

CONCRETE SOLUTIONS TO ABSTRACT PROBLEMS

Michel Gaztambide

As a scriptwriter I belong to a generation of self-taught-Spanish filmmakers who started their career in the early 90's.

Almost at the same time and coinciding with the publication of an avalanche of cinematographic theoretical manuals and an increasing demand for training in this field, some of us, vocationally, accidentally, or out of necessity, were pushed overnight to the world of education. Right from the beginning one of the biggest demands dealt with the teaching of script writing, the search for the philosophical stone that would explain how to write a movie, a great one if possible.

So, suddenly I was turned into a self-taught scriptwriter that occasionally worked as a self-taught teacher. In fact, before I wrote my first scripts I never had a specific drama training and I did not even have a pedagogic preparation before approaching my first classes.

In spite of the apparent paradox of these words, I clearly know I am not an oddball at all. Qualifications have never been a previous condition in this trade. Before, now and in the future, many filmmakers who will not have gone through the schools will still manage to write and make their movies. And many of them will be requested by cinema schools in search of their prestige and experience as a source of wisdom and inspiration for their pupils.

The fact of being self-taught does not mean I never attended a course in script. Once I did it. It was in Bilbao, in 1989. My only teacher of script writing (of flesh and bone and with a blackboard) was Stephen De Souza, the scriptwriter of *Die hard*, among others. When he came to the classroom, he went to the blackboard and drew a line. «This is a movie », he said. Ten centimetres from there he drew a doll, below he wrote «10 minutes » and above the word "need". I think it was Luis Mariás who looked at me and said to me in low voice: "need". But I was listening open-mouthed to De Souza who in that precise instant, drew an ascending line from the eyes of the doll and stopped just before the end. There he drew a circle and with the chalk he turned it into the summit of a mountain. « The climax », he said. And he marked the remaining gap with a dull gesture, clarifying that it was a kind of commitment to relax the tension of the spectator, so that he/she would go home satisfied. Then he turned back and between the main line and the ascending one he drew a continuous line that went up and down. When he finished he stepped backwards and turned towards us. « This is a movie », he repeated. He smiled and put « Predator ». And that was more or less what happened.

At first, I thought that his magisterial lesson was some kind of joke. Only a few years later I understood that in that drawing he left on the blackboard as a rough sketch, there was a pedagogic truth. That the teachers of script, or the scriptwriters who give lessons of script writing, feel obliged to deliver indisputable formulae. This is what happens with a certain type of pedagogy. They tend to mark guidelines and deliver truths that are likely to be drawn. I also discovered that in these formulae, so obvious sometimes, were hiding some pieces of the absolute truth. That same truth we used to chase in script-writing classes and that we desperately keep on chasing.

Obviously, that problem was not and is not only a teachers' problem. In the end they try to adjust to the demands of their audience. Nowadays there is a fascination for the methods. We live in the civilization of the minimal effort in which the gratification has to be instantaneous. People do not want to suffer. They do not know what they are losing.

The thing is, with these few notions I started working as a teacher of script writing. My first classes were almost exclusively based on the rules, on the norms, on the principles and the teachings I was selecting of the different manuals of script that at that time I devoured compulsively one after another. The self-taught always demonstrate a kind of reverential respect for those who have a scientific background, drama in this case, and I could not think that the truth could be somewhere else than among those pages full of magic terms that put a name to everything. But I made a mistake. Not in the explanation, since I was careful and plagiarized one after the other, and among others, from Vale, Chion, Seger and Field. My mistake was that my explanations were supported by the viewing of important movies I capriciously selected. Besides, I remember I committed an unusual frivolity. For every three "admirable" movies, I would put one I took randomly from the video club.

Thanks to that mistake, or to that deficient methodology I discovered two things :

- 1) That taking into account the quantity of questions that came after viewing the masterpieces, like: " You have said that ... but ... », they deduced that, in many cases, the great movies were mocking the rules I supposedly imposed. At the best the filmmakers used that strategy more or less consciously as emotional clues in their game with the spectator. That is to say, we had to know some rules but these same rules were useless in the making of good movies.
- 2) The second one is that thanks to these imperfect movies I took randomly from the video store my pupils were learning about structure and drama. Curiously, it was more useful for them to see what they should not do. Maybe because it was closer to their level or problems. If we think an unsuccessful movie is a badly developed movie, we will come to the second thing I learned. That is to say: the rules of drama applied to the elaboration of a script are very useful, at a later stage, to diagnose or raise possible solutions. But they are not that important when the filmmakers are owners of their work, of their talent and art.

