

## Universal Conflict

This session was written by Lucy for The Script Factory's **Story Design** course, which she taught alongside Rob Ritchie. The teaching points in this lecture are illustrated with reference to the following films:

*Shifty* (dir./scr. Eran Creevy, 2008)

*Lars and the Real Girl* (dir. Craig Gillespie, scr. Nancy Oliver, 2007)

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*Screenplays are primarily about specific characters in a specific situation, but the films with the most enduring appeal are those that present the character's problem as one that an audience can recognise and relate to from their own experience. This opening session explores how to find the most universal conflict in a dramatic idea so that the audience are personally engaged in what's at stake.*

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Those of you who have encountered me before will probably know that I spend a lot of time thinking about how I can be helpful to screenwriters. Obviously, this is my job, but the other reason I do this, is because it matters.

A couple of years ago I was taken to a Bedouin settlement in the heart of the West Bank in the Palestinian territories to a makeshift cinema in a school. The film screening was *The Lemon Tree*, a simple story about a woman who takes on the might of the Israeli Security forces, to defend her lemon orchard which had become a 'security risk' to the new Minister of Defence, who has moved in behind her house. In the process she falls in love with her lawyer, has a steamy affair and also makes friends with the Israeli Jewish wife of the minister.

In front of me were 6 young Bedouin girls in their early teens, who, I was told, had never seen a film before. Before the film started they were mucking about but as they watched a Palestinian woman assert her moral and human rights and her sexuality something changed for them.

Obviously, I don't know what they were thinking, but they were thinking: they didn't move a muscle throughout.

It is in fact a rare treat to see how powerful film is. With our privileged access to cinema we have perhaps lost our sense of wonder and it is good to be reminded that it matters.

So whenever I go to the cinema and see a simple idea that has been made into a moving, powerful, thought provoking or funny drama I work hard to unpick how it has been done: where and why it works, or perhaps doesn't, and try to come up with theories that we can apply to our own work, as developers, and assist you in applying them to your work in our role as screenwriting trainers.

Having brought up the word **THEORY** I do want to be clear that it is neither our aim nor intention to try to devise theories that will work for every film or every idea. This is the road to hell. It simply isn't possible nor is it desirable, and clearly if there was one way to write films, we would just learn it and then do it. When we examine interesting scripts and films we are looking for practical approaches that will become helpful and relevant notes for you to apply to your projects. Though again, I should say that we probably won't agree about everything, and nor should we... and if you find yourself agreeing with every word, well double check your thinking!

For this course we have chosen *Shifty*, *Lars and the Real Girl*, and *Let the right one in* (\*although not referenced in this first lecture) Whatever you personally think about these three films they each achieved production, distribution and a degree of critical success and all of them exceeded the expectations, and that has enabled the filmmakers to step up their careers. Whether or not you like them, by our reckoning, there is good stuff to be considered and learned and applied. Most importantly these are achievable first films, rather than Hollywood greats or classics.

The idea behind this course was to address some of the issues that are perhaps overlooked when you are designing a story. We run other courses that cover structure and the basic principles of a dramatic idea but, even with a solid understanding of all the fundamentals it generally isn't as simple as taking your idea and then writing it neatly into three acts.

So on this course we wanted to look at some of the other elements you ought to be thinking about at the idea stage (or when you come to rewrite) that will help ensure that your idea translates to a screenplay that will hook an audience, deliver a satisfying ending and be filled with engaging characters.

I want to say a quick word about ENTRY POINTS. For many years we ran a **Serious Screenwriting** weekend conference and every year someone on a panel – whether writer, producer, agent, talent scout - talked about making sure the reader has as many ways in to a script as possible. When pressed on what they meant by that, they gave replies that ranged from making it a good read, to writing a cracking part for an actor, to writing in a familiar genre etc.. However you phrase it, what they were saying and ultimately what you're trying to do, **is offer the reader a reason to care about your story.**

What does every screen story need? **Conflict.**

Why? Because without conflict there is no potential for audience engagement and a screen story exists to engage the audience.

There are other ways that ideas get told – as anecdotes, as accounts, as jokes, and there are other forms of **storytelling**, but in screenplays there has to be conflict. As the screenwriter Ron Bass says so succinctly – the difference between books and movies is that books are about what happens **within** people and movies are about what happens **between** people.

**Within** and **between** may well explore the same event, and the same emotional reactions, but 'within' is often expressed as an internal journey and 'between' should be expressed as a dynamic. To create a dynamic, different characters must embody and represent the various positions that an individual character may embrace in one journey within a book, and in so doing generate the potential for conflict.

