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EXPLORING THE SCREENPLAY WRITING PROCESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY

A Thesis in
Instructional Systems

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August, 2005
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ABSTRACT

This study constitutes rich descriptions as a way to understand how screenplay writers practice their craft and implications it has for activity theory and instructional design. Two major findings of the study are discussed: the screenwriters’ talents and the screenwriters’ creative processes. The activity theory framework shows that tools and community rules influence the process of activity in considerable ways. Although activity theory does consider the subject to be important, it has not paid a lot of attention to characteristics of the subject. This research helps to fill that gap by giving due consideration to the subjects’ talents and skills and how screenwriters’ ability to apply and invent tools and methods was dependent upon their expertise that had an important mediating role on their activities and outcomes.

As a result of the study, four screenwriting talents were identified: a storytelling talent, a visualization talent, a language talent, and an innovation talent. The study addresses the question of whether talent is innate or can be developed. It discusses a wide array of learning resources the screenwriters use to nourish their talents and sustain their craft.

The discovery of the two creative approaches: the organic and analytical is another major finding of the study. The study looks at how applying these creative approaches the screenwriters continuously work on writing a script, which represents one of the underdeveloped areas in activity theory research on creativity.

During my study I worked with experts in screenwriting just as instructional designers do when they try to extract experts’ knowledge for designing learning programs. This study allowed me to shift my focus from the individual expert’s cognition to the ensemble of elements that surround an expert, and ask the question, “How do experts operate within an activity context using tools and interactions with other people, in environments that are colored by certain cultural norms and beliefs?”

This angle of understanding the nature of practice, which provided me with a more flexible interpretation of realities than the deterministic approach of finding one right way by analyzing the expert’s cognitive processes and procedures, is discussed in the study.
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I was born and raised in the Soviet Union when communism was the only ideology. Mostly, people around me didn’t question the Communist Party and its leaders. The hearts and minds of people were saturated with worship, respect, and awe for the leadership of the country. Such an attitude was developed at a very early age. The political teachings would start in the kindergarten with poems and songs devoted to the leaders of the Communist Party and would actively continue in school. And so it happened to me.

At the age of seven I went to school and soon became what was called an “Octoberyonok”, meaning a grandchild of Lenin, named after the October Revolution. The Great Social Revolution that took place in Russia on October 25, 1917 changed the system of Russian capitalism to communism and, thus, altering the lives of my people forever.

Becoming a grandchild of Lenin was a great honor for every child who went to the first grade in the Soviet Union and was an inevitable step of entering the first level of the political communist hierarchy, the road that, if successful, would lead to the membership in the Communist Party at the adult age, the highest honor one could receive. Meanwhile, at the age of 9 a student had to join a Young Pioneer league, a step before Komsomol, a Young Communist League that had to be joined in the 8th Grade, at the age of 14.

I remember being extremely excited about joining every single level of the hierarchy. My excitement was so great that I spend sleepless nights before the joining ceremony, imagining how I would become that new person tomorrow and what kinds of great things I would do that would set an example for others.

I should say that our schools did a great job raising us as young communists. All the steps of the hierarchy were accompanied by interesting events and lessons that were planned for the students to study the history of the Communist Party, heroes of the
Revolution and the Second World War. We had a great number of wonderful films made about the Revolution and the WWII where the heroism and the patriotism were depicted through wonderful stories. We were raised on the values of courage, loyalty, honesty and willingness to sacrifice for the Cause.

As I became a young pioneer in the third grade, our class had to watch a film called “Born by the Revolution”, a TV series that consisted of numerous parts. The movie was about the Commissar who served in the Militia in Moscow right after the October Revolution in 1917 and fought the enemies of the Revolution, the bandits and the organized crime. It’s not enough to say that the movie was wonderfully produced, the characters in the movie and their heroic deeds were created with such love and realism, that the movie had become a masterpiece, changing us, children, forever. We wanted to be like the heroes in the movie in every single aspect of our lives.

I still remember the feeling of thrill when watching the “Born by Revolution” and then later reliving the movie’s great moments with my friends in school. That movie had affected me to the greatest degree. At some point I realized that if it weren’t for this movie, I would have never known the Commissar, his Militia friends, and I would have never imagined so vividly the troubled and at the same time romantically nostalgic, times that they lived in. I realized, that the reason I got a real taste of their world was because of the magic of the movie. It was a crucial starting point for my love of cinema that became a life-long passion.

My other life – long passion is my interest in learning. My bachelor’s degree in philology and English and German assumed that I could teach foreign languages and be an interpreter. I taught English in middle and high school back in the Soviet Union and was always curious about how people learn. I organized the courses for foreign languages for children at the Academy of Sciences of the former USSR and tried to invent innovative methodologies for teaching languages.

When I came to USA, I got my MS. degree in Interactive Technologies from Bloomsburg University, which allowed me to work as a learning designer on a wide range of exciting projects for US. Air Force Academy, Andersen Consulting Education, and Aetna Life and Casualty companies. In order to expand my knowledge in learning
and technologies, I came to the Pennsylvania State University to get my PH. D. in learning and performance systems. After completing my course work, I got a job offer from the General Electric Company where I worked for six years as a Manager for Learning Technologies at the GE Capital Corporate University. That provided me with tremendous opportunities to work with the best companies in this country to produce cutting edge technology-based learning programs and implement them around the globe.

When I came back to Penn State to finish my Ph. D., I had a strong interest in case-based learning and activity theory that has roots in the Soviet psychology, the works of Vygotsky and Leont’ev. I decided to combine my two life-long passions to conduct my dissertation research. When I started it, I found myself in the unknown waters because not much research had been done either in activity theory or screenwriting on understanding the practitioners’ creative processes. I welcomed the challenge. After all, I knew that what I was going to learn during this journey would be a life changing experience for me. I was very fortunate to find access to some best Hollywood screenwriters who were willing to share with me their internal intellectual dwellings of artists and their realities of working for Hollywood. It was a transforming experience for me in the sense that a door opened up for me into the creative side of the world that I knew almost nothing about. It allowed me not only to understand it better, but to learn valuable lessons that I could apply in my field. This study represents my best efforts in understanding the nature of the creative activities of screenwriters within the framework of Activity theory. This study is only a beginning of fascinating research on creativity that I plan to continue in the future.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence.
Two roads diverged in the wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

- Robert Frost
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The present study examines the nature of the creative activities of the Hollywood screenplay writers with Activity theory serving as a framework. This study constitutes rich descriptions as a way to understand how screenplay writers practice their craft and implications it has for activity theory.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Activity theory. The chapter begins with the discussion of the main aspects of the activity theory, its background and roots. It then outlines the theory’s constituent subsystems, and how they interact with one another, and presents main features and assumptions of the theory. Then the chapter discusses the problems that represent underdeveloped areas of the Activity theory with suggestions for further research. One of such problems is the issue of externalization or creation of new artifacts which represents my research interest. To provide this area of Activity theory further development, the present study aims at understanding how the screenwriters create new stories for the screen: the processes they follow, the tools they use, the problems they encounter, the methods they use to solve these problems, how they get transformed, and how the cultural context of the community of practice influences the screenwriters and the screenplay.

I use the elements of phenomenology, ethnography and the Grounded theory to conduct my research. Chapter 3 discusses my research methods, research purpose, and research questions. It names two units of analysis: the screenwriters and their screenplays and presents the criteria for their selection. It also outlines the modes of observation that were used in this study such as interviews, close observations, and document analysis. Further the chapter presents data analysis methods and discusses the issues of quality. It states that prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and data, method and multiple perspectives triangulation were used to increase the probability that meaningful findings were produced. The techniques of negative case analysis and member checks were also used to interpret data. The chapter concludes with the discussion of my biases and the limitations of the study.

Chapters 4 and 5 present study findings. Chapter 4, “Being a Screenwriter”, discusses the types of talents the screenwriters need in order to create screenplays. The
study participants believe that a screenwriter has to have four talents in order to be a successful screenwriter: a story-telling talent, a language talent, visualization talent, and an innovation talent. The chapter outlines the aspects of each talent and the learning resources the writers used in order to develop and sustain these talents. They are: classic literature, film, music, their life experiences, research, and screenwriting methodology.

Another major finding of the study is how the screenwriters experience their creative processes, and what creative approaches they apply in order to do that. Chapter 5 “The Screenwriters’ Creative Processes” presents three phases of the creative process: 1. achieving the desired state of the story development; 2. the story transformation or solving the story problems; and 3. the screenwriters’ transformation. In order to implement creative processes, the screenwriters apply creating approaches. The chapter discusses two creative approaches: the organic and analytical. The chapter examines the commonalities and differences between the two approaches, the rituals, methods and techniques that constitute these approaches.

The chapter provides illustrations of how the screenwriters implemented their creative processes and applied their creative approaches when writing four screenplays: “Copying Beethoven,” and “Kleopatra” written by Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson, “The Statute of Limitations,” written by Mylo Carbia, and “Miss Julie Montgomery,” written by Bob McKee. Within each of these illustrations, the chapter also discusses how the screenwriters solve the story problems once they achieve the desired state of the story development, and how the screenplay is transformed as a result of it. Based on each story, the chapter provides insights as to how the community of practitioners, the studio executives and producers, influence the screenwriters’ creative processes by providing feedback on their screenplays, and the strategies the screenwriters use to handle their feedback. As a result of the creative processes and as a consequence of their interactions with the community of practitioners the screenwriters get transformed. The chapter discusses three types of transformations the screenwriters experience: transformation at the level of skill, at the level of insight, and at the level of self-knowledge.

Chapter 6 presents the discussion of relevant findings, suggestions for further research, and implications for practitioners and theoreticians in screenwriting, activity theory, and instructional design fields. The study provides a thick description of the
creative processes of the screenwriters, examining their activities of writing a screenplay as a continuous experience. The present research adds to the research on creativity in activity theory by providing insights into the creative processes and reasons of why the screenwriters do the things they do.

A part of the chapter discusses the nature of screenwriters’ talents and states that although cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) does consider the subject to be important; CHAT has not paid a lot of attention to characteristics of the subject. My research is helping to fill that gap by giving due consideration to the subject’s talents. One of the contributions of my study is identification of three phases of the screenwriters’ creative process and the two creative approaches the screenwriters apply in order to implement the creative processes. The research provides insights as to what happens in which phase, what psychological states the screenwriters experience, how they reason and what tools they apply in order to move the creative process forward. These creative processes and approaches depict how the screenwriters externalize or create new screenplays.

The chapter also provides a discussion of the types of problems the screenwriters face during the creative process, the methods they use in order to solve them, and the resulting from it transformation of the screenplay. The chapter offers suggestions on how organic and ‘arational’ creative methods can be integrated into teaching and learning practices, and how some of the aspects of Activity theory can be utilized by instructional designers in their work, and recommends a case-based technology approach to teaching screenwriting.

During my study I worked with experts in screenwriting just as instructional designers do when they try to extract experts’ knowledge for designing learning programs. Before this study, for years, when designing learning practices, I focused on the question: what do the experts know and how do I extract that knowledge out of their heads and then replicate it in the learning system? The insights I have taken from my research allowed me to shift my focus from the individual expert’s cognition to the ensemble of elements that surround an expert, and ask the question, “How do experts operate within an activity context using tools and interactions with other people, in environments that are colored by certain cultural norms and beliefs? How do all these
elements of the activity system influence one another and interact with one another within the context of the activity when creating a product?

In the center of activity theory lies a close focus on understanding the nature of the activity and the interrelationship among the elements of activity: the *subject* of the activity working on the *object* producing results, while applying activity *tools*, and resulting from it *transformation* of the subject and the object. This simple framework on the one hand, assures the focus on the central relationship of the activity subject and object, and, on the other hand, it offers to expand the view on this relationship to include other important activity elements, such as tools, culture of the community of practitioners, norms, rules and division of labor.

I thought that the constituent elements of the activity theory could be very useful for instructional designers when implementing the design work. Following the order of importance of the elements of the activity as they are presented in the activity theory can provide a useful reference, a framework for an instructional designer when he or she starts to work on the course analysis, content development, and design.