Summarizing. I discovered the importance of relativity and that hypothetically my pupils had the keys to the great scripts they were supposed to write. These keys were in them, in their capacities and evident or still to be discovered talents as well as in the knowledge of a series of more or less fundamentalist or opened drama systems.

After a period of reflection and forced by the experience I started changing the method. I got closer to the one I use or want or consider suitable to use. It is not the moment to expose it in detail though I am going to outline the main lines that define it.

This method, compendium of many methods, of some personal contributions and some apparently against nature lendings is not as much theoretical than practical. I expect the pupils to feel as soon as possible like scriptwriters. They should feel the pressure of their work and learn to develop, the sooner the better, a capacity of analysis and self-criticism, essential for their professional career.

By the way, I keep using movies. Good ones and, of course, ones of the other kind. The kind whose mistakes teach you so much.

Next I am going to develop, schematically and summarized, some of the keys about that way of training. I will divide it into three parts. The first one is a general approach that takes into consideration some important aspects regarding the future scriptwriters as well as the teachers. The second one is a brief commentary on exercises in a workshop of full-length film elaboration. The third one is an approach to pedagogic forms and experiments related to fields other than the cinema and that were useful to me when I had to give specific solutions in such an abstract and intangible area as the making of stories.

GENERAL APPROACH

(with regard to the future scriptwriter)

- a) It is necessary to make him/her work under pressure. To push him/her up to the limits of his/her possibilities. Some may not follow the rhythm, it happens. One of the achievements one may reach in a school or a workshop is the discovery that he/she might not be able to make a career. The future scriptwriter has to discover if he/she is capable of facing the keys of his work. Besides he has to be trained in the development of the writer's discipline (patience, discipline and method) that implicitly involves the scriptwriter's trade. He also needs help to elaborate his own system of work.
- b) We never stress sufficiently the fact that the scriptwriter has to write within the keys of the audio-visual language. He has to move away from the literature and learn to write images. He needs support to find the images of his story. The ones that contain it in a metaphorical way and the ones that develop it in a progressive way.

My technical readings have given me the passion for the decalogues. I also tried to make mine. Though the ten commandments remained in three. That is to say:

- We can only write what can be photographed.
- We can only photograph the surface of the things.
- The cinema is coitus, not masturbation.

With these three points and their development we want the student to reach a correct skill on the writing of his/her cinema script. His/her narrative and emotional strategy has to be elaborated in order to be deciphered by the spectator, someone who must be considered to be an active entity, in my opinion.

- c) The future scriptwriter must be pushed to working in collaboration. First of all with other scriptwriters, his classmates, later and if possible - with directors, producers and actors (it would be even better if they were all beginners). This could force to promote something we always look for, the synergy between schools. In some ways we try to familiarize the student with the work in a group dedicated to the cinema. On the other hand, we start to raise the keys of a certain pedagogic option. This option allows the free traffic of the stories as well as the freedom of judgment. I am always surprised to see that in many groups the pupils do not know the scripts of

their companions. It is funny how the group grows when this creative autism disappears. The student can accurately assess his/her values comparing his/her work with the others. And that is the way they start learning from each other.

