

SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Paerangi | Video 2 – What makes a good story?

[intro music]

[00:00:11 Marina Aloffia McCartney, Screenwriter] I think when thinking about what makes a good story for the screen, we need to consider what film is, and film is a visual medium. Before the "talkies" (films with synchronised sound) they were silent, so stories were told through action, gestures, facial expression, and movement, and it uses film form—so, the mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound to advance the narrative. So, when thinking about what makes a good story for the screen, one of the things you have to think about is, can you tell your story through images? If you can easily picture your story, if you can easily picture your character's journey, then your idea is likely to be suitable for screen, so wherever possible 'show' rather than 'tell' and think about images carrying as much of the story, if not more, than the dialogue.

[00:01:08 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] Film and television gives you a depth of character in a very short space of time that other mediums can't. I think good screen stories allow you to get inside someone else's head and see the world how they see the world. For me it's about being with that character, feeling for them and empathising with them. I think the secret to a good story is that you tell it from the heart, that it comes from the heart.

[00:01:37 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] So, for me, anything that's told with bravery I think is appealing to me as a viewer, as well as a story that I can relate to and that I can see myself involved in in some way, be that through the theme of it, the plot and story of it, or through the characters. I think in particular, stories for screen are ones that embrace the visual side of the medium, as well as the audio, you know, it's very easy for us to write a scene and over write the dialogue of it because we're really trying to make sure we get the idea of the scene across to the audience.

[00:02:21 Dianne Taylor, Screenwriter] The first thing, film is a visual medium, so is this a story that is going to be enhanced by a visual story-telling? If it's a story that really dwells in people's interiors, maybe that's actually a novel. So, you need to think about the medium itself, then you need to think about what is going to engage people. You need a story that involves change of some kind, we need to see people succeed or fail. A film that doesn't change much, it just may not work, you need that sort of forward momentum. A book you can put down and come back to, but a film is playing out in time and you want your audience to remain captive, so it has to be something that's going to hold us.

[00:03:11 Robyn Grace, Director] It's such a subjective question because I think that's really personal and I think what makes a great story is something that's really important to you, otherwise there's no point in telling it, and the moment that you have a story that you need to tell, then other people will need to see it and understand it and relate to it. I think *that's* what makes a great story.

[00:03:33 Jaimee Poipoi, Producer] I think a great story is something that plays on your emotions and takes you on a journey. It can make you cry, make you laugh, just something that surprises you. I think a great story is one that looks at the external conflicts and the internal conflicts, so that could be the world around us, like what's difficult and complex, how does it change, and also the internal conflicts of your character, how do they change from the beginning to the end, so you want to see that change.

[00:04:04 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] I think the best kind of story is one that moves its audience—and that doesn't have to be to tears, it could be that you're moved to laughter or you're scared or that it changes your belief in something. I think a great story connects with its audience emotionally.

[music]

What storytelling format suits your story?

[00:04:31 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] When I first start to develop an idea I don't think I have a preferred format in mind. It's the idea that matters the most to me but I do think as the idea starts to develop, it does naturally lean towards a preferred format, whether that is short script or feature length script or TV episode. As an example my first short, *The Dump*, I knew pretty early on that that was going to be a short film or a short script, and that was

for a number of reasons: I wanted to set it over one day, and obviously, one day, it's not a long time in a film and a short script suited that; it was also set in one location, which again lends itself to a shorter form; but also it was about recognising my limitations as a filmmaker. I'd never made a film before so I certainly wasn't going to be getting millions of dollars to go away and make a feature, and so I wrote something bearing in mind that I needed to make something that had a chance of being made. I wrote something that had a good chance of being made and so *The Dump* kind of grew out of that.

[00:05:47 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] I think the amount of story that you have will determine what medium, what form you tell it in, so I often read short film scripts and go 'whoa, that's a lot of story, that's way too much for this tiny film', but also I've written a feature film that had too much in it to be a feature even, so that then became a TV show. I think when you're starting out it's a good idea to try and tell in a smaller way as possible, as briefly as possible, what's the essence of your idea. I will try and start in the story as late as possible and come out of it as early as possible—and, finding that moment in your story where something shifts, the most important, most interesting bit to you, that could be an entire short film.

[00:06:36 Marina Alofagia McCartney, Screenwriter] When thinking about whether a story is suitable for a particular format, I start thinking about things like, does the story have a closed ending, does it have a beginning, middle and end, because if it doesn't have these things, it might be more suited to another format like television or a novel or theatre. Are the images just as important, if not more than the dialogue? Again, if not, then it might be suited to theatre or an episodic format.

