

Why do good writers go wrong?

In my books I put forward the theory that writing well seems to involve a balance between logic and imagination, or in Edward de Bono's terms, vertical imagination and lateral imagination. I said that writing badly could happen to any writer and that writing well seemed to involve making our work 'real but unusual' by applying logic and imagination in a specific sequence. It was, I suggested, rather like using the brake and the accelerator on a car, and the result of balance was that we could create scripts that were original yet cliché free, giving the audience an attractive combination of pattern and anti-pattern. Lack of balance resulted in clichés or incredible, over-the-top writing, and seemed to be caused by writers unknowingly staying in either vertical and lateral thinking, or else using each for tasks for which it is not suited. Typical examples of this misapplication of thinking was using vertical imagination, which consists only of memory banks of materials, to get new ideas, or using lateral imagination, which is uninterested in credibility, for plotting purposes.

Keeping a balance sounds easy. But I've observed in myself and other writers of all levels of experience that balance is actually extremely easy to lose, even when the writer is making a very conscious effort to achieve it, indeed, is convinced that balance is happening. Why are we so bad at this? Why do we so easily drop into one mode of thinking or the other without realising it? How is it that we can use all our skills and talent to write a script with great care over a period of months - and yet not notice in the script non-sequiturs and clichés that jump out at our colleagues on one reading? Moreover, how is it that when we, in our turn, come to read our colleagues' work we can pick their faults so easily. What is going on here? Why are we so blind to our scripts' faults? Ego? .

There is no simple answer here, but I do think brain function and habit play a part and I'd like to share these theories with you because anything that helps us be slightly better or more prepared in this very demanding profession of ours is worth considering. I think the answer rests in two factors, in a combination of brain chemistry and habit. Let's look first at brain function. I am of course only an interested amateur here. But I have been struck when reading about the brain chemistry of creativity and memory by what the scientists describe as the functioning of a part of the brain called the amygdala. The amygdala is a very primitive part of the brain. It handles emotional memories, particularly fear-associated memories, permitting to learn from our mistakes and survive. As I understand it, the process of recalling an emotional memory involves the amygdala being flooded with brain chemicals to permit fight or flight. People suffering from post traumatic syndrome who experience flashbacks triggered by associations with the past do so because their amygdalas have become over-sensitised, flooding with chemicals at the smallest stimulation.

Notice that the amygdala typically handles fear. I'm reminded here of a comment by Paul Thompson, at NYU. Paul cleverly points out that that the reason people go to movies is to be frightened, whether it is the pleasurable fear of comedy, the thrilling fear of action adventure or thriller, or the fear of death or loss, grief, provided by melodrama. I think Paul is right, and 'fear' is a very vivid way of explaining what writers normally and blandly term 'rising suspense' or 'jeopardy'. We are used to the idea that our scripts need to contain rising suspense or jeopardy, but it is probably much more useful to understand that what we do in our scripts is create fear. And here's where our writing problems start. To create fear we have to resort to our own emotional memories. In terms of brain function, we flood our

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amygdalas with chemicals and recreate the physical and emotional experience of feelings like panic, grief and terror. We live the scene. But in order to get that scene on to paper and make sure it is manipulating the audience in exactly the right way, we need to access another part of the brain, a much later addition, the cerebral cortex, the part that governs analysis, logic and learnt skills. David Mamet says that the actor has to be simultaneously inside the character and at the back of the audience watching. The writer has to be this and more, because the writer has to be inside all of the characters. In addition, the writer is in charge of the structure of the whole piece, that is, the way in which the next scene and the next and the next, will fit together. In addition, simply to get the scene down, the writer has to be utilising very technical skills to with dialogue, subtext, exposition, structure, In television the writer has even to write the scene to a specific and limited number of seconds. Common sense says that jumping to and fro between a highly emotional state and the cold-blooded logic and objectivity that it requires to write the scene would be very difficult. Common sense says that it would be much easier to stay in one or other state. And I think that is precisely what happens.

Just a thought.