So, the most basic tenet of your art is that screen stories explore conflict.

And the good news about conflict is that there are only three ways it can be expressed in a film story:

I know you know this... but

- someone wants something (which can be an active desire or to solve a problem) /other people stand in the way - Interpersonal
- someone wants something/something within them stops them – Internal
- someone wants something and environmental or societal obstacles don't allow it – External

In our view, the best screenplays have the one idea rendered as a conflict, playing out at each level.

If the story is about the character being made redundant at a critical moment – then the obstacles or problems that they encounter are all about this problem:

Who is most adversely affected?

What insecurities or hang ups do they have that make it harder to manage the new situation?

What is it about their world that makes this situation more difficult.

This is a really good brain-storming exercise to ensure that everyone and everything is related to the main idea so you have enough material for a 90 minute script.

Your first acid test is can you articulate the idea of the story which includes the main desire, dream, obstacle or problem that your character/s are facing? Because – as a reader - that is what I am doing to. To some extent this should be the easy bit. Once that is done...

One of the first questions we raise about scripts when reading them either to write a script report or to prepare development notes for a meeting, is ***what happens if the character doesn't get 'it'?*** (***whatever it may be***) in other words, we are looking for those obstacles and conflicts. Very often the answer is nothing. Partly because this is true for life. I really really do want to learn French but if I never do, so be it. Or more commonly, the character really wants to be a writer, get a new job, get a boyfriend, track down a rare species of animal have a baby, etc but the problem is that if they don't achieve it, well, also so be it.

This question, ***what happens if the character doesn't get it?*** is a fundamental question and from the point of view of the reader or the developer, if there isn't a good enough answer it is phrased thus: the stakes are not high enough and/or the conflict is not UNIVERSAL and, in most situations, that is enough to disregard the project. More generous readings, or where the writing is good and

characterisation shows skill, will perhaps ask how can the conflict be strengthened? How can the stakes be raised?

The default for the writer, and perhaps the implicit instruction, is then to think about how can 'the situation' be made worse for the character if they fail to achieve what it is that they need or want? And then the next draft comes back and it still not really working, which is unfortunately, quite common. It is also quite depressing and tricky to handle.

To carry on the example: in the first draft a guy has been made redundant, without a payoff, just before he is due to pay for a much wanted and needed holiday for him and his family. The feedback says the conflict is not strong enough, the stake isn't high enough, and so the second draft has our protagonist owing money to loan sharks and a dying child who needs an expensive urgent operation, as well as the balance due on a holiday.

The better question on the first draft **should have been** why don't we care about this guy? It isn't hard to care about anyone in a tricky situation.

It may be that the writer needs to think about the characterisation, how is our guy dealing with the situation – with anger, arrogance, humility? How are they hiding it? What emotional price will they pay when it is revealed? **And how is it made truthful**, so that whether or not I have been made redundant, I recognise the truth in the actions and decisions that that character takes and can anticipate the outcome, both good and bad.

In other words, thinking about developing the elements of the story that will give depth to the idea rather than, in this example, stretching it into a desperate need for money, which is easy not to care about.

My task in writing this session has been to work out if there is another way of looking at this need to RAISE THE STAKES that could be more helpful to writers?

Is it better and more useful to ask how can the audience be broadened? Or perhaps how can you translate the character's goal or predicament into something that a reader can personally identify with?

Can you get **one** reader to care first, on your way to reaching the broadest possible audience?

And this is where we start talking about Universal Conflict. Not the way it is expressed, but what it actually means. What do you think that really means?

Conflict that we all have experience of? Kind of.

It might be hard to define a specific conflict that each and everyone of us has been through and make all our films about that, so it may be more helpful for you think about it as A TRUTHFUL CONFLICT.

Even if I haven't experienced exactly what it is that the character is going through I can recognise **truth** in the situation and can relate to the actions that the characters take to achieve, solve, untangle themselves from the specifics of the situation.

For example, I haven't been a government agent that needs to stop an impending terrorist attack, but I recognise the truth in the situation. I haven't been kidnapped, but I recognise the truth in the elements of the situation. I have never been cheated on... but I think I know the range of responses that will strike me as true.

With this definition – that **conflict has to be truthful** we can begin to check our stories for some quite common mistakes.

The first problem may arise when the conflict is true but the drama resulting from it has been **manufactured** for the character.

For example:

I read a script in which the character was a beautiful leggy, blond architect, completely in control of her life except she couldn't get a boyfriend, because, the character thought, men were intimidated by her, and the story was about her journey to prioritise this goal and make sure she had a partner.