[00:07:16 Morgan Leigh Stewart, Producer] Yeah, I consider a lot of things when assessing a story for a particular format. Often it's about the length of the story itself or how many characters are involved. Some things do definitely feel weighted towards more of a series, where you can explore in-depth characters or worlds; whereas some things that are a more concise, tight story-telling environment could be better suited for a film.

[00:07:47 Robyn Grace, Director] I mean, filmmakers are really visual people—so, when you read words, if they don't become images in your head immediately, then potentially it's not going to work. The format that it takes usually forms itself really, really quickly and you should trust those instincts and really go with them, and you can finesse it, you can create bigger pictures or firmer ideas, but really hold onto those instincts. That's really important, like you could even write those down, 'this is how I felt immediately' or 'this is the image that I saw', and go back to those a lot because that's a very sort of guttural reaction to a story.

[00:08:27 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] The great thing about making for the web is that the restrictions are much looser, there's much less censorship, there's less restriction on how long the episodes need to be, and you can actually find a niche audience quite easily; whereas on television or short films you're restricted by potentially putting it in festivals or putting it on television, and you don't get the chance to just put it out globally such as on YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok, which are three, and there's obviously more very useful devices for us as makers. We can put our stuff out there, test it out, find an audience. We did that with *Awkward Love* on YouTube, and we've also done that more recently with a show called *Millennial Jenny* for Instagram, which is standalone episodes one minute using Instagram's restriction of one minute time limit, and that's found a wonderful audience globally.

[00:09:24 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] The way I work out between a television series and a web series ... there's not a lot of difference to be honest. Money is a big one, I'm not gonna lie. Do I think this has massive commercial appeal—I might try and push for the TV series; if this is like a heart story, this is something I'm desperate to show, it's a little bit risqué, I'm not sure of my audience, it's a bit more explorative—I will make it a web series. But saying that, I think you should, well, in terms of the series, make what you want and then figure out if it's got a home in TV or web. These days Netflix for example, everything is a web TV show so the line isn't so clear.

[music]

Do stories always come from the environment around you?

[00:10:22 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] When you're creating your own story, as I have done many times and my team have done many times, the inspiration for the story itself can come from anywhere, whether

that be seeing a person on the street and wondering what their story is, be it a scenario you've been in yourself and wanting to either tell the fully non-fictional side of that, or you want to make a little bit more of a story out of a scenario you've been in, or you've seen a short film and you're inspired to tell a story similar. The inspiration can come from anywhere.

[00:10:55 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] I think stories don't have to come from the environment around you but I think the best stories are the ones that you have a personal connection to, that matter to you, that you care about, and that only you can tell. Part of that is where you come from, your upbringing, your place in the world, your family relationships; I think your voice and your unique perspective is what will make your story special.

[00:11:24 Morgan Leigh Stewart, Producer] I think the environment around you definitely has a huge part to play in where stories come from, but often they can just spark an idea that can open your imagination to bigger things. I love genre films, I love science fiction; a lot of those specifically don't come from my environment, but the humanity and the empathy and the heart of a story should always come from something that you recognise or would like to see.

[00:11:50 Marina Alofagia McCartney, Screenwriter] I don't think stories necessarily come directly from the environment around you. For example, George Lucas wasn't living in a galaxy far, far away from here when he created *Star Wars*, but his story and his way of interpreting and creating that story would have come from the themes he was interested in—so, spirituality and morality. I think it's really, really important that you relate strongly to the theme that you're exploring in your story, and your understanding and interpretation of those themes will come from your world view, your physical environment, your culture, your political ideologies, and your understanding of the world.

[00:12:31 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter] In terms of whether or not stories need to come from the environment around you, no, it's not a hard and fast rule, but having said that, all the stories that I've made so far have seemed to come from the environment around me, and I guess there's really obvious advantages in starting stories that come from the world that you're comfortable with. Your knowledge of this world is obviously far greater and, therefore, when you tell the story, your connection to the material is going to be that much more pronounced and deep. So, when something is grounded in truth, that's a really important thing; having said that, although the seed for the idea often comes from the world around you, it is *the* seed and, as you start to develop this idea and you build this world around this idea, it becomes its own entity, it becomes its own thing, and that's where the fictionalised element comes in.