First, the instructional designer can look into the nature of the activity at hand and ask the questions: What is the essence of the activity? What does the expert do in the activity? What is his or her main object? What results are they trying to achieve? What are the processes, phases, steps do they follow in order to implement the activity?

Embedding *the mediating role of tools* into the working framework, the instructional designer can ask: What tools does the expert use in order to implement the activity? In what ways does the application of the tools help the experts to carry out an activity and get closer to realization of its object?

As instructional designers, we usually try to understand what the experts do and how they do it, often loosing the sight of what is happening to the object, how it changes or transforms as a result of an expert’s actions. I believe that showing the transformation of the object is important because working with the object represents the main goal of the activity that is directly connected to achieving the result. Trying to understand the nature of the subject and object transformation, the instructional designer should ask the following questions: What types of changes or transformations does the object undergo
during the activity? What causes these transformations? How do the practitioners’ actions and the tools he or she applies change the nature of the object of the activity?

As instructional designers, when conducting front-end analysis we look for the causes of the existing problems. Among such causes can be the lack of knowledge or skills, or environmental problems. If the problems are connected to the lack of skills, we recommend training or learning interventions, if the problems are in the environment, we can make recommendation about making changes in the environment. Rarely, almost never in my experience do we analyze how the cultural environment of the community of practitioners influences the expert and the product he or she creates. Because cognition is situated, the analysis of the culture can provide valuable insights into how environment affects the expert’s cognition, how and why they do things differently because of the environment, how they adjust themselves and the object they are working on to fit the cultural norms, or how the experts in their turn, may influence the creation of a certain culture.

The following questions will help the designer to understand the culture of the community of practitioners: What constitutes the community of practitioners where your expert performs his activity? How does the expert describe this culture? How do other members of the community of practitioners affect what the experts do: their cognitive processes, the nature of the product they create? How do the experts change as a result of the influence of the community of practitioners: what methods they use to adjust to the culture? How does the product change as a result of the influence of the community of practitioners? How do experts contribute to the formation of the working culture? Are there any conflicts or contradictions among the members of the community of practitioners? How do these conflicts get resolved?

One of the lessons I’ve learned from my study is that theory often clashes with practice, and that sometimes we try to apply theory to do something practical and it doesn’t work. I believe it is a good idea for an instructional designer to run a healthy reality check with the practitioners in the field, see how they do tasks and what they think about theory, and then present perspectives of practitioners on the theory as a part of a learning experience.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Activity Theory and Its Aspects

Defining Activity Theory

According to Davydov (1999), activity is a specific form of the societal existence of humans. Activity is directed towards a purposeful change of the natural and social reality. Human beings living in society construct new forms and features of reality through the acts of creation and transformation of the initial material into objects and outcomes of the activity. Any activity is implemented by the subject who applies various processes, approaches, and tools in order to achieve the outcomes of the activity. Any activity has goals and motives that manifest themselves in the images of the foreseen result of the creative effort. Activity is carried out in the wide historical and cultural context that in their turn, influence the processes and the outcomes of the activity. Activity is often implemented by people who constitute a community and therefore, has a collective nature. According to Davydov (1999), activity is open and universal and should be taken as a form of historical and cultural creativity. The formation of the human activity is also a beginning of personality (p. 39). Activity theory is based on the principle: “we are is what we do.”

The underlying concepts of activity theory originate in the work of the Soviet psychologists, Vygotsky (1978) and Lenot’ev, a follower of Vygotsky (Leont’ev, 1978). Presently, activity theory is being developed to extend the original concepts (Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Kuutti, 1996) by scientists around the world, including representatives from psychology, anthropology, human-computer interaction, cultural research and other social sciences (Gilbert, 1999).

Activity theory provides a powerful descriptive framework focused around a mediated activity system, comprised of the individual practitioners, the colleagues, and co-workers of the workplace community, the conceptual and practical tools, and the shared objects as a unified dynamic whole (Engestrom, 1992). The following is Carroll’s (1997) definition of activity theory:

“It is an ensemble of technological factors with social factors, and individual attitudes, experiences and actions within community practices, traditions and values. Activity theory emphasizes that these ensembles are
inherently contingent and changing, that human activities are mediated and transformed by human creations, such as technologies, and that people make themselves through their use of tools... Activity theory shifts attention from characterizing the static and individual competencies toward characterizing how people can negotiate with the social and technological environment to solve problems, and learn, which subsumes many of the issues of situated and distributed cognition” (p. 521).

Activity theorists emphasize a close binding between knowing and doing and refer to doing as transformation of some object, with the focus on contextualized activity of the entire system – not an isolated activity (Engestrom, 1987; 1993; Kuutti, 1996). As Fig. 1 illustrates, an activity system consists of a subject (individuals or groups that act and whose agency is selected as a point of view for the analysis), and the object (that which is acted upon), as well as the components that mediate the relations of subject and object (Barab & Plucker, 2002). The mediating components are tools (conceptual and physical), community, rules, and divisions of labor (Engestrom, 1987). Activity is distributed across subjects and the tools they use, all of which occurs as a part of the community context (Barab, Plucker, 2002).

![Fig. 1](image-url)
Activity Subsystems

In Engestrom’s model of activity system, the components of the system continually influence and transform one another. At the same time, each system is nested into the network of other systems of related activities. For instance, the tools in the system are products of the previous activity systems for tool production. So, the present activity systems are influenced by layers of historical development (Engestrom, 1992).

Engestrom (1987) describes an activity system as containing interacting components: subjects, object, tools, and division of labor, community, and rules that are being organized into activity subsystems with the goal to reach the activity outcome. An activity system consists of the following activity subsystems: production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. These subsystems describe the higher order functions, interactions, and relationships between the components of the activity system (Jonassen, 2000). The production subsystem constitutes the primary focus of the activity systems analysis. According to Jonassen (2000), production of the object is oriented by the outcome or intention of the activity system.

The production process in any activity system involves a subject, the object of the activity, the tools that are used in the activity and the actions and operations that affect the outcome. The production subsystem is regarded as the most important, because in the production process, the object of the system is transformed into the outcome. The production system consists of the interactions and relationships between the subject and the object that are mediated by tools and signs. Its goal is to transform the object of the activity into the outcome (Jonassen, 2000). It is important to note, that concurrent with the production of the physical products, the subject is producing knowledge about the activity, its components, assumptions, and contradictions. The conscious understanding is an essential part of the activity that cannot be separated from it.

The production subsystem is completed by the tools, sign systems, theories, and procedures that mediate the activity (Jonassen, 2000). Tools and signs are the means that actors use for acting on the object. The use of the culture specific tools shapes the way people act and think. The tools alter the activity and are in turn, altered by the activity. However, as important a role as the tools play, activity theory specifically states that the relations between individuals and artifacts are not symmetrical: artifacts maybe mediators
of human thought and behavior, but human motive and consciousness belong to people, not things (Kaptelinin, 1996 b).

Another subsystem of the activity system is the consumption subsystem. It describes how the subject and the surrounding community collaborate to act on the object. Although the goal of the activity is to transform an object, the production activities targeted towards transforming an object also consume energy and resources from the subject and the community in which it operates.

The distribution subsystem ties the object of activity to the community by defining a division of labor (Jonassen, 2000). The division of labor refers to the horizontal division of tasks between cooperating members of the community but also the vertical division of power and status (Engestrom, 1999). How work is distributed throughout the organization determines to some degree the nature of the work culture and the climate for those involved in any activity system. Jonassen (2000) emphasizes the role of community, stating that people may perform individually in different contexts, but their ability to perform is dependent on groups of people. According to Leont’ev (1981), ‘the human individual’s activity is a system of social relations. It doesn’t exist without those social relations’ (pp. 46-7). Human cognition is always situated in the complex socio-cultural world that affects individual cognition. Because individuals are concurrently members of different communities, they must continuously alter their beliefs and actions to adjust to the socially mediated expectations of different groups. Conflicts between roles in different communities often arise, leading to transformational activities required to harmonize those contradictions (Jonassen, 2000, p 102).

The exchange subsystem engages the subject and the two contextual components: the rules that constrain the activity and the community with which the subjects interact. The exchange of personal, social, and cultural norms in any work community also determines the nature of the work culture and the climate for those involved in the activity system (Jonassen, 2000).

The Hierarchical Structure of Activity
Activity theory differentiates between processes at various levels, taking into consideration the objects to which these processes are oriented. Activities are oriented to motives, that is, the objects that are impelling by themselves. Each motive is an object, material, or ideal that satisfies a need (Kaptelinin, 1997). Activity consists of a goal-oriented hierarchy of actions that are used to transform the object of the activity (Leont’ev, 1978, 1981). Actions are completed in order to fulfill short-term goals, while operations are mediated by the conditions under which they occur. Dynamic relationships exist between actions and operations, where actions may initially be performed as operations because they are not automatized and require conscious effort, but with the time and practice the activity collapses into actions and operations more easily and naturally (Fig. 2). The reverse dynamic is also possible when operations can become actions with the disruption of the flow.

![Diagram of Activity, Motive, Actions, Goal, Operations, and Conditions](Fig 2)

Engestrom (1999) warns that objects are not to be confused with goals. Goals are attached to specific actions. Actions have clear points of beginning and termination and relatively short half-lives. Activity systems evolve through long historical cycles in which clear beginnings and endings are difficult to determine.

An activity system constantly generates actions through which the object of the activity is enacted and reconstructed in specific forms and contents – but being a horizon, the object is never fully reached or conquered. The creative potential of the activity is closely related to the search actions of object construction and redefinition.
Activity theory stresses the *unity of consciousness and activity*. Instead of breaking knowledge and skills into prerequisite and main, as is common practice in traditional approaches, activity theory claims that ‘the human mind emerges and exists as a special component of interactions with the environment, so activity (sensory, mental, and physical) and conscious processing (learning) cannot be separated. Individuals cannot understand something without acting on it. “Conscious meaning making is engaged by activity” (Jonassen, 2000, p.105).

Another assumption about activity theory is the emphasis on *intentionality* of the activity, the purposeful actions that are realized through conscious intentions. According to activity theory, intentions arise from *contradictions* between what the subject of the activity perceives he needs to know and do and what the reality represents about what he really needs to know and do. Another level of contradictions in the activity system may manifest themselves *in the interactions of the subsystems*. Contradictions cause changes in the activity systems. Understanding intentionality of the activity and its contradictions will provide a better insight into the nature of the flow of the activity and the possibilities for its change.

**Mediation by Artifacts**

*A key idea in activity theory is the notion of mediation by artifacts.* Artifacts, broadly defined to include instruments, signs, tools, language, and machines. Artifacts carry with them a particular culture and history and are persistent structures that stretch across activities through time and space (Kuutti, 1991).

Engestrom (1999) pointed out that the mediating artifacts include tools and signs, both external implements and internal representations such as mental models. The author argues that it is not particularly useful to categorize mediating artifacts into external or practical ones, on the one hand, and internal or cognitive ones, on the other hand. These functions and uses are in constant flux and transformation as the activity unfolds. An internal representation becomes externalized through speech, gesture, writing, and manipulation of the material environment – and vice versa, external processes become internalized. Freezing or splitting these processes is a poor basis for understanding
different artifacts. Instead, we need to differentiate between the processes themselves, between different ways of using artifacts.

As stated by Engestrom, the origin of the mediating role of tools in the context of labor was emphasized in the works of Karl Marx. In his theses on Feuerbach, he explicated pointedly the theoretical and methodological core of the concept of activity (Engestrom, p. 3, 1999).

Marx’s concept of labor or production of use values was the pragmatic model of human object-oriented activity for Leont’ev when he formulated the concept of activity. Drawing directly on Marx and Engels, the Soviet psychologist emphasized the two mutually dependent aspects of mediation in labor activity.

The first is the use and making of tools. “Labor begins with the making of tools.” The second feature of the labor process is that it is performed in conditions of joint, collective activity, so that man functions in this process not only in a certain relationship with nature but also with other people, members of a given society. Only through a relation with other people does man relate to nature itself, which means that labor appears from the very beginning as a process mediated by tools (in the broad sense) and at the same time mediated socially (Leont’ev, 1981, p. 208).