So the way she decided to go about it was to dress up in a fat suit, and make herself ugly so that the next guy she met wouldn't be intimidated by her leggy blondness and beauty, as others had been. All the drama, conflict and obstacles arose from this specific course of action.

Whilst there is undoubtedly truth in the notion that you can't manage love, and you can't make it happen, the way in which the writer had chosen to tell this story lacked a universal truth in the character's behaviour. Making herself ugly is not something that strikes me as true. Therefore it is too specific, too **manufactured** to a particular character and it isn't something that I would do, so I don't recognise it to be truthful. It failed to elicit care.

But we are not in the business of chucking out ideas, we are here to develop them so the question is:

How could I be made to empathise with the plight of the leggy blond??

As I said, there is truth in the premise I outlined. The idea that you can control pretty much everything in your life but you can't control and manage love. You can't make it happen, like a contract, or a job, or a house purchase, or a beauty and fitness regime. So this character is trying to get what she wants by controlling a situation, when what she needs, is to be able to relinquish control. The wrong course of action, or an untruthful course of action has been chosen to explore this idea.

NOW it is possible that you can create a character who would be fool enough to do this thinking it will get her what she wants but you make life harder than it needs to be!

Because a second reason that a conflict may fail to feel truthful is when the character wants something or can't do something, which is so tied up in their own specific backstory that it is only relevant to them.

An example of this is a character who wants to be a opera singer; this is perfectly fine for a screen story but not if the problem is because she has no confidence because when she was five she was asked to leave the school choir, when she was six she faltered at her brother's birthday when she was supposed to do a solo, when she was seven her skirt fell off during the school play and you get my point. Being under confident is enough for us to understand that the character's desire has

become a problem made worse. Giving us all the **specific reasons** has the effect of making the story feel crowded and not universally relevant. We have all felt under-confident in situations that demand a lot from us.

So, it may be helpful to think of universal conflict as a **truthful conflict**.

And your job is to ensure that the character in a situation or a predicament or with desire for a goal of some sort elicits recognisable human reactions – the situation and the character’s response need to be truthful. This doesn’t mean it can’t be surprising, but the protagonist must respond in a way that we understand. Another way of saying this: the specifics are not ours but the **values at stake** are recognisable.

Did you see *Young Adult*? I loved it... basically the story of a 35 year old woman who is irritated by the smug married baby news of her old boyfriends’ wife and goes back home to win him back. In truth, I wouldn’t do that... but I do recognise the sense of feeling unresolved, left behind, missed out. Because these are attached to values that we most often have.

What do I mean by that??

Well, for example, we all understand the importance of the search for:

Truth

Justice

Love

Dignity

Freedom

Self-assertion

We all know the importance of identity and the centrality of trust in relationships. And we understand heartbreak and betrayal.

On your way to broadening the audience, it is really important that your stories have a universal value at stake in them.

Let’s think about this in relation to *Shifty*:

The idea of the film is this:

*Shifty* is about 24 Hours in the life of a small-time drug dealer. The unexpected return of his old friend enables him to see his future for what it is going to be if he doesn't make a change, and with some clever double-dealing he is able to give it up and walk away towards a brighter future. This is essentially the idea.

How then are we made to care?

The reason I chose this film is because I think this is a great example of an idea with a limited audience – my gut response is – don't sell crack cocaine you sad loser and I don't really care. Most of us, in fact I would hazard the guess that all of us here, are not crack cocaine dealers and yet most of us recognise something when we watch that film; whether it is something in the world, something in the relationships, something in the resolution, something else, but something that enables us to **care** about this crack cocaine dealer and be willing him to change. We are happy when he gives up his mobile phone – the symbol of the drug dealer and the link to that world and gets on a bus outta there.

My task has been specifically to work out how and why this care-factor has been achieved in order to lift the idea from one without obvious universal conflict, to one with enough to find an audience.

If we start with the character of Shifty himself, what do we **never** see him doing? Drugs! It is a very small decision but one which allows us to relate to this character as a 'straight' person. I am going to talk much more about how we relate to characters tomorrow, but an important first point to make is that Shifty is not doing this to finance his habit, which distinguishes him from the other drug dealer in the story and enables the development of the key plot point; it is **not Shifty** who is cutting the drugs so he can get his for free; so in the rules of this world and as far as one can be honourable, he is.

What else does that make him? Clever! This is backed up with reference to his 4 'A' levels. So for being a drug dealer, he has two very admirable qualities. Which enable us to like him more.

One of the ways to check the levels of universality is to think about **what is at stake for everyone else in the story?** Your answer to this should not be an audit through the cast of characters describing what it is that this story means to them – this is specifically about how does the main plot – the reason you are telling this story - impact on other characters. This question must make you think about whether the best stakes have been invested in order to serve the story and broaden the audience.

