about what Hulk doesn't find compelling...

The thing Hulk wants you to keep in mind is that most audiences, whether mainstream, independent, or artistic, instinctively tend to agree with Hulk on this one.

43. Adaptation

So if you ever find yourself in the position of writing in Hollywood, chances are you'll find yourself dealing with the art of adaptation. For many years, the main focus was the adapting of popular books. The practice had its own peculiarities (full-on novel-adaptation screenwriting classes would be taught and everything), but then the industry really started shying away from that focus. Now, it's all about adapting "properties." It started with old TV shows and then switched to comics, cartoons, famous characters, Twitter accounts, and even theme park rides. It wasn't about known stories, it was all about "known iconographies."

The reason why this happened isn't some big mystery. It's all about marketing a known value so you can get your awareness numbers up and that somehow becomes your justification for green-lighting a movie. Which is pretty damn meaningless in terms of making a good movie, so we'll just leave that one alone. The important thing to realize is that even while the particular talents for adapting a novel are slowly becoming less relevant, the core idea at play in adaptation is something you need to understand.

There are no set rules in adaptation, but instead there is a very specific set of conditions best expressed by a simple dichotomy.

The first part of the dichotomy is that you have to accept that there are people in the theater who want a staged, line by line re-creation of the source material and don't actually care about the experience other than that.

The second part of the dichotomy is to accept there are people there who have never read the book and could care less about faithfulness.

And even if most people are some lessened version of each side, you still have to try and please everyone, because neither gives you a sizable enough audience to be successful. Don't please the hardcore fans? They don't help you market the long play to the masses. Don't please the simple movie-goers? You won't have a successful film on any level then. Which means the art of adaptation just falls to our reliable old concept of "balance" to save us.

Basically, that just means you have to write a good movie.

The key to doing that in adaptation is understanding what you have to keep and what you don't have to keep. People always talk about how a good adaptation "captures the spirit" of the property, but what does that actually mean? It's kind of vague, right? Really, it means what Hulk been saying since the beginning of this whole damn book: *character is king*. You want the people of the property to be the same people in the film. That's everything, really. Audiences just want to recognize the characters they have come to love or be fascinated by. And if empathy truly is everything for getting your audience to invest, then getting the characters right is your primary concern. And hey, if the original property was able to resonate then that's a pretty damn good indicator that capturing the same things will cause your adaptation to resonate too!

So remember: capturing the spirit = nailing the characters.

As for the plotting? It's a negotiation. Sometimes you're fine if you go just make your own adventure, but for true adaptation you really just need to decide on the central plot-points (meaning mechanisms) that allow the functioning of the plot in the original property and incorporate them into the central structure of yours. Just remember, it's not the "what" of the plot point but "the why." Think about *the purpose* and everything we've been talking about.

What are the character decisions? What are the themes? How do the plot mechanisms accelerate at a certain point? And from there: streamline! Do everything we've talked about with economy, therefore / but, taking "written info" and making it "showing info," and merging into conflicting arcs. All the same lessons apply. It's writing all the same. The only difference being that your ability to analyze and breakdown why a story works in its original form will absolutely allow you to build a better adaptation.

Still, people worry about cramming everything into an adaptation, which Hulk readily admits can be difficult. If you need a good working example of the tactics you can use in your approach, then Hulk heartily recommends first reading John le Carre's **Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy** and then seeing the recent Tomas Alfredson film adaptation with Gary Oldman. And that's because the film is a master class in adaptation. Not because of any tonal choices (the film is remarkably subtle and quiet), but because of the expressions of plot through pure cinema. Look at the choices they make in condensing information. Entire monologues in the book are cut off and feed what we assume they must have talked about based on the next scene. It's all transitional filmmaking. A knock on the door, a file dropped on a desk, a smile, an extended gaze. Each action forwards the story. Each action reveals character. And before you know it they've taken a book that was a 5 hour miniseries adaptation and turned into a 2 hour film without missing a beat.

A master class.

44. Spec Scriptin'!

Okay, so technically a spec script is anything that is written “on spec,” meaning anything that is unsolicited material, but a production company is still reading to check out a writer. Most of the time when you’re first trying to get an agent or manager you will be writing original scripts and they will be read by these people “on spec.”

But there is a curious overlap in terminology that specifically applies to television. Because television so readily involves hiring writers for an existing show (90% of writers are working on a show that isn’t “theirs”), the industry also uses the same phrase of “spec scripts” to mean un-commissioned TV scripts for shows that already exist.

Say you want to be a TV writer. Say you want to write on a smart, dramatic TV show. So you write a fake episode of **Mad Men** and the idea is to establish that you could totally write an episode of that show to prove your mettle. But really you want to show that you can look at another person’s show and understand the characters and get the tone right. You are proving that you can take that world and craft your own unique and interesting story within it. The idea is to both impress the hell out of everyone and signify that you can play with someone else’s toys.

Which means just doing all the good writing stuff we’ve talked about here. With the caveat of a few pieces of advice Hulk will give you now on how to thread the needle of what people will be looking for...

I) Often times it’s not good to write a spec script for the *exact* show you’re trying to get a job on. It’s sort of a weird circumstance. You would imagine it was the most logical thing in the universe. But the people approving you and hiring you are often *too close* to the show to truly be able to separate themselves from what you are writing. They know the entire universe so well that they will take it personally. They are guarded with it. And in those circumstances it’s just so easy to go off the reservation from their specific way of writing the show.

II) So that means you pick a show that’s *like* the show you would want to work for. Look for overlaps! Look for the kinds of shows that those people like! Be smart about it! But at the same time...

III) Don’t pick a show that you do not know well. It happens more than you would think and it’s something that you can’t fake. Either you know the history and tone of a show and that’s clear or you don’t. At the same time...

IV) Don’t go nuts trying to show off how much you know! A lot of spec scripts will try and cram in every history or reference ever. Unless you’re **Arrested Development** or something where callbacks are woven into the fabric of the show, don’t go nuts! Heck... even then.

V) Also, don’t go nuts with your fan-fic-ing inclination for the show. What does that mean? Well, put it this way. When **Friends** was first on the air the writers would always get spec scripts where it was clear the writer just wanted to make two of their favorite characters hook up... don’t do that. Quite bluntly, it’s amateur hour because you’re instantly proving you’re a masturbatory and indulgent writer. So try to avoid new hook-ups between the characters. It just always, always plays bad.

VI) Or less offensively, a lot of times spec script writers include some *major event* that dramatically changes a character or the plot. It’s an understandable inclination, because you want to write a big, impressive, dramatic script... but really your job is to show that you can uphold the rules and norms of the universe you are trying to write for. You want to prove you can uphold the status quo... not change it. It can even be a little thing. Some years ago Hulk wrote a spec that Hulk thought was sharp and upheld the universe, but it used a narrative device (centralizing around a previously unknown character) that many felt was too radical a departure for that show... perhaps Hulk was just too inspired by “The Zeppo.” (That’s a reference!)

VII) Lastly, remember the difficulty of aiming too high. You know how Hulk mentioned **Mad Men** as a possible option? Well, one thing you should keep in mind is that Matthew Weiner is one of the best writers on the planet. It would be like walking out on to a major league field and trying to no-hit an opposing line-up. Hulk isn’t telling you to aim low... Hulk’s just saying to *be aware of what you’re attempting...* because you’d be surprised how many are not.

So that’s a lot of things to try and balance, right? Of course it is, but would you expect anything else in the major leagues of writing? Like everything Hulk has told you so far, achieve balance in your writing. Negotiate what you most value and account for all the possible results. Writing is about making difficult choices, which is oddly enough the same thing that makes compelling characters.

But enough tangential thoughts... it's time to address one of the trickiest, most problematic concerns in writing...

45. How To Approach Plot Holes And Movie Logic

Whenever people talk about how stupid movies are they like to talk about plot holes as if they are *the reason* the movie was bad. Hulk understands this inclination. Movies definitely need to have a certain level of logic to work because we are, after all, logical beings who need to make sense of what is happening around us. But what Hulk would like to prove to you in the following chapter is that plot holes (at least in the way people use the term) actually have nothing to do with whether or not stories are good or bad.

They just become things we talk about in trying to explain them.

The problem with talking about plot holes in the first place is there seems to be a lot of confusion about what they even are. Half the stuff that gets called a plot hole these days isn't even close, but a true plot hole is actually a very nuanced thing that Hulk believes can still be defined in a clear, obvious way (this is Hulk's personal definition): a plot hole is a crucial gap or inconsistency in a storyline (as presented) that prevents the proper functioning of the plot or central characterization (as presented).

The words "crucial" and "prevent" are both key for reasons that Hulk will explain in a bit, but for now note that the two words "as presented" are also rather important. Because those words prevent us from diving into a whole bunch of extraneous questions and they allows us to accept the rules of the world on a conditional basis.

Think of it like this: in mathematical proofs, you always start with a series of rules and information. These rules are accepted as true and called "givens," which you will then use to solve the proof step by step. And in a way, when we start a film we are essentially accepting the rules of the world as a kind of "given." For instance, a sci-fi film may explain in the beginning why this particular world is different and how that society operates. A more concrete (and famous) example of sci-fi "givens" would be Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics (and if you'll notice, the subsequent breakdown of those three rules is what creates the chief conflict in his stories). But this doesn't have to be the case for these unique sci-fi worlds. The idea of established givens should work even for more emotional realms of a movie world, like melodramas and comedies. For instance, it can be that "this character can talk to the camera" or "people behave absurdist" in this world. Sometimes those rules can be about character consistency and established feelings, like "Dad hates Mom" or "our main character is unpopular." These behaviors and dynamics are *givens* for the world we are entering, and then we operate within the context of the movie from there.

Because as movies go on, we get more and more information (whether for plotting, character, or theme), and this creates more and more understanding of the world. But a plot hole occurs when the new information given is fundamentally countering the old information *with no eventual accounting for why*. Do you see the distinction? A lot of times we can have a character suddenly switch motivations, but this has to be explained for us to accept it. And the more the switch makes sense based on other information presented before or after, the better we feel about it.

But the thing to understand here is that the kinds of plot holes that actually matter are the plot holes that hurt *the functioning of the movie*, meaning the plot holes that derail the in-moment experience and *actively* prevent you from enjoying the film right there as you are in the theater.

So in that spirit, let's be clear - a plot hole is **not** any of the following:

- I) A blatant movie-stopper
- II) Something that only seems confusing in retrospect
- III) An event that simply occurs off-screen
- IV) A loose end (though it can be)
- V) A real-life inaccuracy

So let's talk about each in order...

I) It is not a blatant movie stopper.

A friendly and kind acquaintance of Hulk's was once discussing the problems he saw in **Looper** and he asked the logical question: "*why doesn't the future mob just drop their targets in the middle of the ocean?*"

The simplest answer?

Because then there would be no movie.

Glibness aside, it really is the only answer that matters. You can stop virtually any single movie on the planet (invented sci-fi world or not) with a simple solution that nullifies the core conflict. But we don't go to theaters to watch people come up with the best solutions. We go because we want to watch a damn movie. And we watch movies to experience drama, laughter, dizzying highs, sadness, tears, and sympathy. And in order to experience these things we *must* have situations in which the simplest and most logical solution isn't present. In fact, we have to watch people do the wrong thing. We have to watch people fuck up. We have to see their wants and desires become entangled in a situation where they have to make a bad choice... We call these sorts of situations "conflict" and they happen to be *the entire basis* of good storytelling and drama.