[00:13:34 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] The stories I worked on nearly always come from the scenarios around me or around the people I've worked with. We find that writing from that place brings a heck of a lot more truth and deeper storytelling because we're so familiar with the scenario. It's very easy to go, ooh, here's a good idea, but that's pretty much where it sits because it's only coming from your imagination. Being able to fill in all gaps either takes a hell of a lot of research or it takes drawing on your own experience for that. So with *Awkward Love*, that was an example, it was inspired by my now fiancé's dating experiences before me and, because she'd lived those horrific experiences so much, the story wrote itself, and because they were from a place of honesty and real life experience, we also found that that appealed to the audience, cos so many of them had been in the same scenario. We didn't have to make it up, it was something that many, many people have experienced.

[music]

How much truth should there be in fictional stories?

[00:14:44 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter] How much truth should there be in fictional stories? That is a great question and I'm going to say nothing and everything. You can make up entire scenarios, entire characters, it doesn't matter, but I think the heart of your story needs to be true. It doesn't matter what your characters do and it doesn't matter how your characters do it, they can be completely fictional in a fictional world with fictional animals and fictional food, it doesn't matter, but what you're really trying to do is connect to an audience and the way you connect is to speak to their heart. That only comes from a real truthful sense and feeling of what you really want to say, because what you really want to say isn't plot and it isn't your characters, it is the core of your story, and that is the only thing that really needs to be true.

[00:14:53 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] I put a lot of truth into my stories, maybe too much, I have a habit of putting my whole self into it. I've used a lot of my life and my family's life in my scripts, and I think you don't have to start from that place, but it gives it an authenticity, it gives your character a detail because they're real people, and I think the emotional logic of it will be real because it is real. I will often start with a story that is autobiographical, knowing that it will evolve and change and become a story that belongs to someone else instead of me.

[00:16:22 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter] On a purely literal level, it's a fictional story so there doesn't need to be any, but on a storytelling level there absolutely does need to be a truth to the storytelling, to the *intent* of the storytelling. A story needs to be grounded, as I've spoken about before, a story needs to be grounded in a truth, in something that the viewer or the reader can grab hold of. As an example, that movie *Gravity*, I have no connection whatsoever with being an astronaut or living in outer space, but that story was grounded in a very human journey. The adversity and the loneliness and the grief and the resilience, they're all very, very human, very relatable themes—and, because that was the truth at the centre of that film, I was able to go on that journey and completely connect to it in a really tangible way.

[00:17:24 Morgan Leigh Stewart, Producer] Particularly in genre film, the elements that I feel need to be realistic are a sense of character in what a character would react to, and then beyond that often genre films are a parable of something real, and that's the way that they really connect in with an authentic tone or vibe, is by having that sort of parable.

[00:17:50 Robyn Grace, Director] I think it's really important and I don't think it's a question just for writers, I think it's really important for directors as well, you have to bring the story back to something that you understand otherwise you can't tell it well enough.

[00:18:04 Marina Alofagia McCartney, Screenwriter] I think when you are developing fiction, the way to ensure or the way to try and nurture truth and authenticity within your story is to really tap into the themes and how you interpret those themes. If you were trying to interpret those themes through the lens of someone else, rather than yourself, then it's likely sometimes the characters might not seem authentic and might not seem believable, so it's really tapping into your own understanding of how a character's mind or inner workings work. It's also tapping into your understanding of these themes and how they play out in your world, because if you can take that and then transplant your truth and your way of seeing that into that fictional world and the way characters relate to one another, the way that world works, hopefully other people will be able to see that truth as well and relate to something in that truth. This is where having a universal theme is really, really important.

[music]

What should you consider when creating characters that are not of the same ethnicity/cultural group or gender/sexuality as you are?

[00:19:27 Karin Williams, Producer] Stories are often about identity and, in indigenous communities in particular, stories are not always about an individual; stories are often about your whanau, your family, your village, your ōire (village – Māori Kūki 'Āirani), your hapu, your tribe, your vaka, your iwi, and as an indigenous filmmaker you are often considering when writing a story or telling a story for the screen, the wider implications of what that story means for your identity as part of a collective. You also have responsibilities to your community about the story that you have told. Your family is going to be looking at that story, and the wider community, and asking what it says about you and about the people you're representing. As indigenous storytellers we are always representing our communities, and that is something that is inherently different, I believe, to most mainstream or non-indigenous or non-people of colour storytellers.

[00:20:31 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter] In the same that a writer needs to be interested and observant, it makes sense to apply the same approach when you're writing characters from different backgrounds to yourself. Do your research, be respectful, be interested, be observant, ask lots of questions, talk to the right people, don't make assumptions; these are all common sense things that you should be doing if you are writing for characters who are from the same background as you. With every story you're wanting to create characters who are both authentic, but also wholly unique, and relying on stereotypes or only a vague knowledge of the background of this character, obviously isn't a strong place to start from.