Chris, the (absent) best friend.

The story could be told with Chris as Shifty's new friend. This allows for some stakes: he represents a new way, or another way of living your life. But in making Chris an old friend and in giving him a significant back story we have a character that has potential to broaden the audience.

- He ran out on Shifty at a crucial and difficult time due to drug dealing and drug use.
- He is back doing things that we recognise to be truthful:
- He is facing his past
- He is confirming that he was right to move on

And in the present of the film:

- He is not a drug user
- He has a regular job
- And he has a chance to stand by his friend and right the wrongs of yesteryear

Once we unravel it in this way, what emerges is recognisable redemption story in this British gangster film.

Let's think about why this matters in a bit more detail.

Early friendships are very enduring and those of you old enough to have sustained friendships over many decades will know, like me, that they have a quality of sibling or family-relationship about them. Meaning that the criticism of one's personality and one's choices is never held back, yet the loyalty and defence of each other to anyone else is very fierce.

The relationship between Shifty and Chris is conveyed with depth and maturity and therefore becomes a **recognisable truth** at play in the film that helps to broaden the audience. We want their friendship to succeed, and the past not to come between them. We don't consciously think this, but it pulls us in to the story.

Can you think about key moments that encapsulate this relationship? Key examples for me are:

- Not talking about the stinking horse (why did you leave me). This, for me, is about re-establishing the friendship first, and whilst there may be some fear of losing the good moment, it does also convey a simple enjoyment in each other's company.
- There's a great moment when Chris says 'I could smash one of your mum's curries' which immediately evokes a joyful, youthful history between them.
- When Chris says 'I'll get me bag and go – only joking... sticking together now.' There is honesty, grace and loyalty between them – the highest values a friendship can have.

What about Shifty's family?

What is at stake for his brother? His **trust** in Shifty. This is another important way in which the audience is broadened. Rez, the brother, has a relatively minor part, but it is significant in advancing the plot - he flushes away the drugs and forces a confrontation between Shifty and Glen - and in broadening the emotional landscape of the story.

Again, there is something very recognisable in the way Rez, the brother, is blindsided by the obvious: despite the evidence of money in the clothes, the box fresh trainers, the equipment, the gear, Rez **chooses to trust** that his younger brother has given up dealing. When the trust is betrayed, the audience aren't thinking about the plot implications, they are thinking of the time they ignored the bleeding obvious and allowed hope to triumph over experience. We have all done it and it is very powerful.

So again – this is not about the specifics of the plot or the characters, rather this is about giving the story real latitude in its emotional range that enables entry points for the audience beyond the idea.

What about Trevor – what is the line you remember in that sub-plot?

*When his partner says "You swore on our baby daughter's life that you had given it up."*

Where I think it is safe to say that both Trevor and Glen are functional to the plot, Glen's world is firmly rooted in the drug community where life is half lived, high risk is commonplace and death is not unexpected. Trevor, I think additionally serves as the 'yuk' factor. It takes the world of drugs into the 'real world' where we see it effect the lives of his wife and children, people who did not opt into that world. While this offers an observational view point on a family affected by drug abuse rather than speaking to some universal human condition, its themes of broken trust and betrayal bolster the main idea giving it a very tragic veneer that couldn't be extracted from Glen's death alone.

In terms of *Shifty*, then, we have 2 really strong universal ideas that have been made integral to the story through the detail used.

- The power of good friendship to endure, nurture and save.
- To trust the untrustworthy –with all the right motives and despite what they say - will always bring heartache.

These statements of truth about the human condition speak to me and speak to you and we overlay them with our own specific experience. And in so doing, watching the film about a crack cocaine dealer can become an engaging memorable experience rather than a detached forgettable one.

### **What about universality in *Lars and The Real Girl*?**

I think we can safely say that all of us turn to a rubber sex doll in times of need... or not!

I love this film. It feels to me like the writer came up with a great concept – “I know! Let's make a film about a 27 year old guy who has a proper relationship with a rubber sex doll!” It's funny, and high concept and cinematic.

To be honest I don't know the genus, but let's assume that the writer must have started with the idea of the real doll and our job now is to go backwards to unravel the universal conflict.

My first point to make is that I am coming at this film from the opposite angle – when you have a great cinematic idea what process will help you find a universal conflict to give it depth.

The idea of *Lars and The Real Girl* is a story about a shy 27-year-old man called Lars. He has a profound fear of intimacy and, until he gets over it, adult life and adult relationships will be unavailable to him. It is revealed that his problems stem from the fact that his mother died in childbirth – with him – and his dad was too grief stricken to give him a warm and emotionally secure upbringing. His older brother Gus split the family home as soon as he could.