On top of that the frequent problem with going down the logic rabbit hole is that Hulk has a million good reasons the ocean solution isn't even a logical fix to begin with, but none of them have to do with actual storytelling, just logic itself. For instance, Hulk would argue there's a pretty damn good reason for the future mob's use of looper hitmen - because mob killings are all about "kill confirmation," having someone responsible who can attest to the relative success of the hit and be responsible if it fails (it's actually the same reason people laugh at Bond villains who leave our hero in an easily escapable situation and just presume he'll die with no one watching. There's no kill confirmation). And the ocean solution ignores this rather logical policy of the mob. When he was presented with this logical counterpoint, said acquaintance then cited that the ocean solution was still preferable because with the looper system, we see the hitmen "fuck up" a lot. Which is not only inaccurate, but another misunderstanding of the very purpose of conflict. In fact, we actually see the looper hitman system as a wholly functional enterprise and the only two unsuccessful incidents are actually the sole *driving force of the conflict in the movie*. Again what is being missed here is that the disturbance of natural, logical order to things is actually the fundamental approach to creating conflict in movies. It's all "everything was okay, and then this inciting incident happened so it wasn't anymore!"

Far more importantly, the ocean solution has absolutely nothing to do with making it a "better" movie. It would in fact make the movie infinitely worse. It would create a non-story. It is the failure to realize that every single conflict scenario you have ever seen onscreen probably had a more logical solution than the one that plays out in the narrative, but that truly doesn't matter.

That sentiment should be blindingly obvious to all of us, and yet we still keep reverting to the place where we ask those logical questions. Especially with horror movies. Now, this is largely because we place ourselves in the stalkee's shoes a great deal in those kinds of movies and actively look for solutions on our own, but the real answer to "why didn't they just do _____" in a horror movie is always *to make the most effective, dramatic scare*, which, lest we forget, is the entire reason we are in the theater. Of course, there are a million other things that have to do with making an effective scare or an emotionally effective scene, but Hulk assures you they often don't have all that much to do with plot logic either.

So in Hulk's mind, these overt logic questions that are "movie-stoppers" or "scare stoppers" or "drama stoppers" are really not even worth getting into that much, because they undermine the experience we are there for and fundamentally misunderstand the goal of a dramatic, compelling experience.

II) It is not something that only seems confusing in retrospect.

This one is actually the most complicated, but it is also important because it gets at the heart of the movie "function" part of Hulk's definition. And the best way to address this part is to have a little talk about Christopher Nolan.

Christopher Nolan is pretty damn well respected for the most part, right? We can at least agree with that. Most people think he makes proficient and reasonably effective movies. Still, he is often the subject of a lot of plot hole talk. For instance, a number of people have spent the last several years laughing about how **The Dark Knight** doesn't make a lick of logical sense when you look at the plot as a whole. And when you look at it in a rigid plot-based way, yes, that is very true. The Joker's plan for much of the movie is ridiculously implausible and dependent on incredible amounts of convenience and luck. But here's the thing about all of that... It really doesn't end up mattering.

Why? Because Nolan isn't that interested in having it all make sense. He's interested in entertaining us in as dramatic a way as possible, while keeping everything thematically interesting. And he did a pretty damn good job of it if you ask

Hulk (and the legions of people who first walked out of the theaters proclaiming it a masterpiece). The plotting mechanism at play was fairly obvious: Nolan was just building a cat and mouse game of increasing escalation where we follow new pieces of information from scene to scene in an ultra-enthralling and propulsive fashion. But it worked. Boy howdy did it work. Scenes move along with not just fantastic pacing, but fantastic *purpose*. There is a sense of intrigue and character motive that showcases what a master filmmaker can do. Sure, the movie's overall logic doesn't quite work, but it still flows beautifully and engages us on other levels which are far more important.

What are those other levels? Hulk argues that what saves **The Dark Knight** from having a thread of ill-conceived logic undo everything is the fact that the *ideology and theme* are so damn logical, resonant, and focused that they utterly carry us through the movie in terms of our understanding and comprehension. Yes, The Joker's plan is chaotic, but his crystalline approach to the ideas behind that chaos, the pure anarchy and his goals of breaking down Batman, Harvey Dent and the rest of Gotham are so absolutely clear (and terrifying) that we can completely hang our "attention and interest" on them for every second. Hell, we're downright fascinated by it. And please take special care to note that almost all of The Joker's games are built around ethical choices that directly engage both the characters and the audience too; the movie practically feels like a tightrope walk for our moral souls. It's because of the moment-to-moment energy and the clarity of a mental connection that **The Dark Knight** gets hailed as a masterpiece.

But you'll notice that Hulk talked about a situation being only "confusing in retrospect." everyone who tended to complain about the logical problems of **The Dark Knight** only seemed to do so long *after* the first time they saw it (and generally loved it). In fact, it didn't really pop up a lot until most people had experienced multiple re-watches at home or on hbo. With plot hole hunters, this is very common. It means they've had time to process the logic and now they can suddenly see the seams. And that's when (because they think movies have to be defined by logic) they begin to think that great movie they loved was perhaps not so great.

Not only is that a shame, but it is so, so, so missing the point of what a movie is supposed to do. If a story didn't need the logic to function like that the first time, then it really doesn't need it at all. Because so often the eschewing of logic is done in the name of giving you a dramatic and thematically resonant experience (that probably made you fall in love with the movie in the first place). And that's everything. That's what pulls you in. That's what brings you satisfaction. Drama is by far the most effective tool in connecting with people. To fulfill the purpose of storytelling and translate life's narrative... So why do we judge the logic of a movie differently in retrospect? Why do we say "shit, this movie makes less sense the ninth time we watched it!" Drama is simply the gateway to everything we need from a movie. And even though there is a plethora of films that reward multiple watches for either cerebral, detail-oriented, or humorous purposes, it's *that first watch* that counts for everything in terms of whether or not the dramatic function works.

III) It is not an event that simply occurs off-screen.

Something that happens off-screen and is later alluded to is not a plot hole.

To reiterate: movies are things that are edited. Therefore movies create inherent, *intentional* gaps of information that are omitted because the viewer doesn't need to see them. Heck, movies bring us into fully realized worlds with their own histories. And the thing about these histories and mythologies is that we don't necessarily need to know them, but simply *feel* them.

All of this should be obvious, but you would not believe the number of times Hulk has been asked about a "plot hole" that involved something that was explained but not shown... yeah those are not plot holes. Hulk just had to acknowledge this and move on.

IV) It is not a loose end (though it can be).

Somewhat confusing matters is the subject of a loose end, or an unresolved plot-line or character arc at the end of the film.

So let's qualify it like this: the mere existence of a loose end is not necessarily a plot hole, but there are indeed loose ends that can be plot holes. The problem is that there's a huge range of what qualifies as a loose end. Because of this gray nature, Hulk could just sit back and argue that it's all a "case by case" basis, which is certainly true... But that's not really all that *helpful*, so the following is Hulk's puny attempt to argue that the kinds of loose ends that actually qualify as plot holes have nothing to do with *want*, but instead with *function* (are you sensing a theme here?)

What does Hulk mean by *want*? Well, for instance, you may have *wanted* a likable comic relief character to get a proper send-off, but if they serve their function earlier then they may not be necessary for the film's ending, especially if their resolution would be tonally disparate. Or perhaps you may have *wanted* two characters to hook up, but instead the film is interested in telling a different kind of story and left that love unexplored on purpose (or has them committing to other life needs). And the thing about loose ends is that they tend to bother us not because we want what we want, but because as an audience we like *everything to have a reason*. And quite honestly, we're kind of right to want everything to have a reason. Hulk even argues that everything having a grand, plot-based purpose is actually a surefire sign of good storytelling, but the truth is that you simply cannot wrap *everything* up in a film without letting all the air out of your emotional conclusion and poignancy. Ultimately, it becomes a question of function and balance.

As a writer you will struggle with this constantly. What is worth wrapping up? What is not? Hulk advises you to look to existing, effective art to find a balance. J.K. Rowling could have attempted to detail what happened to every single character in the Harry Potter universe, but you can't do that without really *undermining the emotional end for Harry*. Which means the question of "what gets resolved" (particularly in a big saga) is largely a question of negotiation. And in the end the author is choosing what gets wrapped up and what doesn't and we have to understand that. The things we *want to happen* must often be left aside for what the story *needs to happen* (and note that Rowling explained most of her extended epilogue outside of book form to give that added resolution for the minor characters later).

Naturally, this all becomes an even more nuanced subject of loose ends when we get into the topic of purposeful ambiguity. Look. A lot of audiences hate ambiguity (specifically regarding endings) almost on principle. In fact, it makes them downright angry. And on one hand, Hulk gets it. Hulk talks about the purpose of storytelling and Hulk has seen a lot of ambiguous endings that have no other bigger idea behind them than "it's ambiguous!" or "you guess what happened!" Oftentimes, the creators think that ambiguity itself works because it gets to that inherent post-modern truth or relativity. And quite honestly, Hulk finds a lot of ambiguity to be kind of sophomoric (as one very, very smart person once said to Hulk regarding a terrible ambiguous ending Hulk wrote: "C'mon. You're a big boy. Have your character make decisions.") But that doesn't mean ambiguity can't be completely profound, either.

Hulk has talked about the end of **No Country for Old Men** ad nauseum, but that movie made so many beautiful statements about how things can't always end the way we want, and it shows the damage we will do if we chase those "ends." Call 'em what you will: money, justice, power - men will pursue them to the ends of the earth. And the movie is really about making peace with ambiguity and all the loose ends of life in a truly meaningful way. But that's just a stellar example of its use.

And honestly, Hulk kind of adored most of **Lost's** use of ambiguity for much of the series' run. It was often buried into the themes and characterization in a way that felt largely natural and compelling (including the few rare cases of great use of *deus ex machina*). But the ambiguity thing became slightly problematic when they went in a purposefully didactic direction in the finale. Hulk won't get into all that (phew), but while they were trying to clearly adhere to their central theme, their didactic explanation of it came off rather curt and cruelly withholding. Hulk understands this wasn't the intention, but they didn't realize that ambiguity is something best experienced and not told.

But perhaps the best example on the subject of loose ends is **The Sopranos**. No show was ever more content with pushing the limits of audience indulgence and withholding want more than that particular show. People like violence? You get an episode like "University" where it becomes so cruel and ugly that you cannot abide it. People want more drama? You get the entire slow burn of Season 4. David Chase wasn't being a dick about it either, folks. He was pointing at us and trying to get us to look inward. He was always questioning our morals and getting to the heart of life's narrative. He was asking why we indulged in the killings and the nudity and what we got out of it. He didn't try our patience with slower episodes to be a jerk, but instead to get us to explore bigger forms of storytelling and the amazing nuances of all the characters at play. He wanted us to fucking care. He wanted us to be better viewers. He wanted us to get outside ourselves, like so much of the psychology that had become fundamental to the show's text. And when it all came to an end and everyone was expecting all the stories to get wrapped up, he instead went outward. He got esoteric. He went with the most open-ended, symbolically driven, brilliant cinematic experience that brought us right into the head of tony soprano. Hulk says it all the time, "the ending is the conceit," and the ending of that show fully expressed what it was really about: bringing you into the mind of a man who is emotionally connected, rather unbalanced and morally askew.

And yet, there were some people pissed off with the ending of **The Sopranos** 'cause they never came back to the random crazy Russian guy who was running around in the woods somewhere... And oh yeah, that whole cut to black thing drove most of America crazy. And truth be told, Hulk gets it. That was a really provoking move (especially without the title card). **The Sopranos** was cerebrally brilliant and often very involving emotionally, but Hulk gets why some found it

dramatically unsatisfactory. But to Hulk's point; David Chase wasn't interested in just giving a dramatically satisfactory ending. He could have done that in his sleep. He wanted to push us into an area we weren't comfortable with. He wanted us to explore new boundaries of storytelling. He wanted us to embrace the ideas behind Tony Soprano and why we were even watching in the first place.

When you are dealing with these loose end questions in your own writing, Hulk wants you to really dig in and ask "Why did the filmmaker do this?" These things are rarely unintentional, so ask yourself: "Why was it not addressed? Was it really all that important? What are they saying by that?" And these questions may give you the answers and possibly the dramatic catharsis you need, if you are open to them.

