

WHAT THE FILM IS 'ABOUT': MESSAGE AND SCENARIO

The 'Message' and the 'Scenario' that demonstrates it

Film and stories are like fables. They are 'about' two things. They have a 'message' or 'deeper meaning' (eg 'slow, planned progress beats erratic speed') and they have a 'scenario' that dramatises the message (eg 'an overconfident, unfocussed hare is beaten in a race by a slow but consistent tortoise'). For writing and pitching purposes it's very useful to be able to distinguish between the two, but it can be surprisingly difficult. Writers often confuse them, and often undervalue scenario. This is a mistake. While the deeper meaning of a film is what writer and audience are most interested in, deeper meaning cannot be transmitted without the right scenario.

Example of the message and the scenario in a film

Here is an example of the difference between message and scenario in a film

In the film *Cast Away*, the 'message' component (themes, thesis etc) covers (amongst other things) the following issues:

the power of love and the human spirit; humankind v. the elements; what happens to a normal urban man emotionally, psychologically and spiritually when put on a desert island; the power of love; courage; coping with loss; coping with despair; necessity being the mother of invention; the need for human interaction; etc etc

In *Cast Away* the scenario that carried the message is:

FedEx executive who flies around the world maximising efficiency of delivery is in a plane crash and survives for four years on a desert island before making a raft and being rescued.

Interdependence of scenario and message

If we return for a moment to the hare and tortoise fable, we can see that another scenario could equally well have demonstrated how 'slow and steady wins the race'. For example, the same message could be transmitted through a story about a dogged camel and a flighty Arabian steed crossing a desert. But it would probably have ended up having a slightly different approach and dealing with slightly different issues.

This demonstrates a fascinating two-way relationship between message and scenario, namely that the realistic characters invented to people the scenario (the arrogant hare and the anxious tortoise) actually affect and enrich the message. They illustrate all kinds of extra wisdom about human behaviour. On the other hand, the existence of message helps the scenario have a seriousness and a point rather than just rambling at will about hares and tortoises.

So then, message and scenario exist in a symbiotic relationship. They nurture and focus each other - so much so that in the best pieces of writing it is impossible to imagine any other scenario that would do the job as well.

Hence, understanding your message and how the scenario demonstrates your message can be vital. After all, you might not have the scenario that best suits your message.. Alternatively, you might be writing a story that goes nowhere because you not fully aware of the deeper message that you are trying to transmit. In both cases, you risk going off the point and producing a weak, rambling film.

When you start

Creativity being the intuitive, patchy business that it is, often writers start out knowing the message of their film but not the scenario (eg ‘I want to write a film about the lack of trust and betrayal in marriage’). Others start out knowing the scenario but not its message (eg ‘A couple go away on holiday and start to fight’). This is normal when you start planning, but as you proceed, try to pinpoint what the film is ‘about’ both in terms of message and scenario because it helps the writing, improves the result, saves time and prevents burn-out. Be aware that this pinpointing process can be difficult and is an ongoing process – often you have an intuition that you don’t understand. Expect it to be hard and persist.

How pinpointing helps you establish the structure

In a traditional three act structure, what the film is ‘about’ *in scenario terms* is almost always the first act turning point. For example, the plot of *Tootsie* is ‘about’ a male actor who dresses up a woman to get a job’. That event happens at the first turning point. The plot of *Thelma and Louise* is ‘about’ two women on a holiday weekend who shoot a rapist. That event happens at the first act turning point.

Here is a useful rule of thumb. If you are writing a three act film (as opposed to a film in parallel narrative) and searching for your film’s structure, ask yourself what your film is ‘about’ in scenario terms. This should give you a crucial *event or action* that you can turn into your first act turning point. If asking yourself what your film is ‘about’ gives you answers that are to do with message or deeper meaning and not an event or action, you haven’t yet got a scenario that can properly carry your message.

Of course, in terms of deeper meaning and message, both *Tootsie* and *Thelma and Louise* are ‘about’ issues like the exploitation of women, friendship between women, the problems of paternalism and male chauvinism. These issues are clearly the *raison d’etre* of both films. But without plot - without scenario - the issues could not be transmitted.

How pinpointing helps the pitch

You also need to know the difference between message and scenario *because the pitch and the logline in conventional three act films will usually refer to the scenario*. This is because scenarios typically sound exciting or intriguing while messages typically sound dry and scholarly. In parallel narrative the pitch and logline often start off referring to the message but then add the scenario to assure people that the film contains an interesting story. For example, a description of the fine film *Lantana* typically states that it is ‘about’ trust and the limits of love in a range of relationships, but will soon proceed to describe the interconnecting murder mystery that makes up the scenario. Be aware that pitching a film on the basis of its message gives little indication of its human drama and can make it sound actively boring. The story, the scenario, is essential.

How pinpointing can save time, temper and money

Distinguishing between theme and scenario helps everyone involved in creating and funding the film know what they’re after, that is, ‘what film we’re all in’.

Starting from a character

Sometimes film ideas come from a character idea (‘a meek and mild librarian breaks out’).

Character ideas are particularly difficult to turn into films or stories because the writer needs to invent both message and scenario. Expect it to be hard and persist.