- d) The work in a workshop or a master on project development has two slopes. A general one, where you work with the whole group of aspiring sriptwriters. And a particular one where a tutor does an individual follow-up of every project. In this individual follow-up one must work the project not only from the classic, or typical aspects, of drama (your first act, your second act, your third act) but besides it should penetrate into the specific and genuine aspect of every story. The professional experience has taught me that every story has its own key (even those that belong to a genre), that its ideal development does not always falls within the rules of drama. Generally speaking, the story itself has a few distinctive keys that implicitly contain the solutions to the problems they raise. We cannot treat the stories as if they were clones. Or at least, I think that within the distinctive features we need for a European type of teaching, the values of the genuine, the specificity and the particularity should be fomented.
- e) We should promote the future scriptwriter's capacity for criticism. Provided that there is no such truth of the script or we are just not qualified to form them. The students should expect from his/her teacher, variety, confusion, contradictions and different talents. The knowledge he/she should be able to get from this miscellany will allow him/her to develop his/her own stories and prepare him/her to work in any condition, for any format, under any type of pressure.
- f) We should also promote the self-critical capacity of the scriptwriter. The students must be trained for the day after. The day in which he/she will not have the support nor the supervision of the teachers. The day in which he/she will have to find the keys of his/her mistakes. The day in which he/she will have to work with the director or the producer and negotiate with them his/her creative ideas.
- g) The future scriptwriter will have to be encouraged, pushed, forced, to know the cinematographic skills. So, right from the school he/she will have to practice shooting exercises– shorts films– and at least once experience the responsibility of the direction. It would be very interesting for him /her to go trough the experience of production, script and acting.
- h) The students will have to face an increasing demanding level. Not only as for amount of work but as for rigor. The students will have to get used to rewriting, which is what it is all about.

(with regard to the teacher)

- a) The teacher will have to combine theoretical elements with the elaboration of practical exercises that should turn the pupils into professional sriptwriters. These exercises will have to fulfil several conditions and follow a logical crescendo. It will be very useful if some of the exercises were the teacher's own creation.
- b) From the teacher we should expect dedication. Without dedication it is not possible to force the pupil to a demanding and continued work. Every proposed exercise must be checked and analysed. In this analysis it would be convenient to

increasingly request the pupils. At first, they will be more technical in their writing, etc, then and progressively in the content, the story, its structure if necessary, its motivations, etc.

- c) The teacher does not keep for himself secrets of his art. He has to bear in mind that at present the pupils we are facing are what I call « professional pupils », they are about 20 years old and with attendee's careers at the classes. In these conditions we believe they are specialized in judging teachers in a pretty rigorous way. A teacher who keeps secrets is ingenuous or stupid. If he/she does not give everything he/she will not receive anything.
- d) The script writing teacher does not necessarily have to be a professional of the script. It only helps if it is accompanied with certain pedagogic aptitudes. In any case the script teacher must have a pedagogic knowledge. He/she should at least, have shown interest on methodologies that teachers employ in some way or another when faced with similar disciplines or those that take into account work related to creativity, story telling, etc.
- e) If the teacher is a scriptwriter it would be convenient to expose his/her own works. He/she should analyse them, dissect them, expose them in public. They are probably full of mistakes (see the aforementioned praise of the error), of practical keys that will turn out to be very useful to his/her pupils (for instance going again through the adventure of a project, from the first moments of its elaboration through the different versions of the script and up to the final movie) He should also have the chance to show his/her talent and foment what is a key process in the scriptwriters' training, critique and self-criticism.
- f) The teacher should be passionate. Without passion there is no contagion.

EXERCISES

It is not the moment to go into what could be an ideal group of exercises aimed at helping the aspiring scriptwriter to successfully reach the development of a full-length film. But I hope and wish that this aspect will also be treated in the seminar. My only intention is to briefly consider three aspects I reckon important.

- 1) Though the aspiring scriptwriter comes to develop his/her story in an almost obsessive way, it is fundamental to support his/her adventure with parallel exercises. With these exercises we would practice complementary aspects of the trade such as the knowledge of the cinematographic skill, the work in team, the development of the critique and self-criticism, the development of a certain know-how in the development of the sequence, the aptitude to talk. Etc.
- 2) The aspiring scriptwriter must be pushed to find the visual keys of his/her history. This is the usual and general methodology regarding its drama development, the keys of its structure. It is not precisely used from the point of view of the images. And my professional experience tells me that there is the essential, not of the narrative development of a story, but of its capacity to thrill the spectator. And therefore, to get him. To make a story exciting we need more than just telling the story. We have to tell the story in a certain way. And I am afraid – more than that- I

am glad - that this emotional key of the movies is less in the drama structure than in their visual development. Of course I am talking about the visual development that can and must be written in the script and not to the photographic style of a movie.

- 3) When we suggest the elaboration of a full-length film script to a future scriptwriter, we face many failures. I guess that one of the reasons is that they are faced right from the beginning to the elaboration of an original story.