V) It is not a real-life inaccuracy.

You.

Yes, you sitting there reading this book. Guess what? You are probably an expert in something. Maybe you are a molecular biologist. Maybe you are an electrical engineer. Maybe you like muscle cars. Maybe you've seen every Bergman film. Maybe you know every word to The Replacements' oeuvre. Maybe you know the ins and outs of every episode of **Avatar: The Last Airbender**. Whatever it is, you probably know more about something than most other people. And when you see someone talking about that subject or dramatizing it in some way, you have to understand that the person may *not* be an expert in the same way you are. And that means you have to be willing to give a little leeway. Especially in how you watch movies.

Because writing and making movies well is really, really, really fucking hard. Like harder than anything you can ever imagine. And chances are that writer or director has thrown themselves into whole worlds and done countless amounts of research (again, cinema is the lens of *exploring everything about the human experience*) and beyond the individual effort, we have the entire aforementioned departments devoted to getting things right.

But in the community process of filmmaking things can get missed. Or things can be ignored in the face of some other artistic choice. So when you're dealing with someone who is not an expert like you, who is just trying to make the best choice for the experience of the movie, then there has to be a sense of understanding with all of it. This does not mean accepting it if they spit in the entire face of what the subject means, but it does mean sometimes accepting it if they fudge details in the name of effective drama. Remember, why are you in the theater? Chances are it's not to watch seamless historical or factual integration.

And as a writer you are going to have problems with this dilemma. Because some people aren't going to know what you're putting on screen is wrong. And some people are *very much* going to know that what you're putting on screen is wrong. And it's hard to please them both. So while Hulk told you to research your heart out, and in an ideal scenario all that is factually accurate will feed itself into the correct dramatic choice, but often it will not. So at a certain point you are going to have to make a choice: do the dramatic thing or do the logical, factual thing.

Look to an example. Take Alfonso Cuarón's **Gravity**. It's a great film that very much captures some realistic aspects of science (the lack of sound in space, the dangers of space debris) but fudges on others (the relative distances between spaces stations aren't manageable distances to travel in the way they are shown). Why did he follow some logical rules and not others? Because he took the things that mattered in terms of conveying a realistic, terrifying experience and he ignored the ones that would greatly impair his ability to tell a dramatic story. He had to make a choice, and to resolve it he asked himself, "Why is my audience in the theater? What am I trying to convey?"

* * *

Perhaps the most important argument for why you should not overly focus on plot holes is that we only seem to be enraged over them when a movie is bad. Funny, isn't it?

We walk out of a movie like **Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen** with this feeling of relative horror in our guts over the nonsensical thing that we have just witnessed. And when it's time to explain why we have that feeling, we use our logical brains to find the apparent faults. And because our brains are logical, we look for logic. We talk about the fact there's no way a Transformer could take a real-life lady form and how that's never addressed. We talk about characters being in places they shouldn't. We talk about nonsensical geography. All those things are valid observations and some are true blue plot holes. But **Transformers ROTF(L)** sucks because it is a terribly told story with endless bloat, no

momentum, paper thin characterization, no character consistency, no actual relationships, poorly articulated conflicts, zero sense of drama, a weird-as-hell tone, and a whole lot of sexism and racism to boot. But to articulate all that to someone, you need to be pretty well-versed in the language of drama and character and all the other stuff Hulk talks about in this book. Just know that movies don't suck because of some logical hiccup.

Meanwhile, we walk out **The Dark Knight** and we proclaim it to be a masterpiece. Sure, that movie doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but that doesn't matter because the movie is 100% grounded in character purpose and theme. We adore it. And unlike **ROTF(L)**, it is written with an assured hand, carefully building to all its points and moments of dramatic emphasis. The logic and goal will more or less makes sense from moment to moment, and that's why we don't care if it doesn't make sense in retrospect.

The dynamic between these two movies illustrates everything Hulk is trying to convey to you in this chapter. As a writer, you will be brandishing a double-edged sword. You will want your story to make sense. To be well-researched. To be factual. And hey, if you are making a film like **Primer** (which is largely about the cerebral component of the story and makes the science front and center), then these elements will matter more than usual. But the kind of truth that will always need to resonate more is an emotional and visceral one, not a factual one. For all of the much deserved credit for accurate science, **Primer** is a great movie because it articulates desire, fear, want, the will to control, and the complete loss of that control. It all works toward the purpose of storytelling. We don't go to the movies to watch a logical exercise play out in front of us. We go to be enthralled. To see something speak to our souls and emotions.

But as a writer, how do you know when to do which and how?

There is no great answer. All Hulk can say is that writing is about making choices. Most screenwriting books will tell you "Do this!" or "Do that!" As if there was one magic answer, but it's not the case. Some choices fix one problem and inadvertently hurt another aim you may have. So it's all about making that choice of what you want to accomplish, why, and how you think it helps your story. Still, given everything Hulk has learned about movies, here's Hulk's advice on which way you should be leaning:

Worry more about character holes. Worry about emotional holes. Worry about motivation holes. Worry about inspiration holes. Worry about drama holes. Worry about theme holes. Worry about momentum holes. Worry about pacing holes.

And worry less about plot holes.

46. Writing Is Re-writing

One of the big problems people have in writing is paralysis.

There are two forms. The paralysis that comes from a blank white sheet of paper where a scene should be. The other paralysis comes from the words actually being on the page and having no idea what to do with them.

In both cases, there's just something so daunting about the prospect of their being unfinished or unformed. Our brains want the words to be perfect; we want them to convey exactly what we intend. But they won't ever be perfect, will they? So what is the point of being paralyzed? So here's Hulk's advice for both forms of paralysis:

Just write the first draft no matter what.

Don't care if it's good. Don't care if it even works. Don't care even if it's gobbledygook. Just get it done. It doesn't matter. Get it all up on the page because no one ever has to see it. Remove the paralysis. Get in a place so you can see it all before you. So you can see what needs to be done and how it needs to be changed.

And then? Do, like, 7 rewrites... at least.

Because the simplest truth is that a first draft is nothing. It is not proof you have written a story, but proof you have written a certain number of pages. Hulk has never really read a good first draft of anything. So the way Hulk always likes to write is to just get a first draft over and done with so that Hulk can then be on Hulk's way with all the fun editing process.

And editing is *fun*.

Really, it is! There is the old adage that "writing is re-writing." Hulk feels it is true because that is when you get to shape the actual story. When it's a bad script (and they are all bad at first) you can reshape it through sheer commitment to making it a good script. And the best part about refining your script is, you know, you can still make great changes with zero negative consequences (unlike when you start filming). Hulk loves editing scripts. It's when the story actually feels alive.

Paul Thomas Anderson talked about writing once and said, to paraphrase, that writing is like ironing. You have this rumpled mess that's still a shirt and everything, but you keep going over it again and again until it's smooth. Each pass straightens the shirt, accomplishing its job until you have exactly what you need.

"So yeahyeahyeah, edit a lot. Got it, Hulk. But how do you know when you're done?"

Well, we'll get to that. First we have to talk about:

47. When & How To Disregard These Guidelines

In the beginning of this book, Hulk said these chapters were all guidelines, not rules. And Hulk meant it.

Your idea. Your story. The thing that compels you.

These are what matter.

So everything you write should cater to making those things resonate. You may have noticed that throughout all these guidelines, Hulk kept bringing up exceptions to rules. Sometimes they were examples of guideline exceptions that worked and sometimes they were examples where it didn't work. The ones that didn't work were usually the result of haphazard, unconscious reactions or flippant, counterintuitive gestures. They were the results of artists who didn't really understand the conventions and story devices they were utilizing. But all the exceptions that worked did because they knew how to negotiate what they were trying to accomplish. They abandoned one element of our good narrative definition to deeply explore another element of our definition. The good exceptions can always negotiate and approximate in the name of a more impressive dramatic function, whether it is plot, context, character, texture, theme, etc.

So do what makes sense for the kind of story you want to tell. Understand the mechanisms at play and you can accomplish anything with them.

But you have to understand them and know how to use them first.

Be willing to say "fuck big, epic battles in the last act! They tend to let me down!" if that's what your story calls for. Tarantino's **Kill Bill Vol. I** knew that after the battle against the 88, he couldn't top it action-wise. So he had a brilliant 5 minute monologue, summing up the entire viewpoint of the character, followed by an equally climactic discussion over dinner, and finally 5 *seconds* of intense fighting... And it was a hundred times more interesting than any possible battle. He did what made sense for his story.

So do what makes sense for *your* story.

Mike Leigh's **Happy Go Lucky** eschews every rule of traditional romantic comedies to say something and opts for a system of character reveals instead of dramatic function, but in doing so he created a movie that used our own expectations and movie-watching prejudices against us, all in the name of delivering a beautiful statement about the nature of life and happiness.

Do what makes sense for your story.

Animal House essentially stops the movie's forward motion in any conventional sense in order to have a full-on dance number to "Shout." It halts the narrative, but it still succeeds only because the sequence is pure joy from start to finish.

Do what makes sense for your story.

The ending of **No Country for Old Men** tosses aside all narrative propulsion to wax philosophical on the nature of life and resolution itself. It pokes inward at each of the characters, cutting to the bone of their essence, even if it lets the big cathartic story gestures happen off-screen. It gets away with doing this because the storytellers knew how to take that audience disappointment and directly address it. They knew they could make us understand with a resonant final monologue about two dreams.

Do what makes sense for your story.

Shane Carruth's **Primer** gleefully breaks every single rule about narrative, concept, and coherence. As such, there are some people *who can't even watch it*. But for some folks, he manages to create one of the most brazen, interesting films ever made. It so concentrates on the concepts of scientific veracity that it captures its resonant thematic truths through the subject itself (much like the **Zodiac** and **Contagion** examples), only his subject is one of the most complex theoretical concepts on the planet. This completely unapologetic treatment of scientific accuracy-via-plotting results in a stunning, distinct, and completely original film. The filmmaker pursued an uncommon view that *compelled* him and thus revealed a new view that *compelled* us.

Do what makes sense for your story.

But just know this... Every single rule or guideline that is being broken in the examples listed has damn good reasons for why. It's never "just because it would be neat." They weren't making some totally pedestrian movie and then broke a rule because "it's more real!" Even if going with their gut was the thing that brought them to this creative decision, they all eventually had a logic and sense of how to make it work.

These examples of successful exceptions worked because the exceptions make complete sense for those stories and are handled responsibly. It's almost as if the story *had* to go to these creative places in order to see their conceits through to the end.

But the biggest problem with how everyone is breaking the rules nowadays is not because it's robbing us of traditional narrative power (though that sucks), it's because no one seems to even understand *why the rules are even there*. If they don't know what the rule says and how it works, they therefore can't understand what *breaking the rule* says either. They're just trying to be different. Hulk's already explained why that's so problematic but worse, there are a lot of filmmakers who really don't even know what the rules are anymore.

There's got to be a reason for all of this, right? Why don't we know the rules anymore? What happened? And why do we just slam forward with this faux-understanding of filmmaking?

It all speaks to an evolution of cinema. If you forgive Hulk for indulging in this bit of a history lesson, but back in the golden age of Hollywood everyone pretty much knew the narrative rules. Movies had a very set craft. They knew all the beats. Writers were all stabled in the studio system and they would even have different roles. There would be a structure guy. A dialogue guy. The director had a role. Movies and storytelling were, essentially, on an assembly line. Yes, this produced a lot of films that were similar, but it also produced movie after movie *that just worked, dammit*, and showed off top-notch quality craft. And besides, all the best writers / filmmakers of that era knew exactly how to sneak subversion into their work. Even their artistic inclinations could flourish.