At the start of the story Lars father is also now dead and his sister-in-law is pregnant. As he lives in the garage at the end of his brother's garden, Karin's pregnancy is a very confronting inescapable fact and his fear of losing someone else that he loves is overwhelming him.

So far so dull, and even tedious. Also not, one hopes, a set of experiences that most of the audience share and relate to, so the question again is what are the universal conflicts in the idea, and what is at stake for the characters in this story that enable the audience to broaden?

### **The fear of losing people**

### **The need to process trauma to move on**

Put like that, *Lars and the Real Girl* is a story in which we **recognise the human condition**, we know he needs to become the adult he should be by now, and we know he is struggling.

The question for us is how have the filmmakers worked to convince us that this is a story we can enjoy and that the device of the Real Doll is a 'truthful' response to the situation?

Let's think about Lars:

What is the key point to make about Lars character? He is incredibly kind and nice to Bianca and whilst we can think it is ridiculous, it **shames** us to judge him and it is a crucially important part of his characterisation. It enables him to win over his family and his community, which will in turn release him, and the clear intention is that this will win over the audience.

What else is significant about Lars? He is 27. Which means that the scene you may reasonably expect – the one in which he is taunted and ridiculed by his peers is absent. If Lars was 17 there would be no way of avoiding it, or something like it, but at 27 it is adults who surround him.

Gus and Karin represent the range of ‘normal’ audience response covering the spectrum from angry, to embarrassed, ashamed, willing to be helpful, and then ultimately generous and deeply affected by the situation – summed up perhaps in Karin’s knee jerk cry to dial 911 when Bianca is ‘unconscious’!

The other significant point is that this story takes place in a small community. What do small communities mean to us? Knowing each other’s business but being tolerant of each other. It is the job of the other characters in this story to convince us that Lar’s actions are believable.

There are two important scenes in which this film opens up to a broader audience: the first is, I think, Karin and Gus’s meeting with the key folk of the church congregation wherein it is pointed out, with examples, that everyone is a bit mad. In that moment we nod our recognition.

And secondly, Lars saying that ***hugging hurts like burning, or like a thaw, when your feet freeze. Yes that is exactly what it feels like.***

Together these two scenes allow us to recognise some commonality of the human condition – or a universal truth about the way people are and at the same time, give us the SPECIFIC depth and desperation of Lars’ problem that the story is going to be concerned with.

So even with something as seemingly ridiculous as a real doll standing in for a girlfriend to a shy 27 year old we can extract universal or truthful conflict.

### **How can you apply this?**

The questions you need to ask are these:

What is universal about the idea in your story?

How are you expressing this?

To help yourself to do this, write a brief paragraph about your story that defines both the core value at stake and what is motivating the character/s.

*The Fully Monty* has a clear goal - about getting on stage and stripping to earn some much needed money; the value at stake in this story though is **male dignity** and this is what appeals. It is made funny of course because stripping and dignity are at odds...

Once you have defined this, ask yourself is the motivation truthful? Is the desire for the value something that that all humans want? The specific course of action undertaken by the characters in pursuit of the value... is this a truthful and recognisable response?

The key to shaping the detail of your story is to keep it focussed on this bit – the values that are at stake in the idea.

Think about the people around your character

#### **Their family**

What is at stake for each member in the story? Can it be something that helps broaden the audience, like trust, or loyalty? Can you use the familiarity of family relationships to express these stakes? Where does everyone sit at the table? Who is hiding what from whom?

#### **The main character's friends:**

Don't audit what you have written, or thought about – rather ask yourself: is it more useful that they are old friends or new friends? These are very different relationships in terms of the way we present ourselves, and both have universally recognisable patterns.

You could also ask is it better if the friends are from a similar background or different? Again – this can create stakes that enable entry points.

Small community versus big city?

#### **The other key characters**

What is at stake for the other characters? Make sure there is something, and then make sure it is related to the themes to ensure the broadest possible audience.

Use films that you like if you need to practise the art of discovering what is at stake and, like we have done this morning, interrogate how it is manifest in every key choice.

**To sum up:**

Because we don't primarily watch films to be intrigued by what is happening the screen, but rather to be emotionally engaged, there needs to be something **recognisably true** in the situation that resonates with universal human fears, human hopes and human desires.

Whether it is a story of a drug dealer moving on or a emotionally retarded 27 year old, the job of the story is to allow the audience a way in by being conscious of the main universal value at play in the story and using it to the maximum effectiveness.