In my opinion the ideal thing would be that before making this step, the scriptwriter faced the elaboration of full-length film plots of another type. This is complicated because it means a previous educational development of more than one year, at least two. And this is not always possible.

This ideal scheme would fall into three parts.

- a) The development in group of a full-length film of sketches or thematical. In view of a more or less concrete topic (The chaos, or Valencia, for example) that would be carried out jointly. Each pupil should develop a fragment. Once the different parts written, the group – always under the tuition of a teacher – would build them within a narrative system of full-length film. This would exclude the fragmentary full-length films of the shorts succession type like « 11 S », etc.
- b) Adaptation of a story. The pupil would work individually on a literary work given in advance or chosen by the pupil himself according to his/her interests, genre or natural talent. He /she would develop the story into a full-length film. With the story the pupil might have to face the problems of dramatization, narrative and emotional structure that he/she will need when building his/her own stories. This phase is particularly important because the main part of the work of a professional scriptwriter consists of adapting. Novels, news, cases, stories of other people.
- c) With the experience of his/her work in previous full-length films, the pupil would approach the writing of an original story.

OTHER PEDAGOGIC EXAMPLES

When you look for books to help you when elaborating a course of script writing, you find the big theoretical manuals. They all seem to be definitive, but they are still very little practical. And I still have not found any that contains a pedagogic clear development. You can barely find exercises. There is nothing but absolute truths. These absolute truths are immediately denied by other manuals, as scholar, blunt and indisputable as the previous ones.

But once the pupils have gone through the initial dazzle of all these theories they start to move anxiously on their chair. They start to need something more practical.

Which are the problems I will face? What exercises will help me grow? What can I do when I do not know what to do?

It used to happen to me. The theory as a teacher was too much for me. My climax and turning point would fall from the blackboard. I needed to look for examples and know how others had taught. Yet, I am not talking about the script but about the disciplines that had to do with the creativity and imagination. And I found things. First, in reference to the pedagogy. Gianni Rodari's magnificent book « The grammar of fantasy » that contains a good number of exercises with which they stimulated the creativity of Italian pupils in the 60's. To a great extent these exercises can be transferred and applied to the teaching and to the practice of the script; the experiences of the adults' education which profile looks so much like that of the pupils of a group of script. And close to my own house, the experience of the schools of bertsoaris.

In the Basque country, where I live, there is an age-old tradition of oral poetry sung in euskera, called bertsoarism. It consists, basically, of a confrontation, an oral duel between two or more poets. A referee suggests a topic, and poets improvise verses on it. The winner is the one that makes the other be quiet, the one who imposes his rhetoric, through beauty, humour or bluntness.

Beginning in the 80's, Basque institutions have greatly supported the indigenous language, euskera. The pedagogic experience I am going to tell you about was a part of this support.

Among many other particularities, many of which are often troublesome or downright surrealistic, there is the fact that children can receive their education following four different language models. With a prevalence of Spanish and Euskera. Those schools where all teaching, or most of it, is in Euskera, are called ikastolas. And in the ikastolas there are bertso classes. That is, children are taught to improvise verses.

To make a long matter short, I will say there are four basic rhymes. The most common two are the "txikia" (or small) rhyme, strophes of 8 or 10 verses of seven or six syllables, respectively, where a full rhyme is repeated in the even verses. The other common kind is the "aundía" (or big) rhyme, strophes with 8 or 10 syllables of 10 or 8 verses respectively, again with a full rhyme in even verses.

The question is obvious. How are they taught to improvise? Well, this is the system. First, they become familiar with the bertsos. In spite of being an oral tradition, many ancient bertsos are still kept, and of course many modern ones, too. Children recite them, learn them, become familiar with metre, rhythms and melodies. Then they are taught to improvise. Once the topic (*conditio sine qua non* in any duel) is fixed, the child is made to always think of the final bertso. That final bertso, the closing, is the one that will contain the message, or the poet's point of view on the subject, that is, the tone. It also contains the ending that gives the listener the key to the rhyme. Once with the final bertso, the poet starts developing and planning the story he will tell.

They first work on it writing. Then, standing up and doing by heart.

The outline would be: 1st) A subject to begin with. 2nd) The final verse, the closing which includes both the tone and intention of the poet. 3rd) The development of the strophe until the final verse. If we look closely at it, it is quite similar to how speeches and religious sermons are constructed in that everything is conducted to the final effect of the speech.