But the '60s and '70s changed the paradigm. The system had been "working" so well for so long, but a good deal of storytellers and studio folks got lazy within those constructs. Which means movies in general got lazy too. When this fact was coupled with serious changes in the counter-culture, it resulted in the audience genuinely tiring of the Hollywood system. New audiences wanted an alternative and something that felt resonant to them. So the movies turned to new filmmakers. They didn't have resources so the construction was messy. Natural. Outdoors. Thus, the style of movies broke the mold, too. The textures, stories, ideas all resonated in a perfect way for the time and place.

Of course, the huge success of some of these rag-tag blockbusters in the '70s suddenly put dollar signs in the eyes of big business and paved the way for another round of studio dominance, all done through the homogenized, Wall Street-centric 1980s. But again, things changed. We had another reaction to "The Man" with the '90s independent film boom. Again the films went messy. Natural. Outdoors. But alas, the independent movement was homogenized again as corporations are now running "indie studios" too.

The purpose of all this history is to highlight the fact there have been ebbs and flows to the nature of the business for... pretty much always. There is always a dichotomy: to work within the system, or to work outside the system. Depending on the direction of the trend it makes it easier to do one or the other, but storytellers always seem to have an implicit desire to snub the dominant culture or popular models and embrace the most artistic constructs and forms. It is an idolization of perpetual rebellion. The 1990s' independent filmmakers rebelled against the homogenized '80s model, but they were also in love with the '60s and '70s poets of their day, and sought to emulate them.

It's all very romantic-sounding... But the problem with this, and why no one seems to give a shit about the rules anymore, is that we have fallen in love with the *cadence* of this rebellious work.

Think about the '90s boom. Tarantino has had hundreds of emulators, but the reason no one comes close to being as good as him is they only take the tangible stuff from his films. The cool suits. The swears. The out-of-order storytelling. The ironic sense of music and bloody gunfights. They get the idea that people talk, but not *how* they talk. They miss the very simple elements of narrative propulsion, objectives, and clear stakes. His storytelling isn't out of order for no good reason, but instead to reveal the story in a fascinating thematic evolution. People obsesses over his cadence, which is totally neat and stuff, but it's not why his films *work*.

This has always been true. People rip off Altman, Scorsese, Spielberg, Lucas, etc. But the reason those rip-offs feel so false is not because they are derivative, but because they fail to recognize the most basic dynamics of good narrative storytelling. Let's look at super-recent examples of both:

Super 8 usurps all the language and cadence of Spielberg's films, but it fails because it doesn't know how to make the monster elements connect thematically to the story (unlike **Jaws** and **ET**). Really, it doesn't get two central components of our good narrative definition.

Attack the Block succeeds because it takes the inspiration of Carpenter and Dante and filters those motifs and approach into its own personal story and texture. Plus it has deep thematic ideas. It gets all four components of Hulk's good narrative definition.

Story rules. Cadence is overrated.

And because Hulk has to acknowledge the exception for just about everything, yes the cadence/style of your script and film are great tools for speaking to certain audiences. But stylization is not nearly as critical as the intention and honesty of your well-meaning story. It doesn't matter where you come from and who you're working for, you can be operating subversively within the system, or you can be chucking rocks from the outside with an independent bent. You can be telling a traditional story or you can be using a wildly inventive meta form. It really makes no difference to Hulk.

The meaning of the story, and its ability to resonate for the audience, is what makes the narrative work. Hulk doesn't care what kind of conceptual story you are telling, or what structure you are using... Just think about what you are saying. Approach your stories in terms of mind, body, and soul. Ask yourself questions. What does this action mean? What am I implying with this character's behavior?

Know when you're following the rules and know when you're breaking them.

Know who you are reaching and why.

Be conscious.

Be smart.

And be you...

Part Six - How To Write A Screenplay –Script-Specific Instruction

Of course, there is also the format of the screenplay itself!

Holy hell! Can you believe we're finally here? Hulk apologizes that Hulk waited all the way until part six to talk about this, but it is because the fundamentals of good storytelling are way, waaaaaaaay more important than what basically amounts to *a matter of proper formatting*. And the things you are about to learn in this section are really simple and easily applied.

But please do not take this statement to mean that Hulk thinks formatting and screenplay etiquette are *unimportant*, as they can actually help you write the most functional, readable screenplay possible, it's just the solutions to achieving this are much more clear and direct. Basically, there's much less nuance. But it is still incredibly important.

Because while most of Hulk's previous advice was stuff that helped you write compelling stories, Hulk promises you that this section will help you the most when it comes to *actually selling your scripts!*

So let's get started:

48. You Need To Understand Grammar And Sentence Structure

That may seem obvious, but do you realize how many scripts Hulk reads where it is clear that the person does not have a lot of experience *actually writing and composing sentences?*

If that's the case then it doesn't matter how good a story you tell, you will not be hired. Seriously. It doesn't matter if you understand a lot about cinema, screenwriting is writing. It is your trade and chosen profession. You cannot just be a screenwriter and think cinematically. You have to have mastery over the written word.

After all, when you sell a screenplay you are really being hired for *your ability to write*. It's not just for the script itself, especially because from then on in there will probably be a lot of re-writes during pre-production. If you cannot compose a sentence on the fly, if you cannot work quickly, then you will be in big trouble and probably left in the dust immediately so they can bring someone in who can actually do these things. Trust Hulk on this one. So many young writers will sell something and not understand why they are immediately dismissed. Sometimes it is genuine bad luck, but many other times it is because the writers have a good idea, but do not know how to write. So please, please understand that you are not being hired for what you have already written. You are being hired for your ability to write.

And that means you need to understand grammar and usage.

So get out there. Read books. Like actual books. They will reinforce your understanding of language better than anything else. Soak them up. Keep your grammar guides and usage dictionaries right beside your computer. Don't be lazy. Look stuff up. Consult usage. Hulk's done it about 275 times in the process of writing this book. That's totally allowed! But also don't think of the ability to look things up as a cure-all. Use it repeatedly over the course of your life so you get better. Learn how to master our language. And like everything, then you can know how to break rules for effect (our running theme). Do that and you will be able to make up fun words and do all that inventive linguistic stuff we want to do from the very beginning. But you have to know grammar and sentence structure to do so.

And beyond the basics of language, there are other basic things you need to know, like what scene headings are, how to number scenes, etc. So let's get to that stuff:

49. Screenplay Format Basics!

Please note: if you are writing a script and have any intention of doing something with it you should absolutely, positively use screenwriting software. No question. Suck it up and buy your own copy, too. Hulk uses Final Draft and Hulk loves it. The last thing you want to do while writing is waste time on formatting. And screenwriting software will

do all the formatting for you. Please. Absolutely buy the software. Don't download it either because Hulk swears you can get in trouble with the W.G.A. over that. It's complicated to explain, but just know it's not worth it. If you don't have a lot of money, save up and buy it. If you want to be a writer, this is part of the sacrifice. Strive for it.

But just so you know what you're doing without that software, here's Hulk's no-bullshit quick guide to formatting a screenplay. To start, the following are the only (needed) line designations:

- Header
- Action Line
- Character
- Dialogue
- Character Parenthetical
- Dialogue Parenthetical
- Transition
- Over Black;
- Scene Numbers

That's seriously it. There's nothing else necessary for writing a screenplay.

So let's go one by one....

I) Header

It's an all caps line (yay!) At the top of your scene. The first part tells you whether the scene is an exterior (EXT.) Or interior (INT.) Followed by the location, followed by a dash and then the time of day. It looks like this:

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT"

Things to consider: when a scene transitions from interior to exterior or vice versa without a break you can write "INT. / EXT." Also, some people get into discussions about how detailed you want to be when talking about the location. Hulk tries to keep it as simple as possible (as it's easier for someone to read), but sometimes if there's a lot of location hopping in your scripts, you should put the city of the location first to help and then a comma followed by the destination. Whatever you do, keep it organized and simple.

II) Action Line

The action line is a line of description underneath the header that describes in more detail what is happening in the scene. It looks like this:

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired."

Things to consider: this action line should be strictly visual information, as cinema is dependent on what we can see. Also the character's name should be in all caps. There's some disagreement about how often you should capitalize: either the first time a character is introduced or for the entire duration of the script. Hulk likes capitalizing the name for the entire duration. It just singles it out so the reader can always know who the characters are in the scene and won't lose track of them.

III) Character

A character designation goes below an action scene and lets you know who is talking. It looks like this:

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!”

... It’s all pretty self-explanatory.

IV) Dialogue

You can see it briefly in the example above, but a character talks with a little condensed blurb. And then another person talks. It looks like this:

“INT. HULK’S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!”

V) Character Parenthetical

Everything else you’ve seen before, but character parentheticals you may have not. Basically they are parentheses next to the character name that indicate if the character talking is doing something besides the standard talking to another person onscreen. There is voice-over (V.O.), off-screen dialogue (O.S.) and special designations like talking on the phone (INTO PHONE). It looks like this.

“INT. HULK’S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK’S phone rings.

HULK (INTO PHONE)
Yello? ... What up, Tony!

BETTY rolls her eyes and exits the room.

BETTY (O.S.)
Come to bed when you’re done!

HULK
Okay!

HULK puts the phone back to his ear.

HULK (INTO PHONE)

Go on....

NARRATOR (V.O.)

And so Hulk sat there on the phone and listened to Tony Stark ramble on about science or something. Meanwhile..."

Hulk should mention one thing that drives Hulk nuts is phone rule inconsistency. In your cinematic universe, can we hear the person on the other end of the phone line or can we not hear them? You'd be shocked how many films mix and match. It may not seem like a big deal, but it's just one of those things no one ever thinks about. And hey, if you really need to do both for dramatic purposes, do so. But otherwise just try to be consistent.

VI) Dialogue Parenthetical

So this is different from the character parenthetical and is placed instead right before the dialogue. Its purpose is to illustrate how the person is talking or what their tone is. It can also indicate when another language is being used. It looks like this.

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. He seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
(angrily)

Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
(concerned)

Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK
(sheepishly)

Hulk know, Hulk know. You right.

BETTY walks over and puts her arms around him.

BETTY
(whispering)
It's okay, Hulky. It's okay.

THE WHITE TIGER suddenly bursts in and starts yelling in Spanish.

WHITE TIGER
(subtitle)

Hey you two! It's me, The White Tiger! The short-lived Puerto Rican superhero that Marvel created in the '70s! I'm sadly the only character you could think of who speaks Spanish!"

Things to consider: so... um... try never to use dialogue parentheticals. Especially for describing the emotional state of the character. Seriously. You may want to, but your ability to write will depend on your ability *not to use them*. You want to have the ability to make it clear exactly what you mean through the dialogue itself. When you're starting off that can be hard, but you'll get there. Have confidence in your words. Only use dialogue parentheticals when the character's tone is *truly* counterintuitive. Otherwise you're just trying to be the acting coach and the actors will resent what you try to tell them anyway.

Hulk once read a screenplay where 50% of the dialogue had descriptions of how it should sound and how the characters were feeling. It was showcasing a writer who didn't have confidence in their words...

The rest of the script backed that up.

VII) Transitions

So a transition comes at the end of the scene and goes all the way over to the right of the page and says what happens in the transition. Now it's not specifically an editing note (fade, star wipe! etc), but more just a way to let you know that a scene is over. Meaning it should mostly be a "CUT TO:" Sure you have your possible "FADE TO BLACK" which is obvious. But you also have your "SMASH CUT TO:" (any time you want a cut to land really hard and not seem seamless) or "MATCH CUT TO:" (in which the action onscreen matches the action starting at the next cut in some visual or audio way). Here's what it looks like.

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. HULK seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK
Hulk supposes you're right.

CUT TO:

INT. READER'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A DEVOTED READER sits there, refreshing the homepage for an update over and over, whilst crying.

FADE TO BLACK."