Activity theory proposes a very specific notion of context – the activity itself is the context. According to Nardi (1996), context is constituted through an enactment of an activity involving people and artifacts. Context is not an outer container or shell inside of which people behave in certain ways. People consciously and deliberately generate contexts (activities) in part through their own objects (objectives; hence context is not just ‘out there”).

Context is both internal to people – involving specific objects and goals – and, at the same time, external to people, involving artifacts, other people, and specific settings. The crucial point is that in the activity theory both external and internal are fused, unified.

People transform themselves profoundly through the acquisition of the functional organs (memory, consciousness and emotion); (Zinchenko, 1996, p. 286) context cannot be conceived as simply a set of external ‘resources’ lying about. One’s ability is the result of specific historical and developmental processes in which a person is changed. A
context cannot be reduced to enumeration of people and artifacts; rather the specific transformative relationship between people and artifacts is the heart of any definition of context, or activity (Nardi, 1996, p. 76).

Internalization and Externalization

Activity theory recognizes two basic processes operating continuously at every level of human activities: internalization and externalization. According to Vygotsky, as quoted by Kaptelinin (1997), these processes describe the mechanisms underlying the origination of mental processes. Mental processes are derived from external actions through the course of internalization (Kaptelinin, 1997). The researcher emphasizes the social nature of the process of internalization, as he writes: “According to Vygotsky (1978), internalization is social by its very nature. The range of actions that can be performed by a person in cooperation with others comprise the so-called ‘zone of proximal development.’ In other words, the way human beings acquire new abilities can be characterized as ‘from inter-subjective mental actions to intra-subjective ones.’ The opposite process of internalization is externalization. Mental processes manifest themselves in external actions performed by a person, so they can be verified and corrected, if necessary” (Kaptelinin, 1997, p. 109).

Toulmin (1999), emphasizes the role of the language in the process of internalization by citing Vygotsky who argues in the essays reprinted as Mind in Society (Vygotsky, 1978), that language is the instrument we use during enculturation and socialization, not merely to master practical procedures, but also to internalize the meaning of the patterns of thought that are current in our culture or profession. Toulmin points out that the works of Vygotsky and Luria (1973) show that the term internalization covers a variety of cases and procedures. “On one hand, we learn to do sums ‘in our heads’ – doing ‘in the mind’s eye’ sums ‘read to ourselves’. In this way we get information from the page more quickly than we can if reading aloud. In addition, we learn ‘to think to ourselves’ as a way of concealing from other people plans that we do not wish to reveal. Finally, we learn to ‘judge ourselves’ inwardly, so embittering ‘the sessions of sweet silent thought’ by inward self-reproach. Far from being a single, clear-
cut procedure, internalization therefore embodies a family of techniques that make mental life and activity more efficacious in a number of different ways (Tomlin, 1999, p. 58.).

In the past, activity theorists concentrated mainly on *internalization of cultural means*. Today *externalization*, the transformative construction of new instruments and forms of activity at collective and individual levels, has become an equally central theme of research.

Lektorsky (1999) stresses the importance of the notion of *externalization* in the works of Vygotsky. He points out that the main focus in the works of Leont’ev was the processes of *internalization*, which were based on the fact that he described the relationships between activity, actions, and operations. Lektorsky notes that according to Vygotsky, human activity presupposes not only the process of internalization, but also of *externalization*. Humans not only internalize ready-made standards and rules of activity but externalize themselves as well, creating new standards and rules. Human beings determine themselves through the objects they create. They are essentially creative beings.

Internalization is related to reproduction of culture; externalization as creation of new artifacts makes possible its transformation. These two processes are inseparably intertwined (Engestrom, 1999).

Engestrom (1999) introduces the notion of the expansive cycle of the activity that focuses on formation of a new social structure on the basis of some preceding one. According to Engestrom an expansive cycle is a developmental process that contains both internalization and externalization. The new activity structure does not emerge out of the blue. It requires reflective analysis of the existing activity structure – one must learn to know and understand what one wants to transcend. It requires reflective appropriation of existing culturally advanced models and tools that offer ways out of the internal contradictions. However, these forms of internalization or appropriation are not enough for the emergence of a new structure. As the cycle advances, the actual design and implementation of a new model for the activity gain momentum: externalization begins to dominate.

According to Engestrom (1999), the expansive cycle of an activity system begins with an almost exclusive emphasis on *internalization*, on socializing and training novices
to become competent members of the activity as it is routinely carried out. *Creative externalization occurs first in the form of discrete individual innovation.* As the disruptions and contradictions of the activity become more demanding, internalization increasingly takes the form of critical self-reflection – and externalization, a search for solutions, increases. Externalization reaches its peak when a new model for the activity is designed and implemented. As the new model stabilizes itself, internalization of its inherent ways and means again becomes the dominant form of learning and development.

**Transformation**

According to activity theory, subject and object of the activity may undergo certain transformations during the course of the activity because ‘they are not immutable structures” (Nardi, 1997). Davydov (1999) notes that careful examination shows that not every change is a transformation. Many changes of natural and social reality carried out by people affect the object externally without changing it internally. “Transformation means changing an object internally, making evident its essence and altering it” (Davydov, 1999, p. 42).

Davydov (1999) provides examples of two types of definition of ‘essence’ given by formal and dialectical logic. According to formal logic, the essence of an object is something it has in common with other similar objects that makes them belong to the same class. In this case, the object’s transformation consists of the fact that a person changes its type to its family. For example boots belong to the family of footwear. From the point of view of formal logic, the construction and use of various classification patterns by a person can be considered transformation of objects, or cognitive activity.

According to Davydov (1999), in dialectical logic, essence is a genetic initial or universal relation of a system of objects that gives birth to its specific and individual features. “Essence is a law of development of the system itself. The most vivid example of a dialectical transformation is a purposeful growing up of an object as a complicated system. When we find and select wheat grains of full value, sow them, create conditions for their normal growth, and at last get a good crop, this process is an example of a real transformation of some part of nature by humans, or purposeful human activity.
These are two types of activity that correspond to the two types of transformation. One of them is aimed at changing the existing external order of objects. The other one is aimed at the realization of their inner potential, at understanding the conditions of origination of integral system” (Davydov, 1999, p. 43).

**Activity Theory and Other Theories**

*Activity Theory, Situated Action Models, and Distributed Cognition*

Nardi (1997) describes the difference between activity theory, situated action models, and distributed cognition. All three are frameworks that are used for analyzing context of the activity in real situations.

Situated action models emphasize the emergent, contingent nature of human activity, the way activity grows directly out of the particularities of a given situation. The focus of study is situated activity or practice, as opposed to the study of the formal or cognitive properties of artifacts, or structured social relations, or enduring cultural knowledge and values” (Nardi, 1997, p. 71). Lave (1988) as cited by Nardi, identifies the basic unit of analysis for situated action as “the activity of persons –acting in setting.” The unit of analysis is thus not the individual, not the environment, but the relation between the two. A setting is defined as “a relation between acting persons and the arenas in relation with which they act.” An arena is a stable institutional framework.

An important aspect of the ‘activity of persons-acting in setting’ as a unit of analysis is that it forces the analyst to pay attention to the flux of ongoing activity, to focus on the unfolding of real activity in a real setting.

In activity theory the unit of analysis is an activity. According to Leont’ev (1974), activity is composed of subject, object, actions, and operations. Flor and Hutchins (1991) by cited by Nardi define distributed cognition as ‘‘a new branch of cognitive science devoted to the study of: the representation of knowledge both inside the heads of individuals and in the world…;the propagation of knowledge between different individuals and artifacts…’’ and the transformations which external structures undergo when acted on by individuals and artifacts…By studying cognitive phenomena in this fashion it is hoped that an understanding of how intelligence is manifested at the systems level, as opposed to the individual cognitive level, will be obtained.
Distributed cognition asserts that the unit of analysis is a cognitive system composed of individuals and the artifacts they use. Distributed cognition moves the unit of analysis to the system and finds its center of gravity in the functioning of the system, much as classic systems theory did” (Nardi, 1997, p.77).

An important difference between activity theory and distributed cognition, on the one hand, and situated action, on the other hand, is the treatment of motives and goals. In activity theory, activity is shaped first and foremost by an object held by the subject; in fact, we are able to distinguish one activity from another only by virtue of their differing objects (Leont’ev, 1974). Activity theory emphasizes motivation and purposefulness and is ‘optimistic concerning human self-determination’ (Engestrom, 1990). A distributed cognition analysis begins with the positing of a system goal, which is similar to the activity theory notion of object, except that a system goal is an abstract systemic concept that does not involve individual consciousness.”

Attention to the shaping force of goals in activity theory and distributed cognition, be they conscious human motives or systemic goals, contrasts with the contingent, responsive, improvisatory emphasis of situated action. According to Lave (1988), as cited by Nardi (1999), goals are our musings out loud about why we did something after we have done it; goals are ‘retrospective and reflexive’. The position adopted by Lave (1988) and Suchman (1987) concerning goals and plans is that they are post hoc realizations for actions whose meaning can arise only within the immediacy of a given situation.

In activity theory and distributed cognition, by contrast, an object-goal is the beginning point of analysis. An object precedes and motivates activity.

In activity theory and distributed cognition, an object is (partially) determinative of activity, in situated action, every activity is by definition uniquely constituted by the confluence of the particular factors that come together to form one “situation”.

According to Nardi, situated action models have a slightly behavioristic undercurrent in that it is the subject’s reaction to the environment (the ‘situation’) that finally determines action. What an analyst observes is cast as a response to a stimulus (situation). The mediating influence of goals, plans, objects, and mental representations that would order the perception of a situation are absent in the situated view. In situated action, analyses rely on recordable, observable behavior that is ‘logged’ through analysis
of videotapes or other records. Accounts from study participants describing in their own words what they think they are doing or why are not the focal point of situated action analyses. Nardi makes a point that activity theory has something to tell us about the value of interview data. “It has become a kind of received wisdom in the Human Computer Interaction community that people cannot articulate what they are doing. This generalization is certainly true, however, primarily at the level of operations; it is certainly very difficult to say how you type, or how you see a winning pattern on the chessboard. But this generalization does not apply to the higher conscious levels of action and objects; ask a secretary what the current problems are with the boss, or an executive what his goals are for the next quarter, and you will get an earful!

Skillful interviewing or the need to teach someone how to do something often bring operations to the subject’s conscious awareness, so that even operations can be talked about, at least to some degree. The ability to bring operations to a conscious level, even only partially, is an aspect of the dynamism of the levels of activity as posited by activity theory. The conditions fostering such a dynamic move to the action level of awareness may include skillful probing by an interviewer” (Nardi, 1997, p. 82).

There is a major difference between activity theory and situated action in structuring of activity. In activity theory, the structuring of activity is determined in part, in important ways, by human intentionality before the unfolding in a particular situation; in situated action, activity can be known only as it plays out in situ. In situated action, goals and plans cannot even be realized until after the activity has taken place.

An important question for the study of context is the role that persistent structures such as artifacts, institutions, and cultural values play in shaping activity (Nardi, 1996). For both activity theory and distributed cognition, persistent structures are a central focus. Activity theory is concerned with historical development of activity and the mediating role of artifacts. Leont’ev (1974) considered the use of tools to be crucial: “A tool mediates activity that connects a person not only with the world of objects, but also with other people. This means that a person’s activity assimilates the experience of humanity.” Distributed cognition offers a similar notion; for example Hutchins (1987) discusses “collaborative manipulation,” the process by which we take advantage of artifacts designed by others, sharing good ideas across time and space. Situated action
models less readily accommodate durable structures that persist over time and across different activities.

*Activity theory*, with its emphasis on the importance of motive and consciousness, which belongs only to humans sees artifacts and people as different. Artifacts are mediators of human thought and behavior; people and things are not equivalent. Bodker (1996) defines artifacts as instruments in the service of activities. In activity theory, people and things are *unambiguously asymmetrical*.