At the same time, lexicon is worked on. synonyms, antonyms. Lists of words are made whose endings are most common at the end of rhymes. First, words that are easily related, “maitía”, “txikía” (love, small), then words which would not be so easily introduced in a regular poetic plot: “esnea” “elefantea” (milk, elephant). Thus creativity is fomented and the possibilities of the most talented poets are seen.

After an experience of 20 years, educators affirm this work has made most kids improve in such aspects of their education as memory, vocabulary, creativity, speech and a certain kind of mental gymnastics.

But the experience does not end there. Often, some students come up that show special ability and interest on it. They enter then “bertsoeskolas”(verse school), after school, where they meet in a more specialized way, and in smaller numbers. Each group is headed by a responsible adult, a specialist, a teacher. This person does not need to be a bertsolari, but it is necessary that he has a great knowledge of bertsos and most of all is a good teacher.

Apart from the exercises we have already exposed and the everyday challenges which are part of their training, students in bertsoeskolas are taught in oral storytelling. Every day, one of them has to tell the others a story. It can be based upon actual facts, something he has been told, or something he has completely made up. But it must be their own. Brought from their world and their home. They are trained to tell stories.

Another peculiarity of bertsoeskolas is that they promote teamwork. The group gets together to work, sometimes go together to bertso festivals, and very often share their spare time.

Is their experience useful to us? It has been to me. It is funny how the resources of oral storytellers have been brought up once and again to be compared with those of screenwriters.

Three things have been most useful to me. First, working on structure. From a subject to the final verse (which has to include the tone and point of view) and to a later development. Then, the importance of teamwork. And finally, the habit of oral storytelling in class.

I have applied this method to exercises in short film- making. Given the subject, the script- writing student searches for the final sequence in which he tries to express his point of view, his way of thinking and style. Then he works on the development from the beginning to that final sequence. This has made many students improve on the aspect that is most often lacking in short films, that is, the closing, the end. We all know that ending a story is always the hardest part.

It is not useful for all kinds of stories, nor is it as useful to all students. For, as the master who once explained this to me, in the end only the best, the greatest, are those with a natural gift for communication.

And it is well known that the gift is not taught, but can be discovered and trained.

EPILOGUE

One of the reasons why we are here is to look for a European way of writing scripts. This, I suppose, includes a desire to find a European way of storytelling, or supporting storytelling.

It is clear to me. I do not know whether it is European or not, but the key is to get the best out of screenwriters, and that includes promoting a personal way of telling stories which can cause the interest and emotions of the greatest possible amount of active watchers.

The problem we face when we compete with other cinematographies is that we have imported even their way of teaching. And such way of teaching is based upon the creation of dynamic and narrative patterns which are liable to prove their efficiency through a series of clichés that act on a more or less systematic way on a passive spectator.

Regarding this, I shall quote the Argentinean Osvaldo Soriano: “I remember the deeds of that famous bandit who shortened the long ones and stretched the short ones. We are in this time; we want to put all at the same level, and that cannot be done.”

It is true. It cannot be done. Or at least it is not convenient for us.

Possibly, our greatest chance of differentiation and competitiveness lies in that the European spectator, our spectator, is an active, non-passive one. And I bear no doubt that promoting this attitude from the public is also a part of the screenwriter’s job.

And to end all this, another quote. It comes from a book by a disciple of one of the most important cinema teachers there has ever been in Europe, Russian Mijail Romm, who could form in his classes such different filmmakers as Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky. It includes a sentence from Romm and a comment from the student. It says:

“A class is formed by fifteen students who will be future directors and actors. A good teacher, an experienced one, knows that everything will be right if one or two of them are talented. Essentially, the teacher cannot teach a thing, Students will teach each other and learn by themselves. If there is a group of students that gives the class a direction and defines its essence and system of thought, the overall level will increase notably.” Romm never ceased to surprise us. In the beginning, he shocked us with the statement that no student could be taught to be a director! One can be taught how to direct a scene, how to compose it, and can learn some basic principles and cinematographic methods, but that is not the most important. Romm said that his main labour was to help us think, or at least not keep us from thinking.”

Thanks a lot.