Awww. Look at Hulk. Pretending those people exist! Anyway, Hulk hopes you look at this transition not just for the format, but also as example of how to use a pretty standard joke known as "a cutaway." Remember, give your transitions purpose! Link them in a way that creates new meanings!

Things to consider: most of the time you don't actually need to include transitions whatsoever. Seriously you can just start a new scene heading and we will know. And of course you will be "cutting to" it. So really the only things you might need are smash cut or match designations. Also if you're cutting back and forth between two locations and your characters are on the phone or something, try just introducing the new scene with the transition of "INTERCUT WITH:" and that will imply filming the scene in both locations, no problem.

VIII) Over Black;

You'd be amazed how many people don't know what to call it when the screen is black and you're doing a title card or just audio or whatever, chiefly because there's no interior or exterior or location. So all you do is write "OVER BLACK;" in the header screen. It looks like this:

"INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting. He seems tired. BETTY walks in.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!

BETTY
Hulk! You know you have to get up early and go to Avengers HQ! The world can wait another day for your movie thoughts!

HULK
Hulk supposes you're right.

BETTY
Come to bed, Hulky.

HULK
Oh yeah?

HULK smiles.

CUT TO:

OVER BLACK;

TITLE CARD: "Nine Months Later."

The sound of screaming can be heard.

CUT TO:

INT. DELIVERY ROOM – DAY

BETTY screams as a DOCTOR delivers her baby.

DOCTOR
It's a girl!

HULK lights a cigar with the rest of the Avengers."

... The less said about this scene the better. Moving on!

VIII) Scene Numbers

And the only other thing you need to know is scene numbers. Screenwriting software adds them in the margins any time you tell it to, but Hulk recommends you don't even do it until the end. It will just clutter things otherwise. And all it's really there for is to give your production a sense of how many scenes they'll need to shoot. Anyway, it looks like this.

1. "INT. HULK'S HOUSE – NIGHT 1

A big giant green monster by the name of HULK is sitting at his computer and writing a book about screenwriting.

HULK
Hulk wants to go to sleep and stop writing about screenplay formatting!
CUT TO:

2. INT. THE LEADER'S HOUSE – NIGHT 2

THE LEADER sits there deep in thought.

THE LEADER
I wonder what that big green asshole is plotting against me now?"

And that's it! That's everything you really need to know about formatting a screenplay! Easy peasy lemon squeezy!

But what is both far more tricky and for more necessary to discuss are the *unspoken* rules of screenplay formatting that can greatly improve your script.

Which is more difficult, difficult lemon difficult.

... Boy does Hulk love that movie.

50. Submission Scripts vs. Shooting Scripts (And How It Affects Absolutely Everything)

This is one of the most hugely important factors when it comes to how to approach writing a screenplay, and almost no one on the planet talks about it.

Our working definition of a “submission script” is any script that isn’t necessarily going to be made. This can mean a lot of things: it is either a script that you plan to have studios read so they will want to make it, a script that you want to get you a different job, a script that you want to land you an agent / manager, a script that you are submitting for a new round of studio notes on a movie in development, or even a script you are just giving to a friend for feedback. The idea behind this script is always the same: *you want the person to enjoy themselves*. You want them to be compelled. You want them to think you’re a good writer.

So shouldn’t the idea be to make “the read” of your script as compelling and dramatic as possible? And shouldn’t that be obvious?

Meanwhile a shooting script is something already effectively “green-lit” and you’ve finished all the drafts the studio needs, so you can include any information you want like camera notations, production design, and the things that are actually going to help you make the damn thing. Still...

Important fact: 95% of scripts out there are submission scripts, meaning that’s what 95% of you are writing.

Important question: so why are most of that 95% writing their submission scripts like they are shooting scripts?

Seriously. It’s a huge problem. Hulk sits there and reads the most technical, over-descriptive, boring, utterly paralyzing scripts all the time because the person writing it thinks they have to control every single thing happening onscreen and go over them in laborious detail, rather *than make a good read*. They’re trying to be the director, the production designer, the acting coach, and everything *but the writer*. And thus, they are shooting themselves in the foot because what they are writing is effectively *bad drama* for the person reading it. You are reciting them a grocery list instead of telling your story in the most compelling and involving way possible. And guess what, folks?

The person reading is the person who is telling you yes or no.

Isn’t this a huge deal? Yet Hulk sees thousands of young writers press on with the shooting script mode because they can’t let go of control or just because they think that’s the appropriate thing to do... and it is very much not. Besides, the worst part is you can just add all that stuff in later. Like, you know, when someone actually wants to make it and it will have gone through hundreds of changes anyway.

So Hulk wants you to think about the differences between the two kinds of scripts very carefully. Ask yourself: “Holy crap, who am I actually writing this for?” And then you should try and make it as readable as possible. The script should feel alive and vibrant, like they’re reading a play. It should feel like it is happening in real time.

It should not feel like a novel.

So think about that. Because for every bit of screenwriting advice that is to follow, Hulk will be gearing it around submission scripts. Because they are the ones that matter. They are the ones that sell and make you a better writer. They are the ones to learn how to write... honestly though, most of the following can be applied to a shooting script too.

51. Know It Is Being Read By Every Kind Of Person

If Charlie Kaufman, an incredible writer who knows what really makes a great script, sat down to read your script you would want him to think it's great. This goes without saying, right?

The same can be said for if your favorite actor sat down to read your script. And then if a studio exec sat down to read your script, you would want them to think it's great too. And if a script reader, who reads a million of them and whose time is short, sat down to read your script you would want them to think it's great and not be able to put it down, wholly forgetting there's a next one on the pile. And if a 21 year old intern, who really doesn't have the breadth of experience or patience for this job, sat down to read your script you would still want them to think it's great too.

Now... guess in which order the script will be read?

Yup. The reverse of that. And that's why you have to make your scripts accessible to the 21 year old intern. Sorry folks, but when you're starting in this game and don't have a reputation yet, it's absolutely true. Now, this does not mean that you can't use big words or tell a complex story. That would be nonsense. Because the 21 year old intern is actually pretty smart all things considered. But it also means they are busy, easily distracted, and not entirely aware of the subtlety of nuance. Actually, the same goes for most of those people, really. And the one unifying characteristic is that their time is extremely valuable.

Which means you have to get to the point and not dilly-dally in the damn description.

That means no walls of black text. Really. Hulk is one of the most patient readers on the planet. And Hulk can read fast. Heck, Hulk picks up **Infinite Jest** every year to revisit it. Hulk fucking loves to read dense and intricate text. Hulk mean, have you ever seen a Hulk essay; how could Hulk not?

But those are essays. Those are novels. Those are something else entirely. When Hulk sees that big wall of black text in a script, Hulk's heart just sinks a little. It has no real function in a screenplay. By the end of Part Six you'll fully understand why that is, but for now just accept that it is true. And this pertinent reality means it is never productive for you to over-write the action happening onscreen. You may think it's important, or relevant, or interesting, or carefully constructed.

But to the reader it's just not like that. It's undramatic. It slows things down. Trust Hulk on this one. With screenplay details, less is always more. And when you have to over-write everything you are making it clear that you don't trust the readers or potential filmmakers. It's clear you're worrying too much about someone not doing *exactly what you want*. You are making it clear you are trying to direct from the page, and that's not good screenwriting.

The same goes for the desire to be loquacious or ostentatious. David Foster Wallace once talked aptly about "the fear" young writers have where they want to be seen as smart, so they dress up their language in words that don't actually mean anything. They overcompensate with bravado. And it's just so unnecessary in a screenplay. Tell a good story. That's how Hulk will know you're smart.

As the old adage of filmmaking goes: "*Don't impress me, convince me.*"

To do that, be as brief and concise as possible. It's secretly the same thing as Hulk's lesson in narrative economy, only it applies to the literal text of the script. It's just how we read scripts. The dialogue and quick sentences propel us. Even with the most professional, diligent readers, they will start to tune out when it gets dense. Every reader will tune out. It is an absolutely fixture of the business. These are busy-as-shit people. Most of them will simply glance at the action to get a sense of what's happening and then just go back to the dialogue. And if they're really into the story they are not going to want to slow down anyway! They are not going to want to miss a beat, so don't let them get lost in text!

Be brief and move on!

Okay, okay you get it and of course you can't have *nothing* either. That's why lean writing does not mean empty writing. Fill your limited words with purpose and import. Convey only the most relevant information!

And here's a good way to do that:

52. The Golden Rule Of Description

Write only what we can see.

This is also an important one. If you're writing a character's history in your action lines, stuff like: "He grew up in a small town back..." then you are totally doing it wrong. It may be helpful for the filmmakers in trying to decide who to cast, etc, but you are secretly not helping your movie. Think about it: the only information that should be conveyed in action lines is **what the audience could see in the theater.**

Doesn't that make so much sense?

For one, any good director will sit down and look at a paragraph in your script that has nothing but character history and say "how the fuck can I show that onscreen?" and then promptly toss your script in the garbage. And hey, if they like the story under it, then they'll just ignore it anyway and do what they want. So try to remember that a good script conveys only the information that can be seen. The details like: age, clothing, posture, voice, and actions. Don't think of these details as being reductive or limiting, but an opportunity to craft everything visually. Really try to say something with the character's age, clothing, posture, voice, and actions. Use them to really say *something about the character.*

More importantly than informing a director, you need to do this in the script because, fuckin hell, it's exactly what *the movie* needs to do too. It's not like a novel. A voice-over can't just start reading your action lines and describing your characters. So they need to convey visual information!

Sorry if Hulk seems angry and smashy about this one, but you'd be amazed how many people don't realize this very simple facet of screenwriting. A script should be informing the movie how to work. If you need to establish that someone worked on a farm years ago? Don't write "She used to work on a farm." There's nothing a filmmaker can do with that. Instead write about how she has pictures up of her with her family on a farm or something visible like that. It may be lame, but it's at least something that can be shown.

Hulk's old action scene column partner Tom Townend (cinematographer of **Attack the Block!**) brought up the great example of handling exposition with **Silkwood**. Meryl Streep's character is on a plane and she's about to be handed food. She goes to grab her wallet to pay, but attendant informs her they're free. The meaning is clear: *she's never been on a plane before*. Also, please note that this was long before the airlines went broke and you had to start paying for shit. But at the time, the attention to detail spoke volumes about the character.

But since you can't just go into the description and write the history of the character, embrace these opportunities to fit it in elsewhere. Going back to character trees (point #10) try to fit your "feet" details into the story through other approaches: groin, throat, and crown.

If you write something we can't see, it is not just mere faux pas, it's not just a completely wasted opportunity, but it is a writing habit that will actively make the movie worse. You're putting an idea into the filmmaker's head that will make total sense for your story, and it will help *them* get it and inform their experience while reading, but it won't help the audience get it.

And guess who matters the most?

The golden rule of description fixes all: write only what we can see.

53. Oh By The Way, You Are Not The Director

Hulk stated this before, but we really have to ram it home.

Especially because this rule seems to go more and more by the wayside. But here's the thing: if you are submitting a script, chances are you are not the director. Chances are the ones you are submitting to will want to hire another person, which means if your script mentions camera moves or anything that should be in *the shooting script* only, then you are totally overstepping your bounds. The director might even be pissed off enough about it to disregard your advice and actively do the opposite of what you wrote (even if your idea is good). This is not in rare cases either - this is what happens in most cases. Hulk's seen it happen.

So as a writer, how do you, like, convey what should be seen? The answer is simple: you don't actively try. Instead, you use a few tricks to convey what *should* be shown and how. Here's Hulk's best example of how to imply movement with words. Say you want to show something up close then have the camera pull out or cut further back to show the whole thing. To do that you say something like this:

"A delicate hand glides over a 1952 Chevy Bel Air. The hand belongs to ANITA JONES (20's), fresh-faced Midwestern smile, with a bad home-spun blonde dye job and a discount pink dress. She proceeds to wave to the crowd."

