

Maybe the best screenwriting software is a pencil

This is a note I sent to the short film writers discussion list. People were discussing the best layout programmes and commenting that they liked the creative fluency these programmes gave and felt these permitted them to abandon cardboard index cards. This alarmed me because it seemed as if people were pre-empting the planning process. I think it's really important to plan and understand the film in its entirety as much as you can before you write (although of course, things do always slip and change in the writing) . My point is that fluency is not necessarily a sign of inspiration. Unless you are really deeply into a piece of writing, it can often be the result of you unconsciously recycling a cliché or else writing off the top of your head. Be careful of writing on a high - you're usually out of control (sorry to sound so negative)

I have only passing knowledge of these screenplay format programmes having invented my own with macros and auto-text some aeons ago .

So I am coming in on a different matter entirely. It's about index cards and the creative process. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but some of you seem to be looking at these programmes as a way of dispensing with real cardboard index cards as part of the planning process for the structure of the script. If you aren't, don't read on. If you are, forgive me for saying this but if you do dispense with the use of an entire set of index cards for the whole script (that may be ninety or so cards) that you set out on a table and scrutinise in its entirety, reshifting for days, perhaps weeks at a time, you rob yourself of an extraordinarily powerful analytical tool to create a good script.

I'm convinced after my own work and working with literally hundreds of new writers that it is very important to maintain an overall sense of the script. Otherwise you risk end up writing in a linear way - which is like building a house by building one room to completion - then progressing with the next. Not only do you shut off all sorts of possibilities, but you lock yourself into a process of justifying and making work the very first fragmented ideas that you started with. Which tend to be only metaphors for what you really want to write about. Remember that the first scenario that suggests itself is almost always a cliché or at the very least an approximation of what.

By all means get yourself a useful layout programme, but don't let it pre-empt the planning or dictate your film's structure or let you forget the demands of the individual scene. Don't limit your planning to a computer screen - you need to be able to comprehend the film in its entirety. And remember that the moment you write dialogue your objectivity is gone. You will end up standing on your head to save a scene or a speech you like - when the scene, indeed, the whole scenario is often just not very interesting. But all of this might be irrelevant.