

Between the bull and the chameleon. How to understand somebody else's project from the inside without talking about oneself ?

**Lecture by Antoine Jaccoud for TEST, Valencia,
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If acting like a bull means denying an individual and his or her project by not respecting him as AN OTHER person, individuality, subjectivity, human being...

If acting like a chameleon means denying oneself –denying me- by becoming this other, by being eaten and swallowed by him or her...

What animal should a mentor, coach, professor, script-doctor like us imitate in order to understand the projects which are proposed to us AND work effectively with their author?

The fox, well known for its cunning intelligence ?

The delphin, which is so a nice fellow?

The turtle, whose example would help us to stay calm and work for eternity?

The pig, whose every bodypart can feed a man at his entire satisfaction?

The gorilla, whose loyalty and faithfulness is widely admired ?

Well, I do not think we'll find any solution in zoological metaphors.

I will rather suggest a concept which comes from geography, but is used in psychology as well :

Distance.

In order to stay away from the bull as well as the chameleon, we need to establish some distance between us and the Other, between us and his or her story...

In order to work with the huge variety of different people we'll meet along our career -workaholic or lazy, alcoholic or teadrinkers, first time filmmakers or last time film makers, narcissic ones, depressed ones, nasty ones, brave ones, pure writers, hybrid writer-directors, pure directors, hybrid director-producers, pure producers, genius and non genius...

We need to establish distance.

In order to work on so different scripts and stories, short films or features, one page synopsis or two hundred pages semi-novel, first draft or last draft, stories we would love to have written, stories we would immediately throw to the garbage can if we could, boring projects, thrilling stories...

We need to establish distance.

In order to work with ironical people from Paris, funny people from Brussel, lyrical people from Erevan, melancholic people from Geneva or lunatic people from Cotonou (all this being allusion to real cases)

We need to establish distance.

In order, eventually, to be as good and as effective and helpful we want to be,

we need to establish some kind of distance.

Between them and us.

Between their projects, scenarios, stories and us.

But what do I mean by distance ?

I mean not too close and not too far.

This is his -or her baby- this is not mine.

There is no « other » if there is no « I » or « me ».

We are mentors or teachers, or script-doctors, or dramaturgs ; we're not –thanks god !- co-writers, we're not friends (even we will have a few beers and frozen pizzas and endless conversations along the process), we're not husband or wife, we're not father or mother...

We're here to help and coach and support an individual AND a story but we're not inventing and writing this story, for him or her.

Our job, our assignment, has a context –it can be a film school or a production company, or a simple agreement between two persons- it has a clear purpose -in every case, to make a story better- and it has limits –time limits (a very important element to keep our intervention under control !), budget limits, human limits. And all this could be -or should be- described in a contract, an oral or written contract.

This « call for distance » can sound cold and dry, but I spent more than a few times trying the other way –forgetting about the distance- with film students or more experienced writers and filmmakers. I thought for them, I wrote for them, I worked for them, I tortured myself for them, for no better result than confusion, frustration and pain.

Mentoring, coaching, doctoring should not be part of the creative process, it should stay close to it but definitely out of it, because we need to watch the flow –and not be drowned by it- to stimulate and orientate it. Because we need to be safe to save the victims. Because we need to look far beyond the mountains while the author has the nose in his or her plate...

Being part of the process, being IN it, getting drowned in it, is always a mistake, or it is totally another job, attitude and approach : the creative one, that we have to keep for our own works, or for the moments of our life we are co-authors...

We cannot be in and out in the same time.

We cannot be EX-Pert (ex meaning OUT in latin, as you all remember) and IN the creative shit, mess and anxiety. This is impossible, unbearable and it would be a denial of what is expected from us.

But how to find and build the distance ? how to find the good one ? how to tune it ? and how to keep it alive and stable along the process ?

On my opinion this attitude requires a good amount of resources and reliable strengths.

Keeping the distance is always a fight, because –first of all- being a bull or a chameleon is a basic pattern of human behavior . And, on the other hand, we like so much our job that we can often be too passionate, or too compassionate, and have the

secret temptation to take the script from his or her stupid author and fix it (changing everything if required) in one week.

On my opinion, and experience, distance can be built from two elements.

- 1) First of all, our knowledge, our technical skills, our abilities in screenwriting, script analysis, dramaturgy AND pedagogy, both of these competences helping us to be simply and strongly ourself, and helping us to be totally conscious of our position and role in the relationship we have with an author, whatever his experience in filmbusiness might be.**

.....I have to confess that I like the expressions « script-doctor » and « script-doctoring ». Mentor, coach, teacher or professor, we all are DOCTORS having to deal with... PATIENTS. I do not want to be cynical saying this, I just want to mean that creative process, like falling in love for example, is closed to a form of pathology.

Sometime the script is sick (normally we can do something in this case). Sometime this is the writer who is sick (our job can be harder in that case). And very often (I am of course exaggerating a little bit in order to entertain you) both of them are sick, which makes our job very very difficult.