Now. Hulk just made this up. But what does it tell you? It conveys a camera motion without an actual note of camera motion. The "belongs to" bit is great trick for implying we should be up close and then back out. Just like you want to do with action lines, you show don't tell.

But going back to point #52 just before this, the information also conveys a good deal about character. It shows she's working a car show. The "Midwestern" term implies not only a look, but a personality type that goes along with it, without just spelling out what her personality type should be. You show her D.I.Y. approach to her appearance and cheap clothing and this implies she doesn't have much money.

Writing these sorts of lines, which inherently convey character, meaning, setting, information, and cinema, is exceptionally difficult and takes a lot of time. Hulk probably spent 20 minutes on that one line and it's just an example in a book and not an actual screenplay. This is the level of thought and effort that you need to put into your brief descriptions.

This is all part of what Hulk likes to call:

54. The Poetic Art Of Action Lines

So this is just an opinion, but Hulk thinks Paul Attanasio probably writes the best screenplays in Hollywood.

That is not to say he writes the best stories that will become the best movies (though he's obviously done some amazing work). This is to say that he writes best for the medium of screenplays. His scripts not only move fast with great economy, but his action lines are poetic and resonant. They allow the directors to make the best possible movies. Even when his character descriptions get a little too much in the way of things you can't see, they are still these beautiful concepts that can come across in the performance of the character. But really it's his ability to convey information in lovely, small bits of economy that makes it work. Besides, it's all part of the great "negotiation" Hulk talks about in regards to the choices you make to break guidelines. Like Tarantino, his writing is so good and purposeful that you don't really mind his rule-breaking.

Check these fucking out:

"HERBIE STEMPEL, Herbert the great, early 40s and overweight. Marine haircut and shabby suit. A Job for his generation - - exiled to the Boroughs, flayed by grey-flannel insults, scourged by lowly status, grudge-laden before God.

"CHARLES VAN DOREN, 30s, handsome, well-born, debonair, self-deprecating, perfect. The lithe build of a man who has never been made to run uphill. An endearing blankness -- the boy availability of a man still in search of himself.

These are both from **Quiz Show**, one of the best scripts ever written, but the real reason it's wonderful, particularly for this book, is that it shows you how to *write* scripts. Concise. To the point. Dramatic. Gorgeous prose. Hilarious dialogue. Poignant themes. It's all there. If you want to know how to write beautifully in the screenplay format, then go out and hunt down a copy of **Quiz Show** and keep it forever.

55. Writing Action Scenes!

The following is an extension of what Hulk has been talking about with not wasting a reader's time, but it goes for double here:

Reading action scenes is the most boring thing in the universe.

Sure, what we're seeing is rapid on the screen, but the second you stop to describe the motion of pretty much anything, then it's just slow-as-hell on the page.

The answer? Craft it dramatically! Pretend you're telling a story of some big fight that happened at a bar. You're trying to entertain the people listening. Sure, you wouldn't regale with every punch and blow, but that's not what's exciting. You would tell the big moments. You would tell how you reacted. The emotional journey. The turning points. The bits where conflicts turn and then are ultimately resolved... doesn't this all sound a bit familiar?

Yup... you would be telling a story.

And that's all that action scenes are: visual storytelling. Cause and effect. A to B. Action and reaction. So have objectives. Create stakes. Threaten to kill the kitten. Entertain your audience and compel them. Make the person reading your script feel like they are in danger just sitting there. Because action scenes should not be big, tonal chaotic nightmares. They should not feel like choreography description.

They should feel dramatic.

So all you have to do is just take every lesson we've learned about writing and reapply it to the arena of action!

Okay, let's start going on a path that brings this sucker home.

56. Don't Waste Opportunities To Say Something

In Robert Towne's incredible script for **Chinatown** (though he isn't afraid to go on for big walls of text... it was a different era), there is this really neat little detail that exemplifies something that doesn't happen nearly enough in screenwriting today: in the film, Jake Gittes is a private detective who has just informed one of his clients that, yes, his wife is cheating on him. To console the poor chap, Towne writes that Jake does the following:

"Gittes reaches into his desk and pulls out a shot glass, quickly selects a cheaper bottle of bourbon from several fifths of more expensive whiskeys."

The implication of this may seem obvious, that Gittes is "cheap" or something, but the fact that he has them all lined up and ready to go in his office says something else. It implies that Jake knows the client *won't know the difference*.

What may seem like a small detail in the script is actually a detail that can be sussed out to several other implications. It's a brilliant little gesture of which Towne is a master. Really, Hulk's read a shit ton of scripts and these opportunities are rarely explored.

So all Hulk wants you to do is embrace the kind of high-degree storytelling evident in these tiny details. Embrace the high standard. Always try to say something. Even try to say multiple things at once. Every detail in your script can matter if you really want it to. Don't waste opportunities to say something!

57. And If You Want To Be Colloquial...

So while Attanasio and Towne represent the formal end of the spectrum of screenwriting, on the other side there are more colloquial writers.

For instance, there is Shane Black.

Shane Black was the first million dollar screenwriter. He wrote the **Lethal Weapon** movies and **The Last Boy Scout**. He then sort of went to writer jail for **The Last Action Hero** and **The Long Kiss Goodnight**, but he returned in a big, big way with **Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang** (it's a hilarious, great film if you've never seen it) and soon again with **Iron Man 3**. But when he started out, one of the things he became famous for was being very colloquial in the scripts. He directly engaged the reader and would say things like: "This is the scene that's so fucking good, the audience will just whip out their dicks and start jerking off right there in the theater!"

... It made an impression.

Which is to say a lot of people liked it and found it funny, and a lot of the old school thought he was pissing on the craft. Both are fair reactions. But whatever you have to say about it, Hulk thinks the scripts behind Black's colloquial prose were usually pretty good and that was the important part (even if the scenes usually weren't actually good enough that the audience would start jerking off). The problem was that all the love and all the hate happened to spawn a lot of colloquial imitators, who were much, much worse and did not understand when and how to do it. What can Hulk say? It all just keeps coming back to people fixating on the tangible details and tone instead of the actual functionality of the mechanism.

But all Hulk has to say on the matter is this: if you're going to go colloquial, then let's get something straight... You have to be *really* fucking funny.

That's all there is to it. Because if you're not actively making the reader laugh, then there's no point to doing it. Seriously. None. You're already pissing on the concept of economy. And by breaking the fourth wall just say "I know you're a person / Hulk who is reading this. Let's just try and cheer you up!" It better be good. But there isn't anything else the reader can do with it other than laugh. It certainly won't make the movie any better. It certainly won't convey to the director how to make the movie any funnier, because the audience sure can't see the funny action lines!

It adds nothing of value to the film. The *only* thing it can do is make the reader laugh, which admittedly is something to be appreciated in the long slog of reading scripts.

But also remember that humor is subjective, all comedy has a victim, and if the reader of the script identifies more with the victim than you're fucked. Do you know how many times Hulk has seen a script where the writer has identified a band or a song or a TV show that should be made fun of, but the executive in charge of reading the script actually likes that thing? Way more than you think. This shit is tricky. And if it doesn't make Hulk laugh, then it is just a garbage line wasting a reader's time... which means that reader might throw it in the garbage too.

Those are the stakes of being colloquial. Be warned.

58. Voice-Over... Perhaps, Try *Not* Using It

Voice-over is one of the most overused devices in the history of cinema. It is used to explain things that don't need explaining and would best be left shown through visual cinema or natural dialogue, issues that would be best left explored by dramatic means. Even the most unaware audiences find voice-over to be pretty un-engaging. Why is that?

Because voice-over *always* tells, and *never* shows.

What perhaps speaks to the device's assured laziness is how fucking inconsistent it is too. If you're going to use narration at the beginning of your film, then you have to use it at the end (cough **The Descendants** cough). Otherwise you're just cheating. Then there's that hilarious time the voice-over showed up in a couple scenes in the middle of **We Don't Live Here Anymore** and then promptly disappeared for the rest of the film. These sorts of uses only confirm the laziness. Those films used it just when they needed it to solve some weird, stupid problem of exposition. Then they promptly dumped it.

The real problem here, and what every single person who uses it tends not to realize, is that when voice-over goes in and out haphazardly, you are altering the rules of your "movie universe." You are saying the story comes from this person's perspective and they are a kind of "god of perspective" in this movie. That's what voice-over really means to your tone. And it has a *huge impact* on how your audience subconsciously thinks about the film's reality.

So when the movie suddenly fucking ditches the voice-over and becomes a regular movie apropos of nothing, then *the audience can feel it*. You are essentially saying you have made two different kinds of universes in your film. And that's cheating. Worse, it's destructive to the intent of your storytelling.

There are of course, a ton of examples of great voice-over.

All the Malick films employ the device to stunning effect. But heck, the dude is basically writing poetry, which goes

along with the beauty of his imagery. And really, he's one of a kind. Another example is in **The Informant!** Where the seriousness of the plot is intentionally undercut by going into the head of Matt Damon's ridiculous main character, where he'll suddenly start ruminating on panties in Japanese vending machines. There is no information or exposition, but pure characterization and hilarity. This doesn't make it narrative nonsense though as it serves two obvious functions: it helps balance the comedic tone with the seriousness of the story, and it helps explain just what kind of batshit guy would go down this silly, extreme path. Hulk thinks it's great. And then there's the voice-over in the Coen's **Raising Arizona**, which does the exact opposite. H.I. McDunnough, who on the surface is a complete hick criminal, has this lofty, beautiful, eloquent narration that actually counters the hilarity of the world of the film. So by giving it this deep poetic resonance the Coens turn their film into a lofty, weird, wonderful fairy tale.

There's always a way to use a device well.

Just don't be lazy about it. Voice-over can lend a nice feeling of atmosphere, characterization, and tone, but be careful with how it affects your universe. If you really need it and don't want to fuck with your universe, then try a few simple tricks to use it more organically. Like have one character literally telling a story that can overlap into the next scene and effectively be used like voice-over. This way you get the informative effect you want without getting the tonal effect you don't want. But again, *you have to be consistent about it.*

But really, always try not using it first... You'd be surprised how well plain old narrative works.

59. The Practical Art Of Dialogue

So Hulk talked in the introduction about knowing the struggle of writing. Well... Hulk *knows this struggle*. For many years, dialogue was Hulk's biggest obstacle. Hulk thought Hulk just didn't have the ear for it, especially while writing the first few drafts. To even get to a competent place with dialogue, it took time, patience, trial and error, and a lot of lesson-learning. And eventually, after years and years and years, Hulk finally got to a really good place.

But that's great news. You see, it taught Hulk to flatly reject the notion that natural talent is inherently limiting. There is no accepting that there are just some things you aren't good at. Sure, we have some natural dispositions, but we can truly learn anything. It just takes a massive amount of work. It doesn't matter if it's structure, characterization, or cinematography.

If Hulk can get good at dialogue, you can get good at anything. So here are the following hard-earned lessons about getting better at dialogue that Hulk learned along the way:

I) Eliminate The Following In Dialogue: "Ums", "Likes", And "You Knows."

There is a huge inclination among young writers to dress up dialogue in natural sounding cadence... this is bad. Because there's a huge difference between natural and inane. Really, if you want your dialogue to be organic and sound like how real people talk, then that's for the actor to decide. If you're trying to get an actor to time their ums, likes, and you knows to your exact specifications and cadence, then you are going to get the most hollow-sounding, fake nonsense ever. It is impossible to make these kind of natural pauses seem unforced. So take them out of your dialogue. Seriously. They're not necessary anyway and will completely stall the reader from just trying to get the meaning of your words. It's the same lesson of economy as before. Putting stalls makes for a horrible read and terrible drama. So really, make them go bye bye.