Distributed cognition, by contrast, views people and things as *conceptually equivalent*; people and artifacts are “agents” in a system. While treating each node in a system as an “agent” has a certain elegance, it leads to a problematic view of cognition. We find in distributed cognition the somewhat illogical notion that artifacts are cognizant entities. Activity theory instructs us to treat people as sentient, moral beings (Tikhomirov, 1972), a stance not required in relation to a machine and often treated as optional with respect to people when they are viewed simply as nodes in a system. *According to activity theory, we are is what we do.*

**American Pragmatism and Activity Theory**

Engestrom (1999) draws parallels between the ideas of pragmatism and activity theory. He argues that the program of ‘transcending the dualism’ between thought and activity, theory and practice, facts and values has much in common with the theoretical aims of activity theory. John Dewey and George Mead developed conceptions of action, of practice, and at times even of collective activity. In his *Essays on Experimental Logic*, Dewey gives the following definition of practice:

*It means that knowing is literally something which we do; that analysis is ultimately physical and active; that meanings in their logical quality are standpoints, attitudes and methods of behaving towards facts, and that active experimentation is essential to verifications. The object of knowledge is not something with which thinking sets out; but something with which it ends; something which the process of inquiry and testing, that constitute thinking, themselves produce. Thus the object of knowledge is practical in the sense that it depends upon a specific kind of practice for its existence.* (Dewey, 1961, p. 331)
These ideas are fully viable from the point of view of current epistemological debates in social sciences. They also have a family relationship to Leont’ev’s ideas of object and motive construction as central mechanisms of transformation of activity. Thus, the object of activity is twofold: first, in its independent existence as subordinating to itself and transforming the activity of the subject: second, as an image of the object, as a product of its property of psychological reflection that is realized as an activity of the subject and cannot exist otherwise (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 52).

In ‘Human Nature and Conduct’, Dewey (1922) argues that goals are formulated and developed during the process of studying and orienting to the objective conditions of the activity. Goals, are therefore, ‘milestones’ in the course of activity, not its purpose or ultimate motive, which shows an affinity to Leont’ev’s thinking.

Besides, isolations and perception of goals by no means occurs automatically, it is not an instantaneous act but a relatively long process of approbation of the goals by action and by their objective filling, if this can be expressed in such a way. The individual, justly notes Hegel, “cannot determine the goal of his acting as long as he has not acted.”

In contrast to activity theory, the absence of cultural mediation is evident in much of Dewey’s work. The study of Dewey’s extensive production, however, reveals continually interesting theoretical openings and parallels with activity theory. Dewey’s analyses of technology may be mentioned as a case in point.

**Existing Problems And Areas of Development in Activity Theory**

According to Engestrom (1999), today activity theory is transcending its own origins and becoming truly international and multidisciplinary. The author believes that the emerging new type of theory should combine multivoicedness with monism. Human activity is endlessly multifaceted, mobile and rich in variations of content and form. “The theory of activity should reflect that richness and mobility. Such a multivoiced theory should not regard internal contradictions and debates as signs of weakness; rather they are the essential feature of the theory” (Engestrom, 1999, p. 20).
Engestrom (1999) identifies several dichotomies that form the two opposing standpoints in the form they emerge in heated discussions. I provide discussion of some of these dichotomies as they may relate to my research.

**Goal-Directed Action versus Object-Related Activity**

According to Engestrom (1999), in recent years, a large and varied psychological literature has emerged on the nature of goal-directed actions (see, e.g., von Cranabach & Harre, 1982; Frese and Sabini, 1985; Grinsburg, Brenner, & von Cranach, 1985; Hacker, Volpert, & von Cranach, 1982). In cognitive science, situated action has become an important alternative to purely mentalistic and computational notions of information processing (e.g., Suchman, 1987). In sociology, the notion of action has been used in attempts to overcome the dualism of imposed structure and individual experience (e.g., Alexander, 1988; Fielding, 1988; Giddens, 1984).

In most of these theories, *individual action* is regarded as the unit of analysis and the key to understanding human functioning. The orientating function of goals and plans, the sequential structure, and the levels of regulations of action have received a lot of attention. But these theories seem to have difficulties in accounting for the socially distributed or collective aspects as well as the artifact-mediated or cultural aspects of purposeful human behavior. The author points out that the notion of time tends to be reduced to relatively discrete slices, often described in algorithmic terms with clear-cut beginnings and ends, dictated by given goals and tasks. The continuous, self-reproducing, systemic, and longitudinal-historical aspects of human functioning seem to escape most theories of action. As Oleg Tikhomirov (1988, p. 113) points out, focusing exclusively on the level of actions highlights goal-attainment and problem solving but makes it very difficult to analyze the socio-cultural and motivational basis of goal formation and problem finding.

**Internalization vs. Creation and Externalization**

Internalization is the key psychological concept discovered by the cultural-historical school. Vygotsky’s writings that deal with creation and externalization, especially “The Psychology of Art” (1971), have received very little attention. In the
Russian collection on the concept of activity edited by Lektorsky (1990), this emphasis was suddenly almost turned around. Nearly all authors emphasized that the most important aspect of human activity is its creativity and its ability to exceed or transcend given constraints and instructions. Concrete research and experimentation inspired by activity theory have been strongly dominated by the paradigm of internalization. There has been very little research on creation of artifacts, production of novel social patterns, and expansive transformation of activity contexts. Vera John-Steiner’s (1985) work on creativity and the developmental work research approach organized in Finland (Engestrom, 1987, 1990) may be mentioned as openings in this direction.

**Structure and Components of Activity**

Davydov (1999) identifies difficulties in defining the general structure of activity as one of the problems of activity theory that needs resolution. As cited by Davydov, Leont’ev (1978) claims that the structure of activity includes such components as needs, motives, goals, actions, and operations. Davydov notes that if we examine this structure, we notice the absence of the *means of solving a problem*. It seems clear that this component should be added. The researcher poses a question of how to relate the general activity structure to such traditional psychic processes as perception, imagination, memory, thinking, feelings, and will. Can these be considered as components of the general structure of activity, along with motives, problems, and actions? Or should they be considered as independent kinds of activity? If the latter thesis is accepted, we must admit the existence of sensoric, mnemonic, and thinking activity, and even of activity of feeling and activity of will.

Davydov notes, that in different sciences, and especially in psychology, these psychological processes are frequently regarded as particular kinds of activity. For example, human thinking is spoken as thinking activity. “In my opinion,” writes the author, ‘it is not correct to consider traditional cognitive processes as different forms of activity. They are no more than specific components of a general structure that promote the realization of its other components. For example, perception and thinking help a person to single out and concretize the conditions in which a sensory or cognitive
problem can be solved and to choose the methods of its solution. But the problem itself is a component of some integral activity, for example, play, art, or learning” (p. 45).

**Research on Activity Theory**

Research on activity theory embraces all kinds of disciplines and areas. Such as language and its acquisition, plays, learning and instruction, technology, therapy and addiction, computer-mediated activities, and human-computer interaction (Engestrom, 1999, Nardi, 1997). Activity theory provides a useful framework that gives an opportunity to study a variety of activities from multiple angles. It is important to note that researchers in each domain or area of interest who use the activity theory as a framework delve into specifics and intricacies of the subject matter of the domain being researched. For instance, a study on the dynamics of the children’s games and play (Hakkarainen, 1999) provide specific accounts about that particular domain, talking about children’s motivation and the nature of interactions among children while they are playing, contradictions they are experiencing, interpreting their actions from the point of view of activity theory.

This can be explained by the fact that activity theorists from the outset have addressed practical needs, applying their research efforts to the problems of mentally and physically handicapped children, educational testing, ergonomics, and other areas. Following the lead of dialectical materialism, activity theory focuses on *practice*, which obviates the need to distinguish ‘applied’ from ‘pure’ science – understanding everyday practice in the real world is the real objective of scientific practice (Nardi, 1997).

Toulmin (1999) also emphasizes the importance of understanding of the essence of the practical side of the activities of various fields of application before theoretical analyses can by applied to try and understand them further. He writes:

The explanatory procedures of a physical scientist are one thing, then diagnostic procedures of a clinician another, the judicial procedures of a law court is still another. We should not look for universal standards of, for example, ‘soundness’ of arguments in all fields equally: in each case, the first step is to assemble detailed descriptive accounts of the procedures or typified action sequences involved in all these activities. *We need these descriptions, indeed, before theoretical issues can even be raised.* Until the basic empirical or experimental facts are established in human sciences too, we are not in a position to develop
theoretical explanations, and pursuit of theoretical explanations, and the pursuit of theoretical generalizations is premature. No doubt we can benefit by developing new patterns or paradigms to use in studying human activity, but we should consider models that defer move to theory and focus on the richer preliminary task of describing these activities in full and relevant detail. *The key notion of any new theory of knowledge needs to be practice.* In place of the foundationalist theories that held center stage from Descartes to Russel, we shall do better to develop a new praxiology – the term is Kotarbinski’s (1965) – that asks why procedures are efficacious in any given rational enterprise, on what conditions and for what practical purposes (p. 62).

**Activity Theory and Creativity**

As stated by Engestrom (1999), “there has been very little research on creation of artifacts, production of novel social patterns, and expansive transformation of activity contexts. Vera John-Steiner’s (1985) work on creativity and the developmental work research approach organized in Finland (Engestrom, 1987, 1990) may be mentioned as openings in this direction.” Creativity and creation of artifacts is an area covered in activity theory by the concept of *externalization.* Vera John-Steiner’s work represents a significant break-through in this area. The researcher looked into the nature of thinking and creativity of the scientists, writers, and artists. Having conducted interviews with one hundred creative individuals, Vera John-Steiner draws the line between the research conducted using qualitative methods and research run applying quantitative methods of analysis of human thought: “Our knowledge of thinking is limited. While we are awed by the accomplishments of the gifted in the arts and sciences, our study of thought has largely ignored them. The basic assumption that governs this work is that powerful resource of the understanding of thinking is provided by the *self-knowledge* of the creative individuals among us. Some aspects of human thinking can be studied effectively in the laboratory. These include investigations of short-term memory, perceptual and verbal comprehension tasks, and certain kinds of problem-solving activities. The works of Piaget and Herbert Simon uncovered the valuable aspects of covert thinking processes using the ‘protocol analysis methods where the subjects had to verbalize while engaged in diverse problem-solving tasks. But the search for the roots of thought primarily through works of experimental scientists imposes an undue limitation on this endeavor. It is beyond the reach of these methods to specify the cognitive
dynamics of slowly elaborated, complex, or creative mental work” (John-Steiner, 1985, p.2).

To overcome the limitations of the quantitative methods, John-Steiner uses descriptive accounts along with theoretical analyses of one hundred creative individuals in attempt to discover the shared dynamics in the various process of thought, while recognizing and exploring developmental, cultural, and historical differences in the mastery of thinking. To attempt to answer the question “What is thinking?” the researcher looked into productivity of creative individuals. All of her interviews included several themes: the earliest developments of the person’s interests; the nature of his or her training and apprenticeships; the shaping of invisible tools – that is, their craft and creative intensity; some descriptions of daily routines; the biography of a recent work and reports of collaborative endeavors. There were questions about the individual’s sources for new and generative ideas, and the researcher probed, sometimes with difficulty, for the participants’ insights concerning the more hidden, covert processes of thinking.

Trying to understand the nature of thought, John-Steiner’s research has focused on answering the following questions: How do human beings achieve both continuity and novelty in their thinking? How can one pull together into a whole, fragments of reality that have previously been experienced as separate in space and time by a thinker? And what nourishes sustained productivity in the lives of creative individuals?

As a result of searching for the answers to these questions, John-Steiner provides amazing accounts of the creative individuals’ early apprenticeships as well as adulthood experiences that helped the creative individuals to acquire “the invisible tools” of the mind, which in its turn, facilitated formation of the languages of the mind or predominant modes of thinking.

Among the languages of the mind the researcher has identified the following: visual thinking, verbal thinking, the scientific thinking, and the languages of emotion. For each of these modes of thinking, John-Steiner traced the genesis of its development for a number of creative individuals, providing insights and illustrations of the origins and applications of the creative processes. Trying to explain the origin of the particular language of the mind, John-Steiner writes: “A new work of an artist may start with a phrase or that of a scientist may begin with an image, but each represents a nucleus of
understanding that painstakingly unfolds through labor, craft, inspiration, and the careful nurturing of time that separates the beginner from those with experience. Great variations exist between artists and scientists, and even within a single field such as writing, in the ways in which experienced thinkers embark upon their work. But in all cases, the beginnings of creative endeavors are linked to one of the many ‘languages of thought’. The researcher believes that the choice of such a language, or inner symbol system, is not always a conscious one. It is embodied in the history of an individual, beginning with his or her efforts at reflection that first developed in childhood. But the transformation of what is heard, seen, or touched is dependent upon the individual skill of the human mind in representing experience as images, as inner speech, as movement ideas. Through these varied languages of thought, the meanings of these experiences are stored and organized.