In every case, we are people whose job is to make things –and individuals- better and we have to stay away from every other role that could divert us from this mission.

- 2) The second element that distance is based on on my point of view is professional experience. Experience reminds us that all the stories which are proposed in a filmschool or a production office or an author's apartment have been told already, and it is a good news, because we will not have to re-invent architecture, but only help to design a new house.**

Being aware and conscious of this reality helps us again to have distance because as you have surely noticed it, every story and every script thinks to be first and unique, like every new born baby does...

But experience also allows us to remember that if people we meet and have to work with are unique, we'll leave them –and maybe even forget them- the same way we met them. And that we'll be one day like these old teachers that do recognize us on the street but do not remember our name because they had 400 students after us at elementary school.

This thought should help us to take distance too, and get rid of excessive emotional commitment in our job.

this hardworking and shy first time film maker our heart wants so much to help is not the first hardworking and shy first time film maker we meet in our career. Maybe it will be possible to work with him, maybe not.

This obnoxious filmdirector that calls us when we are having breakfast with our kids to tell us that his wife described as « stupidely hollywoodian » the great suggestions we made last night to him is not the last obnoxious filmmaker we'll work with in our life.

Maybe we cannot fall in love anymore...

Maybe we cannot be really angry anymore...

But these are good news :

if passion, love and hate are not part of our professional relationships anymore, it means that we can start to work efficiently. That we can start to work with some distance. That we can start to work like a chess player, or a doctor, and definitely not as a co-writer...

I will even add a maybe provocative remark.

The moment I stopped thinking cinema was the only important artistic expression on this planet, but only one way among many others to tell stories, in a very unhealthy atmosphere sometime, I really got more clever and more « zen » in my job of scriptwriting teacher and consultant.

Yet, I am still fascinated by what effective help and sensitive cooperation can create ; and I am still in love with the virtues and pleasures of knowledge transmission. Feeling like a gardener pouring water in God garden's all over the world can be sweet sometime...

I have worked in the dramatic writing field for almost 15 years now, moving alternatively from writing to teaching, practicing to consulting. I had a very specific chance in the very beginning of the nineties: as an absolute beginner just out of a one year scriptwriting workshop with Krysztof Kieslowski, I had the opportunity to create and build a complete scriptwriting course at Lausanne Art School.

This gave me the great and unique opportunity to think about the writer's needs the moment I was needing help and tips for myself. From that moment, I got interested in tools, techniques, devices, and the transmission of these tools, techniques and devices. Logically then, I could never stop giving time and energy for teaching and mentoring. For me, transmission of our experience is an organic and necessary part of life.

From this moment too, I realized that the problems any author – young or veteran- is facing when writing or trying to write have two origins :

story problems, and creativity problems.

I worked with armenian directors as well as with belgium writers, with georgian writers as well with canadian directors, in every case, situation was the same. People face scenario problems, and they face creativity problems. These problems can be separate,

but most of the time they walk together and intricate themselves, which does not make our job easier.

It can be a simple one day or one week writer's block. But it can be also someone needing 5 years to write a complete draft (and killing 4 co-writers along the process) because of fear of failure and desperate search for one's own and personal theme.

How do we deal with that ?

It can be simply (this is so common) a writer-director that is unable to think about characters and how characters feel because he's obsessed by actors name and camera position. But it can be someone whose brain and spirit seem to resist indefinitely to the concept of CONFLICT.

How do we deal with that ?

It can be someone you would like to send three years in sex clubs and bars with the hope he or she will learn a little bit what life and humanity really is, but it can be someone who tells ANOTHER STORY he or she has deeply in his or her mind and everyone –you, the producer, even the author him/herself- knows it, and does have the feeling of a terrible waste of time, money and energy...

What can we do in such a situation ?

Reality of creating and writing, and specifically writing for film, is complex, messy and full of unrational elements. Some of them can be solved by the rules of dramaturgy -or a producer just saying NO and BASTA- some others with more subtle or complex techniques and understanding, while a few more serious trouble can probably never find any happy ending...

I see there another reason to keep distant, cold-blooded and analytical :

these creativity problems are not ours. We must not share them like a poor co-writer unfortunately has to, but absolutely stay distant from them, in order to see them, to contemplate them, to analyze them, and maybe find some way of resolving them.

What a job !

I told it before. The mentor, the teacher, the script-doctor is a doctor, and the script is a patient and the author is a patient too. Sometime only one of them is suffering, most of the time both of them are sick. And you have to take care of everybody !

So it 's time to speak about OBJECTIVITY, because distance and objectivity are notions which are very close. And a good amount of objectivity is for me absolutely necessary in our job to be effective, and to get the highest degree of LEGITIMACY facing the people we are working with.

Mentor's legitimacy is not difficult to establish in a well known filmschool or famous workshop, but things can be much harder in a production office where you just have been hired as a script-doctor for a filmmaker you do not know, or in this author's apartment by a quiet and full of tension afternoon...

Who are you ? He may say...

What allows you to speak about someone else scenario ?

In the name of what ? of whom, are you speaking ?

What do you know exactly ?