II) You Want Your Character's Dialogue To Be More Clear And On Point Than You'd Assume.

Once again, this is sort of the desire to be like the Coens and Tarantino, who can do this sort of long verbal qualification thing well, but that's not you. Chances are you are still learning, so Hulk advises you not to layer the dialogue in a lot of qualifying and anticipation. For instance, Nancy Meyers movies tend to do that horribly. Stuff like "Well, I was going to say...." and "I think I really just need to come out, and let you know that." Ughhhhhhhh. Have you ever seen **The Holiday**? It's like 2 hours of characters sputtering out stuff before the characters talk and have opinions. It doesn't come off like "organic speech," it comes off like Hulk's ass. Adding these kind of qualifiers just slows down the entire rhythm and import. It prevents the audience from following along and engaging and responding because they're miles ahead of the characters themselves. There's nothing more boring than waiting for somebody to say something. So just say what you freakin' mean. Be terse and to the point. You may worry that doing so will make your characters sound terse and to

the point, but it won't. The natural way we watch movie universes forgives a lot of brevity. It will be organic because it *won't* sound like real life. It will make them sound like they're in a damn movie, which is good news because they are in a movie! And that means audiences watch them like they are in a movie! And that's the relationship that really matters. There's a reason characters talk like that in films and it's because that's how the audience *needs* them to be for the most effective drama and story purpose.

III) Your Characters Can't All Talk The Same Way.

You should be able to hear one person in a scene and know who they are just by the dialogue. Achieving this can be really difficult, but it's true. You can't just rely on the actors to do it for you. When Hulk reads comedies, 1/4 of them have all their characters talk in the generic, witty-but-not-too-witty voice, and 1/4 of the others have their characters all talk like the author. It sucks (FYI, the other 1/4 of comedy scripts are really funny, and the last 1/4 are not funny whatsoever). So concentrate on having your characters have different voices. If this is a big problem for you, Hulk has a few practical solutions for you. For example, think of a bunch of different, pronounced actors in your head, all with unique cadences. Throw in Steve Buscemi, with... um... Dennis Leary and, like, Carol Kane or something. Or whoever you like! Hulk knows this sounds stupid, but it will honestly help you differentiate them in your head. And when whatever actor comes in to play them, they will bring the character a more organic center than the extremes you used in your head. It's just a way of making their voices separate. It's a mere means to an end.

But honestly, there's a surefire way of fixing most of these dialogue problems...

60. Read Your Entire Screenplay Out Loud... Many Times.

This will solve a lot of the problems mentioned not just in the last point about dialogue, but all the 59 points mentioned so far.

Do you realize how many screenwriters never read their script out loud?

It's amazing given the fact that the second you hear your script out loud and you can instantly be like "oh that sounds like crap" or "oh that's a weird thing to say" or "oh that totally wasn't necessary." But it's not just about what sounds wrong to your ear; it's so much more. You'll get a sense of how your scenes are paced and if any of the scenes don't make sense near each other. You'll get a sense of transitions. Have a couple friends read it with you and talk about it. Ask them not just about what they understood (again less important), but more about if the scenes felt dramatic and things moved from moment to moment. And who cares if you're a bad actor? It doesn't matter!

Hulk really can't tell you enough how much *you need to do this*.

Heck, just by getting the damn thing *outside your head* and into the open air, it solves so many problems immediately. Chances are you love movies, but haven't had years and years to breathe scripts yet like some of us. So this is your chance to make the script feel alive like cinema. You'll know exactly what to do with it once it's "real." Like with the action lines that go on and on? Guess what? If you get bored reading them, then the person reading your script will get bored reading them too. So you'll know exactly what to cut. Reading a screenplay out loud should inform you. It should speak to the exact kind of movie you want to write.

To the anecdote!

And now, Hulk will speak to the power of what reading a screenplay out loud can do for you. We can all agree that **The Social Network** was pretty much great, right? Aside from some legitimate concerns about depictions of femininity, it has such a wonderful use of dialogue, smart commentary, insightful details, resonant themes, and a propulsive sense of storytelling... Hey... Wait a minute! Isn't that just all the things Hulk mentioned back in Part One of this book!?!? When Hulk talked about all the stuff that makes a good narrative??? Hulk is bringing it full circle on y'all!

So on to the actual anecdote: during preproduction on the film, David Fincher apparently had Aaron Sorkin sit down for him, and *in one sitting* he had Sorkin read the script out loud. He wanted to know the pace, inflection, and sense of rhythm that belonged in the script. So Aaron sat there, read the entire movie out loud, just as he had pictured it. Breaks not included, it took him 2 hours and 1 minute to read the whole thing.

The final running time of the film? 2 hours 1 minute.

The lesson is clear folks: read your script out loud and Hulk will guarantee you will win an Oscar for it.

... Okay, it won't do that but it will make your script way, way better in every sense.

61. Feedback - Get A Thick Skin And Expect Others To Have None

An old acting professor of Hulk's had a great saying. He said "ideas are babies," and he meant that as a way to describe how much we cherish and personalize an idea of our own. They are so precious that they figuratively become our babies.

And anytime someone brashly rejects your idea or calls it stupid, it's like "They took your baby and smashed its head over a radiator."

That's indeed what it feels like.

It is our natural, human inclination. That kind of vulnerability is so important to the creative instinct... but can also be really problematic to the creative process.

You have to spend a lifetime getting over the fact that your ideas are your babies. Really, you do. Your art will not be able to function without criticism and input from others. You have to be able to embrace the fact that your idea might be stupid. That something you thought was genius is actually hackneyed and trite. You have to be willing to take your lumps and evolve. You have to get the thickest possible skin imaginable. It is the only way you will learn and grow and get better.

It is the only way you will become a professional.

And that just takes time. Really, there's no other way. You need to write a lot. You need to share it a lot. You need to get rejected a lot. You need to hear terrible things. And then you need to numb the pain.

But you want to know the interesting flip-side? You can't expect others to do the same.

You have to be the nicest person. That doesn't mean you have to lie. In fact you should be honest. But there's a way to craft every bit of honesty in a constructive way. And while doing that you have to act like other people's ideas are babies and cradle them gently. Now you may not want to take that baby home with you and adopt it, but you have to be able to handle that deftly. So be kind to the person you are working with. Have empathy for them. They are putting their ideas out there so you need to extend a kindness and understanding to them. Do that while being constructive and informative. Phrase things in hypotheticals. Use if / then statements with their story options. Make it clear you are there to help them unlock that which they want to do, not paint your thoughts over theirs. And when you do that? They will forever be in your good graces. And those are the kind of working relationships you can build a career on.

But most of all, despite getting a thick skin you have to keep the passion for your own work. James Gunn said: "The key to show business is to give 110% while simultaneously not giving a shit." That may sound absurd, cynical, or even an impossible catch-22, but it is one of those absolute truisms of Hollywood. Give 110% percent because you can't accomplish anything in this business without enthusiasm and genuine intent. Be joyful and take pride when things go well. But don't give a shit in the sense that you have to take rejection in stride. Don't let failure bother you. You may hear 17 yesses in a row on a project and then suddenly be cut out at the knees by a no from the top of the pyramid. Hulk guarantees you *this will happen*. But it's okay.

Every single thing that you do in this business will fail until the one time it doesn't.

Isn't that amazing? Everyone thinks success will be instant, but it is rooted in failure followed by persistence. And for those who do experience instant success, it is often followed by a spiral when they cannot handle the low point that inevitably follows. So press on further. Don't get rattled. Do better work next time. It is always about the process. It is always about growth. It is always about learning to be better.

So let's talk about the final step...

62. Letting Go

“I just gotta finish this script!”

Hulk’s heard that phrase a million times... but there’s no such thing.

No one ever finishes scripts. It’s impossible. No script ever feels *perfect*. If you’ve ever felt like one was perfect then Hulk hates to say it, but you might be a little naïve. There is no finish... *there is only the time to let it go*.

But when do you let it go? Well, usually by the time the studio says “Hey, your script is due,” or by the time the show goes on the air or whatever enterprise you are in. But for something you’re doing for submission?

It’s time to let go when you feel like you’re just treading water. When you are just tinkering with it, making small incremental changes which, sure, might be well and good, but they are providing no deeper overhaul or understanding to the piece itself. So Hulk thinks you should only get real one or two rounds of tinkering and then it should be out of your hands and with other, trusted eyeballs. To either be approved, or to tell you what it really needs.

No script ever feels *perfect*. There is only the time to let it go.

It’s amazing how much no one ever writes about this part of the process, when in a lot of ways it is so vital. It’s not just about individual scripts either, but how long to stick with a script you’ve written in terms of trying to sell it or get it made. Which really it gets to the heart of how we relate to our work and what we want out of it. Hulk just talked to you about the giving 110% and simultaneously not giving a shit philosophy, but it can sometimes be tricky knowing when to do what part of that equation.

For instance, Hulk was having a conversation with a filmmaker friend the other night and Hulk was talking about moving on from a recent failed project to get something new up and running, and Hulk was taking this zen approach to it all. But Hulk’s filmmaker friend spoke up and said: “Yeah, but there’s a flipside to that. I can’t tell you how often my crazy passion for making something a reality is what ended up saving it at the last moment, and actually making it a reality.”

Obviously, it’s a great point and something Hulk obviously understands, but there’s a duality that may have more to do with your personality. Because both options can have real value. So once again Hulk brings us to the precipice of a dichotomy:

I) There is the Soderbergh/del Toro route of embracing the chaos and having a lot of irons in the fire, many of which will not come to fruition, but one good idea surely will. Work fast. Make them and don’t become paralyzed by fear or get tied down by megalomania. Move and evolve.

II) And then there is the singular path of many a great, American auteur, who work on a singular project and labor over it intensely until it becomes a reality. The road of which is matched with higher highs and sickening lows. You are living and dying by the project, but it may be that very commitment that ultimately saves it.

In the end, it is a dichotomy. And like everything in this book, you’ll have a natural inclination, but Hulk wants you to look at it in terms of a negotiation. One that is built on your values and the belief of what you can justify.

But whatever you do, be ready to work harder than you ever have in your life.

And know when it’s time to let go....

Part Seven - Now Here Comes The Hard Part

And thus we come to the seventh and final part of our journey, and to start this section, Hulk actually has some bad news to tell you...

None of the things Hulk just told you *actually matter*.

... That sound you heard is everyone's hearts falling down into their butts.

The reason they don't matter is that everything Hulk just told you is not something that can be easily parsed out over a few planning sessions and incorporated immediately. Sure, thanks to this book you may now understand a great many concepts, devices, or guidelines you never thought of before. You may even be really eager to start trying to apply them. But they cannot be fully applied with simple awareness.

For one, there are so many details about how and why to create a story, that when we sit down to actually do it, the multitude of options and responsibilities renders the process dysfunctional. You'll be trying to think of that one thing Hulk said to do, or that one goal of yours, and most of the contents of this big-ass book will fall out of your brains like it was on Teflon.

In truth, learning is really the process of taking what you've *already learned* on some instinctual level and suddenly becoming aware of it. And this book may have articulated an idea on the tip of your tongue or illuminated you to some new concept you need to absorb. But from there, it's the process of rendering that awareness back into an unaware process.

Which means that, as a writer, you have to take these devices and concepts and *ingrain them* into your process. These elements must be seared into your brain so that they are completely automatic. Then, and only then, will the writing process and its results feel truly organic. Only then can you write sequentially and with flow and purpose. Only then will you still be able to include all of the critical elements of storytelling and structure that Hulk has been fawning over for this entire book because the simplest truth is that you really need that speed of comprehension and application. There is a certain kind of on-the-fly writing chops that are desperately needed if one plans to be a working writer in film and television.