Touching upon the subject of externalization of the creative products, Vera John-Steiner states that the varied manifestations of thought, such as writing, mathematical formulae, and musical compositions are the end-products of the multiple transformations of thought. These very forms of externalized thinking also constitute the basis of internal thought. The researcher states that the full interplay of these external and internal processes of thought has not been explored in the past; their interconnection constitutes one of the major themes of her work.

The research conducted by Vera John-Steiner presents incredibly valuable insights into the nature of creative thinking, the processes of which, as the author emphasizes repeatedly throughout her work, need further understanding and research.

**Why I Chose Activity Theory As a Framework for My Research**

There are a number of advantages of using activity theory as a framework for analysis of the elements of the human activity. First of all, in contrast to analysis methods that treat interacting systems components in isolation, activity theory provides a means to account for the complexities of course dynamics, and interactions of the components in the activity context (Barab and Plucker, 2002). The method acknowledges that subject-object relations and outcomes of understanding all exist as a part of the context. This recognition of the context shifts the unit of analysis from the individual or the
environment to the activity. Second, it looks for explanations in activity (person-acting-in-the –situation) and not in the mind of an individual nor the environmental components. Activity theory treats activity as a contextualized set of events that are distributed across physical tools and rich contexts, all of which are embedded in the rich socio-cultural history, and helps to tackle the theoretical and methodological questions that are central to theories that suggest that cognition is practice-bound or situated. Another important feature of activity theory is the acknowledgement that each current system is nested, physically, socially, and historically within various other activity systems (Barab and Plucker, 2002).

In my research study I focused on the activities of the screenwriters as they created a screenplay, on understanding the nature of the elements and the processes that constitute the creative endeavor of writing a story for the screen, the nature of interactions of the elements in these activities, such as interactions of the subject of the activity, the screenwriter, with the object of the activity, the story, and the influence of the culture and the community on these interactions, and how these interactions influence the outcomes of the activities.

Because of the situated nature of the activity, human competencies exhibited in the activity, and uniqueness of events and cultural attributes that every activity embeds, every study targeted towards understanding the essence of human activity may have an original insight into the situation under research. Every well-conducted study may reveal something new and unique because the nature of the phenomenon of the human activity is multifaceted, driven by the unique sets of circumstances of an activity. Based on these characteristics of activity, I believe that one of the best values of researching the phenomenon of activity maybe to focus on understanding how the specifics of the activity influence the interplay of all the elements of the activity and what implications it may have for the situation under research. Such research may result in discovering new insights into a specific occupation, like medicine or screenplay writing, uncover the best practices that can be adopted by other professionals in the same or similar fields, and replicate or model the most effective methods via the use of learning technologies or in a classroom environment.
Only in the context of the activity do the elements of the activity system start interacting with one another. Without a goal in the context of the activity, the elements of the system are just disjointed pieces that exist “out there.” Only the context of the activity puts the elements of the activity system together into a useful application. By ‘useful’ I mean making elements work purposefully towards creation of the product or accomplishing a task.

Barab and Plucker (2002) recommend we draw on the theoretical perspectives of activity theory founded by Vygotsky, Leont’ev, and Luria when defining the various components of the system through which cognition is situated and distributed (Engestrom, 1993; Nardi, 1996). The advantages of using activity theory lies in the fact that it offers a framework for describing activity and provides a set of perspectives on practice that interlink individual and social levels.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Purpose and Questions

The purposes of my study are as follows: 1) to describe screenwriter’s experiences when they write screenplays; 2) to describe how interacting components of the screenwriters’ experiences influenced the outcomes of their activities and their learning; 3) to describe what constituted the most salient/important components of the activities and their interactions in achieving the final outcome, writing a script, and 4) to suggest reasons why screenwriters considered these elements and interactions most important.

My research questions are:

1. How do screenplay writers describe their experiences when writing a film screenplay? What meanings do they attribute to these experiences?
2. How do interacting components of the screenwriters’ experiences in writing a screenplay influence the outcomes of their activities and their learning?
3. What are the most salient/important components of the activities and their interactions in achieving the final outcome, writing a screenplay? Why do writers consider these elements and interactions the most important?

In my study, I provide vivid descriptions of the screenwriters’ creative processes and its elements, and rich documentation of how their stories unfolded within these descriptions. I also provide the reasons why their stories unfolded in certain ways, and why screenwriters took certain paths and did certain things. I describe the interrelationships among the elements of the creative processes and the factors that influenced the screenwriters and their stories. Screenwriters may use these rich documented descriptions of the creative processes to assist them in the process of creating their own stories. Activity theory researchers and practitioners may use the findings of my study to further explore the areas of externalization of artifacts in creative activities or apply certain aspects of my findings in implementing creative activities.

Research Methods
When conducting my study, I used a combination of the elements of the phenomenological, ethnographical and grounded theory approaches. Phenomenology was the main approach in the study. The focus of my study, understanding the lived experiences of screenplay writers when they create a story, determined the primary role of the phenomenological research approach over other methods. Phenomenology helped me to explore the screenwriters’ creative experiences when they write a screenplay, how their life experiences influenced their work and the formation of their personal and professional identities. Phenomenology also helped me to explore how the writers transform their stories and themselves as a result of writing experiences and the feedback they receive from the members of the community of practitioners.

As I was using phenomenology as my main method, I attempted to produce phenomenological descriptions. According to Van Manen (1997), “phenomenological text is descriptive in a sense that it names something. And in this naming it points to something and it aims at letting something show itself. And phenomenological text is interpretive in the sense that it mediates. Klien, as quoted by Van Manen states that etymologically ‘interpretation’ means explaining in the sense of mediating between two parties. It mediates between interpreted meanings and the thing toward which the interpretations point” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 26).

Van Maanen (1997) emphasizes that phenomenological descriptions aim at elucidating lived experiences and the meaning of lived experiences is usually hidden or veiled (p. 27). The author notes that a good phenomenological description is an adequate elucidation of some aspect of the lifeworld – it resonates with our sense of lived life. He writes: “A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (p. 27).

In my study I focused on collecting the screenwriters’ lived experiences, their stories and anecdotes related to their creative processes, their personal experiences and the cultural environment in which they were created. My interviews gathered both reflective and pre-reflective screenwriters’ experiences. Reflective experiences described the screenwriters’ creative processes in recollection of the time when they wrote the story, which could range from a couple of years to several years of time. Pre-reflective
experiences described the screenwriters’ creative processes of creating their stories in the present time. Pre-reflective experiences were precise in describing the authenticity of the screenwriters’ mental and emotional states as they were going through the process of story creation. Reflective experiences were strong on recollections of the creative processes that happened some time ago in the perspective of the present time, the lessons learned as a result of that experience and what significance the screenplay had in the writer’s life.

I used elements of ethnography, a method that focuses on studying unfolding cultural process in order to understand how the cultural context of the activity influences the screenwriters’ products and creative processes of writing screenplays and the types of screenplays they write. Descriptions of what it means to write for Hollywood, the culture that predominates the writers’ realities resulted from my ethnographic explorations. Investigations of the cultural aspects of the screenwriter’s activities helped me to explicate how the screenwriters’ identities and the stories they write are formed by the working environment of Hollywood, how the writers deal with the pressures of their working environment and how they survive these pressures and continue to create. Ethnography helped me to understand what constitutes the Hollywood culture, how it influences the work of the screenwriters; how the writers are perceived in the communities of the Hollywood film makers, how they interact with the producers and film directors, and the processes Hollywood studios use to put the screenplay through the development process once the screenplay was submitted by the screenwriters to the studio executives. Understanding Hollywood culture and what it means for the established screenwriters to work for the Hollywood studios were some of the major revelations of this study. I was unable to conduct observations of participants which is a key element of ethnography in terms of understanding the culture. To approximate participant observation, I talked to producers, I watched documentaries about the Hollywood culture, and I read magazines and books about it.

To generate a substantive theory of the screenwriters’ activities, I employed in my study the grounded theory analytic strategies. The elements of the theory I have produced is “grounded” directly in the empirical data from the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I used a general method of comparative analysis in order to generate the
elements of the substantive theory. The grounded theory approach helped me to generate conceptual categories and their properties by comparing similarities and differences among the diverse individuals involved in my study (phenomenology also helped to do this), which in its turn helped me to create an integrated central theoretical framework.

**Sampling**

There are two primary units of analysis within this study: individual screenwriters and their stories. Five screenwriters have been interviewed during the study. Four individuals wrote screenplays for Hollywood studios, and one wrote for an independent film and has an agent in Hollywood representing her screenplay with the purpose to sell it to the Hollywood studio. My purpose was to interview the screenwriters whose screenplays were produced as movies or optioned by the studios. It served as a criterion for selecting screenwriters for my study because in both cases there was an indication that an individual has sufficient expertise in creating screenplays and understanding the story to draw the attention of either a major Hollywood studio or an independent film production company. Four of the study participants were from Los Angeles and worked for Hollywood studios. One participant once wrote for Hollywood studios and is presently an independent screenwriting guru mainly teaching classes on screenwriting methodology. One participant worked for an independent film company, lived in Miami with an office opened in Los Angeles, and was planning to move to Los Angeles permanently.

I gained access to the participants through connections and friendships I developed as a result of my interest in film. Some of the friendships and connections resulted from attending seminars on screenwriting, and others from references from my friends who knew filmmakers in Hollywood and in independent film area. I also used the principle of chain connections – once I finished interviews with one screenwriter, I would ask him or her to refer me to other screenwriters they knew.

A screenplay served as another unit of analysis. I asked the screenwriters to selects the screenplays that played a significant role in their lives and their careers and about which they could talk in sufficient detail. Based on these criteria, the screenwriters selected their own screenplays they wanted to talk about.
**Modes of Observation and Site Selection**

To implement the phenomenological and ethnographic methods used in the study, I employed the techniques of interviews, close observation, and document analysis.

**Interviews**

My interview questions were focused on understanding the nature of screenwriters’ activities, the processes and tools they use, knowledge and skills they apply to implement these activities. Interview questions were created with the purpose to find the answers to the research questions and therefore, were divided into the areas that are related to corresponding research questions. I have questions inquiring about *story creative processes*, the factors that influenced the story creation such as screenwriters’ expertise, personal and professional experiences, and the environment and the culture in which the writers worked; and the story and the writer transformation. I designed both structured and unstructured questions for my interview protocol (see Appendices B & C). I had follow-up questions based on what the participant was saying during an interview to have a complete understanding of what he or she was talking about or to explore the subject of the conversation further.

I changed some of my initial interview questions by making them in some cases more generic. For instance, I decided not to ask specific questions about the story design and structure, as I initially planned in my interview protocol. The original question about story design inquired into whether the story was designed as a classical plot or an arch plot. When I started my interviews a number of writers didn’t really quite understand the terminology I used because they never studied screenwriting as formal courses. So, I had to change the question and instead ask the writer to talk about the story design or the structure and see what kind of terminology and descriptions they wanted to use when talking about their stories.

After some of my initial interviews I decided to group the interview questions according to the areas of my research questions. As a result, I had questions under the themes “creative processes”, “story transformation”, “culture”, etc. (see Appendix C).
Grouping the questions under these themes helped to better organize my interviews and think ahead during the interview what area I was going to talk about next.

The main method for data collection was phenomenological and ethnographic interviews. The majority of interviews took place over the phone. I conducted in person interviews with one participant in New York City and had a few interviews in person with two participants during my trip to Hollywood where I finally had a chance to meet them. Interviews with each participant happened over a period of a few months where we usually had one or two interviews a week with the exception of holidays or times when my participants were traveling or had busy work schedules. I audio taped each interview. Each interview lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. Five to ten hours of interviews were recorded for each study participant.

I asked the study participants to send me their screenplay via mail, some sent me electronic copies of their stories. I gained access to movies that were produced based on my participants’ stories in video rental offices, such as Blockbuster.