What do you suggest exactly ?

The more objectivity you can show in this confrontation, the more legitimacy and respect and guarantee for a not too unhappy future you can get.

But there is a good news : objectivity is basically what the author wants –or NEEDS !- to hear, because he does not need to hear again opinion, expression of tastes and spontaneous subjectivities. Bulls and chameleons, he met many of them among his or her friends and colleagues ...

I worked many years ago with a man who was a filmmaker and a professional mountainguide. We worked during the day in a house he had rented for me and he drove back home in the evening. As soon he was arrived, he told or read what he had done with me to his girlfriend. She HATED everything, every single word and idea of it, just able to say « I don't like, no, I really dont like ». This situation put the brave guy in a terrible conflict of loyalty and allowed me to see that the mountain hero was not very strong facing women. After a few weeks, I was fired. After a few months, the woman was. Now he lives happy with a french TV star that plays in all his films ...

Objectivity can be first a deliberate attitude. Facing complex creativity problems, we can behave like shrinks who just help the patient to establish links between apparently separate elements. We know the previous works of the person we are working with. We know the actual mess of his new project in which he seems totally lost... We can try to go from past to present, establish links between them, and then from present to future, if there is one...

We can work the same with writer's block. How did it dissolve and end last time in order to finally let the author achieve his or her job? Could it be possible to repeat the same situation ? recreate it ?

We can even work the same with THEME problems. Something strange always happens with the theme of a story or a film. Most of the time, we identify it from the first second while the author does not, (neither do the critics) even after the premiere in the cinema ! Telling an author - with the highest possible degree of objectivity- what seems obviously to be his or her real intimate theme is a wonderful - and very cheap- present a mentor can make to a screenwriter !

And the same concerns of objectivity work for scenario problems too :

Scenario problems are numerous but we know perfectly they are not infinite. Dramaturgy is a relatively limited corpus and it has the strength and the rationality of a cold science to which we can get back again and again like a priest to his bible.

Problems regarding distribution of informations in the story can be pointed with a certain degree of objectivity.

Problems regarding conflict can be pointed with a certain degree of objectivity.

Problems regarding time frame can be pointed with a certain degree of objectivity.

All this can allow us to do something crucial :

establish nothing less than a DIAGNOSTIC for every story or scenario that requires any help from us.

I have read more than 100 scenarios for RTBF, the french-speaking belgian television, in every case, I tried to establish – even briefly- a diagnostic I wanted as objective as possible in order to help the writers if their project was rejected, and many times, it was. Diagnostic helps. It always do. Because diagnostic has at least three aspects and functions :

- It helps us to identify and describe clearly the problems we'll have to deal with if collaboration with the author starts.

- If properly done (i.e. with a good amount of objectivity), it gives the « patient » –excuse my language !- a external description of his or her work, at which we will add a list of what seems us to be the problems, and a few suggestions about possible « therapy », or changings. (Most of the time, a simple and relatively objective description of what we have read is enough to help the author

realise there is still a difference or a gap between his/her intentions and what is transmitted to the reader).

- And, last but not least, it describes clearly the field, the territory, in which we will work, together with the author if a collaboration starts, and establishes its purposes and ambitions.

A few years ago at FEMIS, the famous Paris-based french film school, a student of mine –an african born in Ivory Coast- had to meet a jury in a short session that was intended to greenlight or not his project. A famous veteran french screenwriter I will hide the name was here. The guy did not say much but he had this sentence at the end :

Young man, you're coming from a country where people do like spicy food, you should then put much more spices in your scenario !

These words are not so cruel, of course. Producers or TV people can be much more cruel but the fact was, the poor student had to rewrite his script and he did not know where to start with, where to put some pepper or garlic or pili-pili!

I give you this example to tell you how much I believe in the validity and the importance of diagnostic. Everything along the following process (if there is one) will be influenced by this first sign, this first message sent to the author, and everything will be influenced by the acceptance, or non acceptance, of this diagnostic by him or her.

I like doctors. I told it many times before. Doctors have what they call « The serment d'Hippocrate » (Hippocrate's oath) which gives the philosophical frame and purpose of their practice.

We do not have a same oath –maybe we could think about creating one once !- but on my opinion a well done diagnostic

from the mentor may have this moral and goal-oriented virtue for the relationship we have with the authors.

It will create legitimacy, trust on both sides, and true desire to try to work in the same direction.

If patient recovers –a good script on everybody’s opinion ; a good film on the screen ; creativity problems more or less overcome- we even may receive presents like countryside doctors did in the past ! I received myself a little but very heavy statue from my ivorian student at FEMIS. And four bottles of tomato sauce from a georgian filmmaker that are still in my refrigerator...

If not, we’ll stay alone with (temporary) feelings of disappointment and guiltiness

Until *the distance* comes back...

And a new « patient » opens the door of our office...

Because this is something we do not have to worry about : despite so many efforts all over Europe for scenario health and wellness, authors and scenarios are still needing good doctors, and maybe more and more...

I thank you for your attention, and interest.

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