Sure, you might be able to hammer out a good script in the course of a year, but what about when you're handed a re-write job and the thing starts shooting in two weeks? What about the fact that it's the end of the season and you have to write an entire episode in two straight all night sessions? That's what being a writer in this business is actually like. You have to be able to work on the fly and showcase the real-deal chops. You can't fake it. And even if you're a writer who somehow has all the time in the world, chances are that if you can't write organically, then your story won't be come across as organic either.

Working professionals can just do it.

And to explain the precise nature of what Hulk is talking about, Hulk will now cite the [Dreyfus model of skill acquisition](#). Take a look....

"...competence is characterized by active decision making in choosing a course of action. Proficiency is shown by individuals who develop intuition to guide their decisions and devise their own rules to formulate plans. The progression is thus from rigid adherence to rules to an intuitive mode of reasoning based on tacit knowledge. Michael Eraut summarized the five stages of increasing skill as follows:

1. Novice

- 'rigid adherence to taught rules or plans'
- No exercise of 'discretionary judgment'

2. Advanced beginner

- Limited 'situational perception'
- All aspects of work treated separately with equal importance

3. Competent

- ‘coping with crowdedness’ (multiple activities, accumulation of information)
- Some perception of actions in relation to goals
- Deliberate planning
- Formulates routines

4. Proficient

- Holistic view of situation
- Prioritizes importance of aspects
- ‘perceives deviations from the normal pattern’
- Employs maxims for guidance, with meanings that adapt to the situation at hand

5. Expert

- Transcends reliance on rules, guidelines, and maxims
- ‘intuitive grasp of situations based on deep, tacit understanding’
- Has "vision of what is possible"
- Uses "analytical approaches" in new situations or in case of problems"

Pretty self-evident, right?

So here’s what happens when Hulk and pretty much every working professional Hulk knows sits down to write a screenplay:

Sometimes they’ve scribbled a few brainstorm notes. Sometimes they outline casually until they’ve broken the story. Then they just start writing it. Sometimes it’s a scene. Sometimes it’s a description of a scene. Sometimes it’s a sequence. Then it starts to come together. But for the most part it’s all on the fly. They have the ability to traverse between microscopic issues and big picture concerns at a moment’s notice. They start to see the seams. They see a problem so they go back to their implicit knowledge of structure or genre convention. They piece it together. They write. They re-write. And then they let it go.

The sad thing is that this natural process is actually ruined by obtuse studio involvement. A lot of times they’ll require a treatment, but there are certain problems you can’t see at the treatment level that need to be changed at the script level and it becomes a whole big process. Or worse, some production companies require “act by act” submission, which is just garbage if you ask this Hulk. It’s impossible to write a script when you can’t see the whole of it (and it utterly doesn’t help you confirm the truism of “the ending is the conceit”). As far as the business goes, Hulk’s favorite methodology is just pitch straight into full script. The problem is that usually means you have to negotiate for less money.

If only the industry itself just had a little more respect for the process. But again, we’re not here to talk about the industry. We are here to talk about the things you can do to become a better writer. The things you can do to take this entire book full of concepts and ingrain them into your process like a professional writer.

How the hell do you do that, anyway? How do you make all of these things become ingrained? It seems like it is either magic or innate talent, right?

Nope!

It is hard work + time.

Hulk has regularly cited Malcolm Gladwell's theory from "Outliers" that it takes 10,000 hours to become truly good at anything. It takes practice. Focus. Repetition. The same way a baseball player practices hitting a ball over and over again until each reaction becomes simple muscle memory. A writer must do the same. Identifying script problems, seeing narrative shifts, recognizing false-sounding dialogue. These are all things that must be ingrained and easily recognized though the building of the same kind of muscle memory put on display by a great baseball player. And to get to that point takes 10,000 hours of writing. 10,000 hours of solving your own script problems. 10,000 hours of thinking about things like character motive, story structure, and the art of cinema.

And if you write almost every day for a few hours, then 10,000 hours usually takes about... 10 years.

Gulp.

Hulk cannot help if this reality scares you. So often Hulk talks to people who have dreams of writing scripts and so often they are not even close to that figure. Some of you are still young and in school and in the perfect place to start. And some of you are... a bit behind. But if you really want it, then you cannot let that reality stop you. You have to be ready to put in your 10 years. And Hulk can really speak to the truth of that 10,000 hour figure. It wasn't until 10 years in that Hulk's writing became good enough for real-deal interest. And suddenly, it felt like Hulk woke up one day and it all clicked. Yes, the process itself was actually rather gradual, but all these things Hulk "knew" had become something Hulk actually "understood." Going back to before, didn't Hulk mention that it took the **South Park** guys about 10 years to really understand storytelling and how to approach their show? That wasn't an accident. Things take time. Things take hard work.

So for all these pages and pages of guidelines and practical advice, even if it's advice that Hulk truly believes in, even if every single thing in this book is something Hulk thinks you should adopt with every fiber of Hulk's being... there is still no quick fix.

You have to learn to incorporate those ideas into your deepest essence as a writer. You have to practice with them like a baseball player would. And like a baseball player, you'll find your own strengths over time. You'll find you already have a lot of the skills and training you need to be good at structure. Or perhaps you've been training as a good listener so you have an ear for dialogue. Maybe you have the focus to be economical. But no matter what your skills become and how they manifest themselves, it will take unbelievable amounts of work. Ten years of it.

This is scary. And you have two possible reactions:

1) *Damn... I... I don't think I have the time to do that. I want to, but that's so much and I just usually don't have the work ethic to see it through. I think that seems daunting. I mean, I really would like to be a writer, but I don't know about that.*

2) *Okay, fine. Whatever Hulk. That's not going to stop me.*

If you answered like #1, then you like the idea of writing. You like the things it makes you feel, or perhaps the lifestyle or acclaim you think it will afford you.

And if you answered like #2, then you are a writer.

So it is time to start writing. Go do your first screenplay. Just write the damn thing. Do it. And once you finish it, it's going to be terrible. But that's totally okay. Put it in a drawer. Sit down. Write another one. Do it better. Then start one that's way outside your comfort zone. Do things you are not good at. Put it in a drawer. Then do it all again. And again. Don't look at them as your be all end all, but as just another step in the process. Learn how to craft stories. Then write another. And another. Get better. Don't worry you're wasting good ideas because the value of the idea and the inspiration never goes away, even if the script is crap. You can always come back and re-do the idea once you're better at writing. Hulk's done that all the time. Just keep writing them.

Fact: Hulk got an early start and was super devoted to this process and Hulk wrote over 70 screenplays before even one working professional said "Hey this is pretty good!" and from there? Getting something actually made is even harder. But when the luck and opportunity finally comes around, you have to be sure you can deliver the goods. You have to back it up with real professional know-how.

And yes, it will be scary as all hell, but you are not alone. You have friends. You have collaborators. This is a team medium, so find your support. You have thousands of other writers with you...

... and you have a Hulk.

Hulk knows that sounds cheesy as all hell, but Hulk means it: *you have a Hulk on your side*. Hulk wants you to win. Hulk even hates that this oh-so-necessary 10,000 hour message is dominating the last section of this book. Yes, Hulk needed to warn you of the difficulties, but Hulk would much rather *inspire you*. So in that spirit, Hulk just wants to finish this sucker with a little explanation of one of Hulk's heroes.

So there is this guy named Paddy Chayefsky. He is one of the greatest screenwriters of all time.

Chayefsky's success was due in large part to the fact that he was, first and foremost, a writer of all forms. He wrote plays, novels, television, and even criticism (Hulk likes criticism too in case you haven't noticed). Paddy Chayefsky approached his craft with a remarkable sense of understanding. His style always seemed to vary. You could always recognize his focus and intelligence, but never an overpowering "style" that dominated his work. His voice could mutate at a moment's notice. He could transcend genre, tone, comedy, drama, medium, form, and even language. He could explore the simplest stories about decent human beings and ethos (**Marty**), the growing state of the NYC social scene long before Capote even thought of **Breakfast at Tiffany's (The Bachelor Party)**, the incredible thematic realities of bureaucracy and personal will (**The Hospital**), the hardcore sci-fi and horror concepts of trippy genetics (**Altered States**), the ahead-of-its-time views of sexuality and becoming a forerunner to late '60s cinema (**The Americanization of Emily**), and in his magnum opus, he managed to penetrate the deepest layers of satire to the point where he basically foretold the future of television and American culture at large (**Network**).

If you need a comparison, then Chayefsky was sort of a porto-Charlie Kaufman and certainly every bit as much of a genius.

But Chayefsky didn't just work on these lauded projects, which earned him the most lone screenwriting Oscars of anyone in history; he spent his early career as a "working writer" during the golden age of television (read: mass produced and not nearly on the same level as cinema). Back in college Hulk hunted down most of his lesser-seen stuff and the one thing that always becomes so amazingly clear about his work is that even with his this utilitarian TV work, he so completely understood what he needs to do with the story and devices he's using. *He always understands the purpose!*

As any genius would, Chayefsky famously hated the way Hollywood encroached on storytelling and the author's duty, calling it "democracy at its ugliest," but he still never, ever let that impact the quality, nor the effort that went into his work. He knew how to write big and small, broad and nuanced, for the system or against it, and he knew when to follow rules and when to absolutely shatter them. He always understood the purpose of what he was writing.

And thus, the range, totality, understanding, and humanity of Paddy Chayefsky inspires Hulk every single day. He is everything we should ever want to be in a screenwriter.

And he is a large part of what inspired Hulk to write this book.

"Yeah, why would you write something like this, Hulk? As you would say, what is the purpose?"

On one level, Hulk was excited about the idea of trying to convey the sum total of almost all of Hulk's knowledge about storytelling and screenwriting. Hulk wanted to try and make it a singular, complete thought. A story of writing itself with a through-line that would maybe speak to you. And on one level, this book feels complete, and yet... Hulk still feels like it's barely scratching the surface. As crazy as it sounds, Hulk looks over what is written and still sees so much more that can be said. But alas, it was time to let go.

Which means that the next step falls to you.

This book is only but the first step in a longer conversation. So many ideas within are part of the great negotiation. You may have a different take on how something might work. You may recognize a way to imply something new. After all, Hulk wants you to do what makes sense for *your* story. But Hulk wants to talk about all of those ideas with you.

Hulk wants us to flesh them out and make them feel real and understood. Hulk hopes that maybe you can help Hulk even refine those ideas too. To teach Hulk the many things that Hulk has yet to understand about a subject that can only be tamed, but never mastered. Hulk wrote this book so we both could become better writers. And if we really want to make it happen, then we can all be something of a sounding board for one another. Hulk says this without a hint of cynicism or disinterest. This modern world is so full of yelling and contention and ugliness, so that Hulk wants to create a place where we can do way better than that.

Because secretly *we are* way better than that.

Hulk genuinely wants to change the culture of screenwriting. Hulk knows that sounds freakin' insane, but it's true. The only way it's going to happen is if we commit to the idea and have nothing but mutual respect for one another.

Disagree with one of Hulk's working definitions? Need help breaking a story? Can't figure out a character's path? Write. Ask. Help. And feel free to drop Hulk a line any time at filmcritHulk@gmail.com. It can get a little backed up at times

and submitting full scripts is actually rather tricky depending on what's going on with all Hulk's contracts at the moment, but if you have questions then Hulk assures you that he reads every single thing Hulk is sent and will always try to get to every single person. Right now Hulk's about 500+ Hulk-mails behind (some going back awhile), so please be patient because Hulk fully responds to each one.

But really, why do all this, Hulk?

The same reason Hulk explained at the beginning. Because Hulk knows the struggle of writing all too well. It is an endless war with one's one brain. It is lonesome. It is difficult. And it is often infuriating.

... So who would want to go through that alone?

<3 Hulk

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To Hulk’s colleagues in criticism, Hulk thanks you for your daily inspiration.

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<3 Hulk

Endnotes & Bibliography

Books!