I also found articles on some of my participants on the Internet when they pointed where I should look. I purchased a number of magazines that featured my study participants’ work.

Close Observations

Another method I used for collecting data was close observation. Van Maanen (1999) describes the method of “close observation” as a way for the researcher to enter the lifeworld of the study participant by participating in it. According to Van Maanen, ‘close observation involves an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations” (p. 69). I used the method of “close observation” with three writers. I’d like to make a distinction between the types of close observation that in my opinion, are possible with different types of activities. Van Maanen gives an example of participating in the children’s game as an illustration of a method of close observation. While playing with the children is something natural for adults to do, directly participating in the creative process of writing a screenplay with someone is next to impossible for the researcher unless he or she is a writing partner with
the study participant. During our interviews some screenwriters talked about how difficult it is to write with someone else because of the personal differences, or differences of approaches to the story, they emphasized how important it was to have a writing chemistry with the writing partner. If a screenwriter did have a writing partner, as in the case of Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson, it happened as a result of the existence of such chemistry and years of joint writing experiences with the person. Trying to have the experience of “close observation”, I asked Steve Rivele whether I could be a part of their writing session, and in response I heard: “No, absolutely not, it would be too bulky of a consciousness.”

Being a writer myself, I know that what Steve was referring to is very true. The creative process is mysterious. Often it is unclear how it works. It represents a fusion of unconscious, conscious, and spiritual processes that play an important role in the birth and further development of the story. It is hard, almost impossible, to articulate everything that is going on in the writer’s mind when the creative process takes place. Even if the writer can talk aloud about an aspect of the story he or she is thinking about at the given point, articulating it and having a discussion about it with someone may stop the creative flow of thoughts, and may hinder some unconscious processes that play a key role in the story creation. Robert McKee said that there is a notion that the story is written once the writer starts thinking about it, referring to the works of the unconscious mind that is constantly addressing the story aspects the writer wonders about. The work of the unconscious mind occurs constantly: in the writer’s sleep, while she or he is exercising, reading, even if the writer is not cognizant of such thinking processes, the unconscious mind is constantly looking for answers to the story questions. Other important processes that are occurring during the writer’s writing a story, have spiritual, divine nature, and how do you observe that?

Taking into consideration all these aspects of the creative processes, many of which are hidden from consciousness, it is impossible to sit next to the screenwriter in the writing session and understand all the aspects of his creative processes at the time only because so many of them have taken place unconsciously and the writer cannot explain why and how these ideas came to his mind. This represents one of the limitations of this study. Therefore, based on these peculiarities of the writing creative process, I consider
an experience of close observation of the writer’s activities to be different from most activities where participation is more possible. I think that talking to the writer after the creative session while he or she is in the process of writing a story is as close as a researcher can get to when he or she is not a study participant’s writing partner or not a writer herself. I’ve talked to two writers soon after they had their writing experiences while they were in the middle of creating a story.

I interviewed Mylo Carbia as she was re-writing some parts of her thriller - story “The Statute of Limitations,” based on the feedback she received from friends, film producers and other writers after she submitted the first draft of the screenplay. Mylo shared all the details of the changes she was making to the original story and the thinking processes behind her changes. Steve Rivele was writing “Kleopatra”. Close observation was an incredible experience for me because it allowed me to watch my subjects from a short distance, as they were in the midst of their creative process, sharing with me their thoughts, concerns, their mental and emotional states, agonies and victories.

I would say that the most amazing experience of a close observation I had was when I interviewed Steve Rivele as he was writing “Kleopatra”. I interviewed him every week as he was going through the creative process. The power of such close observation was in being let in into the writer’s internal world of thoughts, challenges, revelations and the break-throughs. One of the most powerful moments occurred when Steve had a break-through one night when after weeks of working on “Kleopatra”. Before it happened the writer expressed his concern that the story was still moving forward very slowly, and he couldn’t get a good sense of the main character of Kleopatra and how the events of the story should unfold. The next day after the writer had experienced the break-through I received an email message from him where he informed me of what happened. We talked on the phone shortly after that and he described to me what happened to him in details. He told me that he couldn’t sleep all night and at 4:30 in the morning he started hearing Kleopatra’s voice. Kleopatra told him the answers to the questions he couldn’t find for weeks, especially the problems that have been bothering him for months. According to Steve, before the break-through happened, creating of the story was a “mechanical’ process,” a stage in the creative process when the writer didn’t yet achieve the state of saturation with the story and the characters, and is trying to figure
out the story as solving a problem. The writer was waiting to achieve a state of saturation with the story when the characters would start talking in his head, dictating the flow of the scenes and what happens, a state which writer called an “organic writing” when the story and the characters start having a life of their own. The break-through experience was a turning point from mechanical to organic writing for Steve, which is the most desirable state of the creative process. My proximity to the writer’s experiencing the break-through allowed me to witness this incredible experience and record it. Being as close to the process as a researcher possibly could, allowed me to really understand what the writer was going through emotionally and intellectually, and how the writer achieved the state of saturation with the story and the character actually contributed to the story development. Also, witnessing the writer’s break-through allowed me to see the important difference between the ‘mechanical’ and the ‘organic’ ways of writing that the writer had been emphasizing throughout our conversations.

My experience of talking to the writer as he was creating “Kleopatra” made me realize the difference between recording the writers’ pre-reflective experiences as they are going through the process of creating a story and the writers’ reflective experiences when they have created the story in the past and talk about it later, reflecting on what they have done and how the story turned out to be. Witnessing and recording the direct living pre-reflective experiences in my opinion, had a lot of advantages over the reflective experiences because pre-reflective experiences really showed me how the creative process works at the time when it is occurring, versus later, when the story is written and the writer contemplates about it. Being in the middle of the writer’s living experience allowed me to see how the writer thinks, what he feels, how he reasons through the possible impediments of moving the story forward, creating the character, how his intellectual and emotional states change after the break-through and to see the positive change in the writer’s mood and his creative intensity when he starts re-creating the story.

**Document Analyses**

Reading the screenwriters’ screenplays, watching the movies based on their stories, reading their poetry, novels and articles written about the writers were the other source of data for my study. As a rule, I read the writers’ screenplays before we were
going to discuss them during our interviews. If the film was shot based on the story, I also watched the film. Some of the writers, in addition to being screenplay writers were poets, musicians and novelists with published books that became bestsellers. Reading screenplays, poems, and novels, the study participants produced helped me to see how the writers applied their skills when writing screenplays, how their beliefs, values and personal identities came through their work, how their personal experiences and the culture they work in influenced how they wrote their stories. The personal anecdotes they shared about the history of writing their stories gave me an insight into their internal personal world, into the phases of their lives and how they tried to preserve their work so that it is not tampered with by others.

Reading the articles about the writers gave me a better idea about how other journalists saw their art and their contribution to the film industry. It also told me about some of the characteristics of the writers I didn’t myself have a chance to observe.

Life history and life cycle interviews were used to understand how, throughout the phases of their lives, participants developed the present level of expertise and what personal (biographical), educational, professional and cultural factors contributed to their construal of their personal and professional identity. The personal biography questions helped me to answer the questions: How did the person get this way? What kind of decisions and choices did the person make that brought him or her to this point in their lives? (Van Maanen, 1997). It was interesting to explore how participants’ cultural, professional, and personal beliefs and values, and their perceptions of their personal identities affect their working practices and application of their skills in the creative writing activities.

I also kept myself updated on the most recent events in film making business by reading such magazines as The Screenwriting Magazine, Creative Screenwriting, The New Yorker, including the Hollywood issue (2004), and Vanity Fair, the Hollywood issue (2004). I also watched a documentary film called “Easy Riders Raging Bulls” that depicted the aspects of the Hollywood culture covering the period from 1960s till early 1990s.

Data Analysis
Each interview audiotape was labeled. The transcription of all tapes was done personally by me. Immediately after transcription of the tapes of each participant I did an open coding analysis. I chose not to use the “Nudist” software program to conduct analysis of the texts of the interviews. After my initial attempts to use the software, I found that during the first stage of an open coding analysis, the use of software fragmented the text into separate documents according to the prescribed code. Because the interview transcripts represented very dense in meaning texts, where one participant’s thought was very closely interconnected with another, and the logic of what he or she was saying depended on the previously expressed ideas, I was concerned that the fragmentation of the text by the software could destroy the integrity of the text, and it would lose its logic and meaning. Instead of using the software, I came up with my own scheme for open coding. When uncovering the meaning of the text and looking for main ideas of what the study participant was saying, I bolded the main ideas in the original transcript:

I: can you talk about the process of screenplay writing? How do you usually start a story?

S: there are two general ways: it is either the story we generated, like “Beethoven”, and we write it on spec. In other words we write it without being paid just because we want to do it. And the other general way is that we are invited by a studio to do a project as in the case of “Ali”.

During the next stage I named or labeled the concept that expressed the main idea of the paragraph and placed the concept title in front of the paragraph, highlighting and underlining it. I created a separate document, which contained the labeled concepts. Next to the concept label I put the page number of the original interview transcript where the text was taken from:

*The Screenwriting Process - Two Ways of Starting A Story (p. 8)*
• **there are two general ways**: it is either the story we generated, like “Beethoven”, and we write it on spec. In other words we write it without being paid just because we want to do it. And the other general way is that we are **invited by a studio to do a project** as in the case of “Ali”.

As a result of this process, I had all interview transcripts labeled. I thought that by doing the open coding this way I preserved the integrity and the flow of the original interviews and at the same time, I could see the emerging concepts within the transcript. I could observe how the concepts emerged from the previous statements and how they related to what the writer said before and after a particular concept. It helped me not only to see the interrelations between the concepts, but also understand their origins and see the emerging patterns of categories and themes.

*Formation of categories* based on the identified concepts was the next step in the process of data analysis. When I was labeling the concepts, I could see the interconnections among some of them, and started jotting down the names of the future possible categories. For instance, when the writers talked about some of the traditions they had about their approaches to writing, things like asking a question that interested them in the story, running research, discussing the impressions from the research with the writing partner, etc., I thought that these things could be grouped under the category called “The Writer’s Rituals”. Some of the categories had subcategories that were identified in the process as well. For example, a category “Organic Way of Writing” had such subcategories as “Getting into the state of saturation with the story and the characters”, and “A story takes a life of its own”, that described the stages of the organic writing approach.

The next step of the analysis involved relating categories to subcategories and looking at how categories crosscut and link. This stage in the data analysis is called *axial coding*. Doing axial coding, I asked myself questions: *why, where, when, how, with what results*. Looking for answers to these questions helped me to uncover relationships among categories.

Taking a perspective towards data, or paradigm, and looking at the aspects of the paradigm such as conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences helped me to make
connections among the categories and the subcategories and come up with the overall themes that flowed from the emerging network of the categories and related subcategories. Having my research questions as a reference point helped me to cluster the categories under major themes of “the writers’ commitment to writing”, “creative approaches to screenwriting”, “culture”, “the writer’s transformation”, and the “story transformation.”

During the process of relating categories and subcategories I came up with the central category called “The Creative Process”. The central category embraced multiple themes that denoted the stages of the story creation, such as “creative approaches,” “the desired state of the story development,” “achieving the desired state of the story development,” etc.

I used a constant comparative method to build the elements of a grounded theory. I compared incidents applicable to each category, and I coded each incident in my data into as many categories of analysis as possible as categories emerged. For instance, the category “origination of the story” emerged after comparing the responses of several screenwriters to the question about how they got the ideas for their stories. Each response indicated a different source of the story idea. One screenwriter responded: “I was driving and suddenly saw an image of a dead corpse of a man in my head. And I thought: what does it mean?” Another screenwriter’s answer was: “I’ve always wanted to write a story about Beethoven. It was only a matter of time.” Yet the third screenwriter said: “This story was channeled to me. I saw the whole thing one night in one hour.” I compared the incidents as I was coding them with the other incidents of the same kind, which helped me to come up with the properties of the categories. As I was comparing these incidents, I’ve noticed that the origins of the story vary from writer to writer and that each writer had different ways they originated the story. Some of the origins were inspired by a long-life dream or a desire to adapt a favorite novel; other stories just incidentally came to the writer’s mind and he or she thought about a possibility to develop an idea into an interesting story; or the idea for the story came from the studio as the writer was hired to write a screenplay.

