

Beyond The Silver Screens

Written by Paul Schrader



From video games to reality TV, we are inundated with narrative and swimming in

storylines, says legendary scriptwriter Paul Schrader. Can traditional cinema keep

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up? Or are we suffering 'narrative exhaustion'?

Screenwriters love to complain. They are disrespected by producers, deemed dispensable by directors, not duly credited by critics, treated like employees by actors - although few complain about being historically and chronically overpaid. Another thing they don't complain about is "the exhaustion of narrative", though it weighs very much on their minds. For screenwriters to

complain about the paucity of original ideas would be like a salesman complaining about a lack of inventory. It's not good for business.

Writers have always known there are a limited number of storylines. Christopher Booker's Seven Basic Plots popularised the number seven, but others have argued for three, 20 and 36 basic plots - Rudyard Kipling said 69. That's not new. We do tell variations of the same stories over and over. That's not what I mean by the "exhaustion of narrative". What is new is the omnipresence and ubiquity of plot created by media proliferation. We are inundated by narrative. We are swimming in storylines.

Let's crunch some hypothetical numbers. Take a media-aware person of, say, 30 years of age. Call him Ollie Overwhelmed. When Ollie's great-grandfather was 30 he had perhaps seen 2,500 hours of audio-visual narrative (plot). His grandfather, age 30, had seen about 10,000 hours. His father had seen 20,000 hours. Ollie in 2009, age 30, has seen approximately 35,000 hours of audio-visual narrative. These are not hard numbers. I've read no polling to this effect. But this seems about right.

That's 35,000 hours of plot. Movies, television shows, cartoons, streaming video, YouTube clips. Storylines long and short: teen comedies, soap operas, love stories, crime shows, historical dramas, special-effects extravaganzas, horror, porn, highbrow, lowbrow, hour after hour, day after day, year after year. That's a lot of narrative. It's exhausting.

What does it mean? For a storyteller, it means that's it is increasingly difficult to get out in front of a viewer's expectations. Almost every possible subject has not only been covered but covered exhaustively. How many hours of serial killer plot has the average viewer seen? Fifty? A hundred? He's seen the basic plots, the permutations of those plotlines, the imitations of the

permutations of those plotlines and the permutations of the imitations. How does a writer capture the imagination of a viewer seeped in serial killer plot? Make it even gorier? Done that. More perverse? Seen that. Serial killer with humour? Been there. As parody? Yawn. The example of the serial killer subgenre is a bit facile, but what's true for serial killer stories is true of all film subjects. Police families? Gay couples? Corrupt politicians? Charming misfits? Yawn, yawn, yawn."Nosotros servimos al publico. La medida no es el número de personas que entran a un museo sino la calidad de la experiencia. Medir esa calidad es difícil pero no imposible. Se pueden observar sus reacciones, podemos saber si vuelve o si e un visitante habitual. Si no quiere volver será una señal de que el museo ha hecho las cosas mal. El publico no se confunde, es inteligente, no hay que despreciarle, siempre me sorprende por su finura e inteligencia".

This becomes painfully clear to any writer who attempts to orally tell his story (screenwriting is closer to the oral tradition than it is to literature). You start to tell a story, try to catch the listener's attention, then watch as Ollie Overwhelmed packages your story and places it in a box. He has seen so much storyline that he has the boxes already prepared. Just drop quote marks around the premise and file it: oh, that's the "two couples on a road trip" movie or the "six men in a lifeboat" film. I know that film. Ollie's mind operates like that of story editor. "And then he goes to her place," you the screenwriter say - "and he finds her hanging naked from a hook in the bathroom," Ollie the listener thinks: I know that film.

Originality has always been in short supply. Does the proliferation of media mean that it is harder to be original today than it was 50 years ago? Well, yes. Today's viewers live in a biosphere of narrative. Twenty-four-seven, multimedia, all the time. When a storyteller competes for a viewer's attention, he not only competes with simultaneously occurring narratives, he competes with the variations of his own narrative. That's real competition. The bar of originality has been raised. The media marketplace puts a premium on anything "new" or "fresh" and, at the same time, inundates its viewers with continual and competing narratives.

Critics and commentators love to say things like "I love an old-fashioned love story," or a "good old-fashioned murder mystery". But what is their response when they are presented with just that? Adjectives such as "tired", "hackneyed", "unoriginal", "dated" and "prosaic". What's a writer to do? Work increasingly outside the confines of traditional storytelling, for one thing. This exhaustion of narrative is behind the rise of recent "counter-narrative" entertainments, such as:.

1. [Reality TV](#). Any regular viewer knows that reality television follows its own scripted formulas, but the appearance of being unscripted is essential to its appeal. Weary of so much predictable plot, the jaded viewer turns to "reality".

2. Anecdotal narrative. The attraction of films such as *Slacker* and its mumblecore progeny is the enjoyment of watching behaviour encumbered by the artifice of plot. It is not "fake," not "contrived" (although of course it is)."

3. Reenactment drama. Whether based on famous events or lesser-known ones, reenactment entertainment sells the premise that these events actually happened and were not cooked up by a staff of writers (though, again, if not actually cooked up, they were seasoned and served by writers)..

4. [Video games](#) . The ability of the viewer to participate in the storytelling process creates an illusion of non-contrivance.

5. Mini-mini dramas. Part of the appeal of three- to five-minute stories created for cellphones, YouTube and original programming is the illusion of not being crafted narratives. Just bits of life.

6. Documentaries. A staple of filmed entertainment since its beginnings, documentaries, historically the poor cousins of commercial cinema, have grown in number and viewership, an increase owed in part to the desire of viewers to look beyond predictable narratives.

What else? Write for formats based on predictability and repetition (soap operas, crime procedurals, superhero cartoons), repackage old plots with new stars and search for that elusive "original" twist that makes an old storyline fresh. And wait. Wait for emerging media to define the new need for narrative.

Storytelling began as ceremony and evolved into ritual. It was commercialised in the middle ages, became big business in the 19th century and an international industry in the 20th. Today it is the ubiquitous wallpaper of the postmodern era. As screenwriters, we struggle with our own success. We have wallpapered our world and now we can't get anyone to notice the picture we just hung. This is not a big deal. Not a crisis. The "exhaustion of narrative" is not a standalone development. It is one of a set of crises that afflict current cinema.

Movies were the artform of the 20th century. The traditional concept of movies, a projected

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image in a dark room of viewers, feels increasingly old. I don't know what the future of audio-visual entertainment will be, but I don't think it will be what we used to call movies. Narrative will mutate and endure. Audio-visual entertainment is changing and narrative will change with it.

Paul Schrader's Screenwriting Masterclass is on 3 July at ScreenLit: Festival of Film, TV & Writing at Broadway Cinema Nottingham: broadway.org.uk/festival . Schrader's [Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters](#) will play at Screen Lit and open at ICA, London, on 10 July.

Paul Schrader
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<http://zonezero.com/magazine/articles/schrader/index.php>