[00:21:19 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] Representation is important and identity is complicated, and you can't just write whatever you want. I think it is scary to write a character that is not the same ethnicity or culture or gender or sexuality as you, and if that's scary that's good because you have a responsibility to get that character right, to make that a fully formed human being who is nuanced and authentic. I think the way to do that is with consultation; I would always, always get consultation from someone who is that gender, that ethnicity, that culture, meaningful consultation and early and all the way through because the characters you write will be shaped by your own experiences. What you write will be shaped by your privilege and your place in society and the way you've been brought up, so you've got a big responsibility when you're writing characters that aren't like you.

[00:22:27 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter] What a writer should consider when they're writing about characters that are really different to them, cultures, genders, ethnicities, sexuality, first of all 'is this your story to tell?' would be the first one, and really interrogate. If it's not, if it's a story that's specific to a culture that you don't identify with, maybe really reconsider or really, really ask yourself why you're telling the story. If you're telling a story that happens to have elements of other cultures, as they should, or other sexualities and genders because representation matters, we can't all see just the same people on the screen otherwise it would be so boring, make sure that you have done your homework. Make sure that you have people on your team that you can talk to, that can input in a really meaningful way, that aren't just there to tick a box.

[00:23:30 Karin Williams, Producer] So, if you are a storyteller writing about a character or a situation or a story outside your own community, you need to consider that very carefully. You need to ask yourself, why am I telling this story about this person? If the answer is, 'well I think I'm gonna get funding if I have a Māori girl in my film', you need to really check yourself. If you believe that there is a really good reason to tell this story, then I think you need to go and consult with members of that community. If you're writing an Asian man or a black woman, I think you should go and talk to an Asian man or a black woman and find what they think about the story. I think it's important to ask, do I have the right to tell this story, what is my authority to tell this story, what are the wider implications for my telling this story? And what I often find is that people have not considered the implications of what that character may mean for a community. For example, if I decide that I'm gonna tell a story about a Pacific Island man and I decide that he's going to be a gangster, a criminal, and a drug addict, then am I unwittingly feeding into stereotypes about those people? If I'm going to tell a story about an Asian woman, is she going to be a servant or somehow, you know, a dragon lady, am I feeding into stereotypes? And I think it's very difficult to understand the implication of a stereotype if you are not from that culture.

[00:25:11 Jaimee Poipoi, Producer] I think when trying to work with a character that's a specific ethnicity or diversity or sexual orientation, it's really good to consider if you're wanting to capture that community, that group, or is it a characteristic trait that you're actually trying to portray. Being Māori I get approached with a lot of scripts by non-Māori people with Māori characters, and that's one of my first questions: why are they Māori? A lot of the times I find it's actually a characteristic trait that they're trying to capture in their script, so it's something they identify with that group that they actually put in the script, and I think if it's a characteristic, then taking away that specific label actually opens you up to a lot more opportunities when it comes to casting. So, I think trying to figure out if it's that characteristic or if it's the culture or the community you're trying to capture, and if it is that culture or community then I think it's really important to have someone in the team working with you (if you can't) that speaks to that group. To me, it just adds so much depth and it's just really beautiful, some authenticity into your script that potentially you couldn't bring. So, I think it's really important to ask yourself, like are you the right person to tell this story? If you aren't part of those groups, and when approaching someone to bring on that is a part of it, are they the right person? Another example is, I get approached a lot about Māori culture content but I actually didn't grow up in the culture so, although I am Māori, I may not be the right person for the idea, but in saying that, because I didn't grow up in the culture, I also bring a lot of understanding of what it means to not have that piece of culture, and that's another interesting layer. So, I think it's really important to know exactly what you're wanting from that character.

[00:27:13 Karin Williams, Producer] My friend, Victor Roger, who is a screenwriter and a playwright, often says, how would you feel about reading that story out to a community of the people you've written about? So, you need to check yourself. We still live in an era where an awful lot of people have decided that it's okay for them to tell stories about people from other cultures. It's becoming more and more difficult to do that and we see the hashtags 'by us

and about us', which are about representation, we see the hashtags 'representation matters', those are all around authenticity and one's own authority to tell a story from other cultures.

[closure music]

Homework

[00:27:58 Eloise Veber] The homework for this video tutorial is to jot down three story ideas. Going off gut instinct, write a paragraph on each, include a beginning, middle and end if you can. Ask yourself: who is the main character and what do they want? There is absolutely no write or wrong answer. This is a chance for you to dig into your creative instincts, think about what's important to you, what you want to say, and to have fun.