I developed my own codes. For instance, “the desired state of the story development”, and used in vivo codes to construct some of the categories. For instance,
the category “Reaching the state of saturation with the character and the story” was taken from Steve Rivele’s language during our interview. As I was coming up with minor categories and based on them major categories, I was thinking about providing examples or illustrations for the major and minor categories from the writer’s work. So, for instance to illustrate a process of getting saturated with the story in order to reach the desired state of the story development, I provided examples from the screenplays “Copying Beethoven”, “Kleopatra,” and “The Statute of Limitations.”

As the categories became integrated with other categories, the connections between the categories became more obvious, and the elements of the theory started to emerge. Thus, it became obvious that when the writers created their stories organically (in vivo term), they had to get into a state of saturation with the story and the characters, when the characters “would start talking in the writer’s head”. When the creative process was not flowing easily, they described it as “mechanical” or “deductive”, they had to approach it as a problem-solving activity until the writers reached the state of saturation. As major modifications become fewer and fewer, the theory and categories solidified. Constant revision of the categories and their properties led to discovery of the underlying uniformities of the original set of categories and to reduction of extraneous categories to a smaller set of categories. Major categories which represented the themes of research appeared. This led to delimiting of the theory. Another factor that led to further delimiting of the theory was the theoretical saturation of the categories. After a number of incidents were coded for the same category, at some point there were no new incidents that would point to the new aspect of the category, and at that point the category was considered saturated. As I delimited the framework of the categories, on a number of occasions I went back to the writer to collect more data on the aspect of the theory that didn’t receive the necessary coverage for an in-depth understanding. For instance, when I coded data based on Steve Rivele’s interviews, I’ve noticed that he mentioned the importance of creating of the metaphorical structure of the story. During our interview I didn’t collect enough data on the subject, and so I went back for more interviews to find out more information on the importance of the metaphorical structure of the story and its relationship to the story general structure. As the categories became saturated and the major themes appeared, it became the foundation of the emerging theory.
Research Quality

What Quality Means to Me

The purpose of my study is as follows: 1) to describe screenwriter’s experiences when they write screenplays; 2) to describe how interacting components of the screenwriters’ experiences influenced the outcomes of their activities and their learning; 3) to describe what constituted the most salient/im- portant components of the activities and their interactions in achieving the final outcome, writing a script, and 4) to suggest reasons why screenwriters considered these elements and interactions most important.

In order to address the issues reflected in the purpose of my study and research questions, I tried to explore them to get exhaustive, detailed data from my study participants. My goal was to reach the fullest understanding of the phenomena at hand. In order to do that, I kept asking questions until I thought the subject was exhausted. I also used other data sources I could find on the question such as films, articles, and books. Trying to reach deep and all embracing understanding of the subject of research in my mind represents one of the most important aspects of quality, especially when exploring the essence of the practitioners’ activities that represent multiple angles and carry unusual hidden qualities like a phenomenon of creativity. Gaining such an understanding from the best representatives of the profession contributes to achieving high quality as well. For instance, I could see the difference when I spoke to a few screenwriting seminar participants who were amateurs in writing screenplays and when I started talking to the expert screenwriters from Hollywood. I think I was very lucky to find people who were open and willing to share their creative processes and who spent years working for major Hollywood studios, knowing the business, the culture inside out and having developed expertise on the subject. Getting data first hand from the Academy Award nominated screenwriters, I was very cognizant of the fact that I was getting the best insights that these writers had on the creative processes and creative approaches they had invented, tried out, reflected on, re-invented and reapplied to see how they were working under various story conditions.

I also spent my best efforts on trying to understand data from different angles and to come to conclusions about its meaning. I believe that the insights I reached are quite
unique in both screenwriting profession and in activity theory. I intended to reflect the unpredictable, unfolding nature of the creative process, various aspects of it: the organic growing nature of it and an analytical problem-solving task it can be.

Reflective and pre-reflective insights shared by my study participants, the creative practitioners in my mind allowed me to present a creative process from the perspectives of the daily lived experiences rather than a pre-meditated analysis of a critic.

The indicators of quality in qualitative research methodology from the naturalistic and constructivist paradigms are: meaningfulness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Baptiste, 2002, Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

When trying to assure research meaningfulness, a researcher should ask herself a question: How do I ensure that my findings account for multiple constructions of my research participants; and are plausible to my target audiences? (Baptiste, 2002). The following activities increased the probability that meaningful findings were produced: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Prolonged engagement is an investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes, learning the ‘culture’, testing for misinformation produced by distortions either of the self or the respondents, and building trust. Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979) argue that objects and behaviors take not only their meaning but also their very existence from their contexts. It is imperative, therefore, that the naturalist spends enough time in becoming oriented to the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When gathering data for my research, I spent at least three months with each participant interviewing them, getting to know them, studying their works and the way they think and create. My engagement with some of the writers took even longer, sometimes up to 7-9 months to collect all the necessary data while they were writing their stories. I interviewed Steven Rivele over the period of eight months in order to follow the full cycle of development of “Kleopatra” – from the writer’s initial efforts to create a story to the point when the story was submitted to Warner Brothers studio, and the writers were getting feedback from the studio executives.

I spent time, socializing, developing friendships and building trust with my study participants, trying to understand the world they live in, their personalities, and their
professional identities. My visit to Hollywood gave me a chance to meet some of my study participants in person, and even better understand who they were and how they created. Each of my study participants had a distinct colorful personality. All of my study participants are talented, sophisticated artists, who knew their craft inside and out and had the character and stamina to fight for preserving the integrity of their art.

The goal of the persistent observation is to identify those elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail. I used the prolonged engagement and persistent observation to understand the creative processes my study participants went through when creating their stories and the cultural context that they worked in. If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Persistent observation helped me in finding persuasive qualities: things that really count in the study and sorting out irrelevancies. Paying close attention to the things the writers talked about, immediate analyses of their interviews allowed me to identify themes and concepts that prevailed among all the study participants quite early in the study and ask the writers more questions about these concepts to insure my complete understanding of their processes and the culture they worked in.

The technique of triangulation is collecting information from a diverse range of individuals, settings, and sources, using a variety of methods (Denzin, 1970). In my research I used method, data, and multiple perspectives triangulation for interpretation of the data. To assure data triangulation, the data was collected from different sources: interviews with the screenwriters, their screenplays, my own notes of observations, examination of films, books, and journal article, and attending of seminars on screenwriting.

For method triangulation, I applied the mixed approaches of phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory by resorting to such instruments as interviews, observations, and examination of various artifacts and tools. To reflect multiple perspectives for interpretation of the data, I resorted to activity theory research and literature on screenwriting, novel writing, and creativity that was relevant to my research. The data was interpreted from the points of view of these theoretical frameworks.
Using the method triangulation approach, implemented via interviews and observations, I created descriptions of what the participants said. Document analysis of the writers’ works sometimes provided data that is difficult to obtain from any other source, for instance, participants may be reluctant to talk about certain things or they forget to mention things that are easier to understand when reading the screenplays they created or watching the films that were made based on their stories. Interviews were a valuable source of information in that they provided a description of events. Both interviews and document analysis complemented each other: the document analysis provided additional information that was not available in interviews and versa versa.

Negative case analysis is a process of refining the hypotheses until they account for all the data and cases without any exceptions. Negative case analysis eliminates all ‘outliers’ and all exceptions by continually revising the hypotheses at issue until the ‘fit’ is perfect (Lincoln, Guba, 1985, p.312). According to Kidder (1981, p 244) as stated by Lincoln and Guba, negative case analysis is to qualitative research as statistical analysis to quantitative. “Both are means to handle error variance.” The negative case analysis helps to make data more credible by reducing the number of exceptional cases. I used negative case analysis to explore the unusual instances in my data. By doing it, I identified the analytical writing approach, deriving it from one participant of my study whose creative approach was different from the rest of the study participants.

Member checks method is when the data is checked with those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Member checking is both informal and formal, and it occurs continuously. Some forms of the member checks can include checking the recordings of interviews by playing them back to the interviewees for their reactions, or it could be played to other respondents and asking them to comment in order to find different insight.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is different from triangulation. Triangulation is the process carried out with respect to data, whereas, member checks is a process carried out with respect to constructions. In my research study I used the member checks when I didn’t reach a full understanding of the concept,
I would read the quote to a study participant and then asked to clarify or expand what was not clear. I also used the member checks to verify some conclusions.

When trying to ensure *transferability of research, a researcher should ask herself a question*: how do I ensure that my target audiences have sufficient information about both the sending and receiving contexts to be able to assess relevance and applicability (Baptiste, 2002)? Will my hypotheses hold true in other contexts, at some other time? In my study I tried to provide thick descriptions of the phenomena under investigation that I hope will enable the readers to understand my study and be able to transfer aspects of it to other relevant for them contexts.

When thinking about *dependability*, a researcher asks a question: How do I ensure that I, my instruments, and procedures are sufficiently discriminating, discerning, and robust to account for changing conditions and contexts (Baptiste, 2002)?

As I was working on analyzing the results of my research, I was constantly working with the methodologist of my study Dr. Ian Baptiste who as an expert was examining if the steps I took in the study were appropriate, and the data analysis procedures and my interpretations of the findings were adequate.

In preparation for my interviews, I would read what the person said in the previous interviews and create more specific questions to clarify the points, especially if the previous interview surprised me with an unexpected turn. I also tried to see how what the interviewer was saying about the creative process was reflected in his or her work by finding the spots in their screenplays which the screenwriters were referring to or which would illustrate their point. I tried to understand the link between how the screenwriter described the process and how it was implemented in the screenplay. If I had a misunderstanding or a question about it, I would always make a point to talk to the study participant about it. I would make a note for myself, and if necessary modify my questions in the interview protocol to reflect my newly constructed understanding of the individual’s unique creative process. The new questions would reflect the changed context of the interview that took a different direction.

To ensure *confirmability, a researcher asks*: “How do I make my procedures sufficiently transparent to allow for and invite critique? How do I make my processes and conclusions open to the scrutiny of my target audiences?” As a constructivist inquirer,
who acknowledges that my study is influenced by my actions and desires, I made sure to **clarify and defend my researcher biases**: any positions or assumptions that I brought to the research. Bracketing my biases as much as possible and acknowledging those in the open helped me to keep my study as ‘clean’ as possible within the subjective interpretations framework. To ensure confirmability of the study, I tried to describe my study’s methods and procedures explicitly and in detail, representing a complete picture. In my description I provided a detailed record of the study’s methods and procedures that can be followed as an audit trail. I believe that at the beginning of the data collection process I had a bias without realizing it. I attended all of Robert McKee’s seminars on screenplay writing and had a pretty good handle on how it works and its terminology. Somehow I think I believed that all screenwriters write according to the methodology that Bob so expertly laid out in his classes. I thought that there would be some variation of the pretty much the same thing. My big surprise came when I realized that the screenwriters not only didn’t follow the methodology, they really didn’t understand my language when I used some of the terminology. I remember during one of my initial interviews with Steve Rivele, I asked him a question: “and where is the story’s inciting incident?” referring to the event that every story is supposed to have, according to methodology, that turns the characters’ lives upside down. And I remember him asking me in a very surprised tone: ‘excuse me?’ Then I wasn’t sure what to do – whether to explain to the screenwriter of many years who was Academy Award nominated for his work what I meant by the term which seemed to me kind of inappropriate, or just drop the question and move to the next one. For a few seconds I was at a loss. I decided to repeat the question allowing a thought that he didn’t hear it well. And I got the same reaction from the writer. Then I realized that he never heard of the term, and I rephrased my question by saying “what was the most crucial event in Kleopatra’s life that changed her life in an irreversible way?” This experience made me re-do my interviewing protocol and drop questions regarding some methodological assumptions about the screenplays. Steve’s and other screenwriters’ reactions and responses also made me realize that the writers don’t follow the methodology and, in fact, don’t like the idea that there is a methodology. All of them invent their own ways of creating their stories, which completely turned my paradigm about screenwriting upside down.
There were other surprising moments in my interviewing experience. For instance, when I asked Steve Rivele what creativity meant to him, his response was: “I don’t understand that question. I don’t know what you’re asking about.” Imagine my shock when I thought I was talking to one of the most creative minds in Hollywood. I said: “well, that’s probably because it is your second nature.” And went on, rephrasing my questions, asking about specific examples from Steve’s writing work. And then something wonderful happened; Steve came up with one of the most incredible definition of creativity I’ve ever heard:

I guess you brought me to the realization of what creativity is. It is the undeniable need or impulse to talk to other people about the truths that we perceive and to find the language in which to do that, whether it is music, ballet or painting or sculpture, whatever. It is the process of inspiration and expiration to put it in the traditional terms. Inspiration means I bring in into oneself of the spirit, and the expiration means the breathing out of the spirit. So, it is the breathing process, we breathe in the spirit and we breathe it out in the form that other people can experience. In this way we’re very much in the mystical tradition. We’re breathing as an essential form of focusing and experiencing the religious truth.

The point I would like to make here is that the researchers’ interviewing skills could represent a bias or a limitation because a lot of times, as my experience showed, the flow of interview can be broken if there is an unexpected surprise and the researcher has difficulty going on, or awkwardly changes the topic. This might create an uncomfortable feeling on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee. I don’t know whether I intuitively have that skill, but in my opinion, I managed pretty well such moments of surprise when unexpected responses came my way. An ability to paraphrase the question, or ask completely opposite questions, or even drop a question, is a decision that the researcher has to make on the spot to make sure that the interview flows smoothly and the subject feels comfortable, and the researcher still gets to the essence of the topic of the discussion. I also found that using humor worked very well on a number of occasions with this audience.

Limitations of the Study
As one of my study participants Mylo Carbia expressed a wish that there was technology that would record movies that are channeled to her when they play in her
mind, so I wish there was technology that would record the writers’ thinking processes, all the elements of it: conscious, subconscious, spiritual, analytical, etc.

One of the study’s limitations was talking to the screenwriters after they have created the screenplay when a considerable amount of time has passed. Seeing the difference between reflective and pre-reflective experiences made me realize that inability to witness the creative process of all the writers in the time they were working on writing a screenplay, might have created certain gaps in complete understanding of the creative process because a lot of details and states might have skipped the writers’ memories since a considerable amount of time has elapsed.

During my interviews I felt that some writers were unwilling to reveal some of the details of their creative processes. I think that this phenomenon could be explained by writers believing in a certain “voodoo” connected to the flow of their creativity, an almost unconscious belief that if they disclose it, the magic might go away. This certainly created a limitation for my research because I could only gain as much depth of understanding of their creative processes as the writer chose to share.

Because every story presents a unique combination of the subject matter the writer creates his story about, the writers’ expertise, the story genre, the immediacy of the spiritual connection the writer manages to achieve, it is very difficult to draw generalizations that perhaps are necessary for deducing a theory. As a kaleidoscope is unpredictable in unfolding every time of a new pattern, so the unfolding of the story is quite an unpredictable and unique process. Theories about creative writing or creativity may be dry or irrelevant without concrete cases of displayed creativity through the stories told by the people who experience it and whose achievements are acknowledged by others.

Not being able to directly participate in the writing experience was also a study limitation. A story about an experience is not the same as the first hand experience. Perhaps co-writing with my study participants or being an observer of how the writing partners create together, would perhaps be an even better, closer experience than listening to their stories, although this statement may not be true because good writing collaboration really depends on chemistry and understanding between the writers and presence of another person in the room may prohibit creative flow of a usual process.
CHAPTER 4: BEING A SCREENWRITER

This chapter discusses what constitutes the screenwriters’ talents and craft necessary to be successful in their profession. It also explores the resources and tools the writers use to sustain their talent and develop their craft and be productive and motivated about writing stories for the big screen. How the screenwriters transform themselves as a result of their learning and writing experiences, and what mental tools they acquire while they are creating their stories are also topics addressed in this chapter.

The Screenwriters’ Talents

Writing stories for the big screen is an art and a science. An art that demands creativity, originality, imagination, and innovation; and a science that requires thorough analytical thinking about the principles of the story structuring, the dynamics of the character development, and the story design that will sustain the audience’s attention from start to finish, and will present the story content in the most unexpected ways. In order to write a screenplay and implement the art and science of it, the writers have to become blacksmiths of their own craft, and the gardeners of their own talent.

As I was inquiring on the topic of my subjects’ screenwriting expertise, the subject of our conversations shaped around the topic of whether it was important to have a screenwriting talent or it was sufficient to master the craft in order to write beautiful stories and be successful. All of my study participants acknowledged that the presence of a writing talent was necessary if anyone wanted to succeed in the screenwriting profession. The majority of writers indicated that it was impossible to teach how to write, that this is something that comes with the talent that the writer has to have. Having strongly indicated that talent was a ‘must’, they talked about different aspects of it that they perceived to be extremely important to being a professional screenwriter: a talent of story telling, a visualization talent, a language talent, and an innovation talent.

A Story Telling Talent

Creating a ‘beautiful story well told’ requires a talent, a gift of revealing to the world a tale of transformation of the human spirit, of the obstacles it overcomes, the peaks it
reaches and the lows it hits on its way of metamorphosing. “Good story means something worth telling that the world wants to hear. Finding this is your lonely task. *It begins with talent,*” declares Robert McKee in his book “Story”. “You must be born with the creative power to put things together in a way no one has ever dreamed. Then you must bring to the work a vision that's driven by fresh insights into the human nature and society, coupled with in-depth knowledge of your characters and your world. All that…and, as Hallie and Whit Burnett reveal in their excellent little book, a lot of love. The love of story – the belief that your vision can be expressed only through story, that characters can be more 'real' than people, that the fictional world is more profound and concrete. But the love of good story, of terrific characters and a world driven by your passion, courage, and creative gifts is still not enough. *Your goal must be a good story well told*” (McKee, 1997, p. 21).

Like Bob McKee, other writers participating in my study noted that a story telling talent is something without which the writers cannot create meaningful stories. Contemplating about the different abilities and skills the screenwriter has to have, Stephen Rivele concludes that the ability to tell the meaningful story is the key: “It is the difference between speaking the language and being able to tell a moving story in that language. What is more important than the knowledge of syntax and grammar is the ability to have something to say. Something of real importance and be able to capture it in the form of a screenplay such that it will communicate to the audience.”

Having written and read hundreds of screenplays as a ‘story doctor’ McKee strongly believes that for a successful screenwriter literary talent is not sufficient. "Literary talent is not enough. If you cannot tell a story, all those beautiful images and subtleties of dialogue that you spent months and months perfecting waste the paper they are written on. What we create for the world, what it demands of us, is story. Now and forever. Countless writers lavish dressy dialogue and manicured descriptions on anorexic yarns and wonder why their scripts never see production, while others with modest literary talent but great storytelling power have the deep pleasure of watching their dreams living in the light of the screen. So the writer embraces the principle, Tell Story…then freezes. For what is story? The idea of story is like the idea of music. We think we understand
music until we try to compose it and what comes out of the piano scares the cat“ (McKee, 1997, p. 19).

A screenplay, first of all, is a story, a story that is written in a particular genre such as comedy, drama, thriller, horror film, etc. Despite the differences in genres, all stories embrace fundamental story principles, they involve a character or a number of characters who go through transformation and who change their lives and themselves as a result of having gone through life ordeals and having made certain decisions and choices. When reflecting about the aspects of the story, all the study participants shared their own notions of what a story is and the types of stories they liked to write.

**Revealing the character through his or her actions**

Revealing the character through his or her actions under extreme circumstances is one of the important aspects of the story that the majority of my study participants wanted to explore. “Screenplays are stories about things happening and revealing character through actions,” says Chris Wilkinson. Rod Taylor likes to write stories where he puts his characters under extreme circumstances because the writer strongly believes that “it is out of that extreme circumstance that comes a revelation of the human nature.”

“True character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character’s essential nature,’ writes McKee in his book. “Beneath the surface of characterization, regardless of appearances, who is this person? At the heart of his humanity, what will we find? Is he loving or cruel? Generous or selfish? Strong or weak? Truthful or a liar? Courageous or cowardly? The only way to know the truth is to witness him make choices under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of his desire. Pressure is essential. Choices made when nothing is at risk mean little” (McKee, p. 101, 1997).

**Showing extreme human transformation**

Writing stories about extreme human transformation is another facet my study participants wanted to explore. “When it comes to writing a movie, you got to have a story than to have a series of events. And the story has to have a great human experience and a transformation within a series of events, if it’s not there, there is no story,” says
Mylo Carbia. Mylo believes that the best stories are about the extremes of human experiences. “It is not good enough to write about good versus evil, it’s got to be an extreme of that when the pure and the innocent turning to true evil and then back to pure and innocent, it’s got to be an extreme story of a human experience in order to be interesting, and I sincerely believe that,” says the writer. “Actual elements of a story don’t have to be exciting, it can happen in a film where two grocery cooks go on a road trip to Vegas, but within that story structure a true human transformation to the extreme needs to happen, and that’s what would make it very fascinating,” says the writer.

Mylo says that when she re-writes the works of other writers and re-creates characters, she asks herself a question: “what would be the extreme of this?” She picks a quality that she wants to explore in the character and shows it being transformed. With her own stories, when the original idea is channeled to her, the writer doesn’t have to ask that question because the story already incorporates it. “When I’m working on the re-write of the other person’s script, that’s where I do that mental process. I would ask for this character, what circumstances would make this transformation more extreme? How can we juice it up? So, there is a mental process of asking: “what life lesson is this character learning?”

Mylo believes that two story genres: thrillers and comedy have the greatest opportunity within the expectations of the genre to show very significant human transformation. “I like thrillers because you can also delve into some really deep, dark stuff within the human soul that you couldn’t necessarily touch upon in other genres. And when you start delving into the deep dark human capacity is when the things get very interesting because we’re so fascinated by the dark side of the human mind and the human soul. And that’s why I love thrillers, because once I got your attention and delve into that particular side, then there are a lot of lessons.”

**Teaching life lessons**

“A good story teaches us life lessons and brings the audience a complete satisfaction,” says Mylo. Mylo believes that there is a very spiritual thing behind the entire phenomenon of going to the movies. We’re learning life lessons through watching characters on the screen,” says the writer. “And how many times do we see a solution to a
life problem which happens to be in the movies? It happens. Or we saw a movie a couple of years ago when the character is in the same situation as you are now, and we remembered the solution in the movie, and we might apply it in our life. That’s really all I do, I’m just channeling stories that need to be told. But they are entertaining,” explains Mylo. When writing her own stories and doing work for hire, Mylo makes sure that the story has a life lesson embedded in it, otherwise the writer doesn’t see the point of writing a screenplay.

Stories about justice

“I think there are some powerful emotions in life: ‘love - hate’. But in my experience the most powerful emotion and the most moving value the thing that gets people upset the most is justice – injustice,” says Bob McKee. “Love - hate between you and someone else and it is the most upsetting, and very tragic, and you get angry and emotionally violent, especially if you feel that the person you love has been unjust. Whatever they’ve done to you is unjust or not, they just fell out of love and it’s very moving. But what really gets people upset you know, is when they feel that some situation in life is unjust. And more than anything else that people want out of this world is justice.” In his screenplay “Miss Julie Montgomery” Bob created the world of incredible injustice to women, to black people, to poor people. “That world is saturated with injustice and that injustice really upsets me. This story embraces the kind of values that I react to, that I got a lot of emotions about,” says the writer.

Contemplating about the stories he likes to write, Rod Taylor talks about his screenplay “The Brave One” a story about a newspaper reporter who worked for “The New York Times,” and was very educated and refined. She went to Brown University and was engaged to a doctor. One night he was brutally stabbed to death and she was brutally raped, which destroys her whole life, just obliterates it, and she becomes a vigilanti - someone who takes the law into his or her own hands. She goes out at night with a gun, makes herself available to the bad guys and then she kills them. “But in writing that character to me, it wasn’t just about what happened. I wanted to write about a frequent impossibility of reconciliation of justice and the law. She does her just, but it is not lawful and she is pushed to the extremes of her own survival,” says the writer. The
reason Rod likes to write these types of stories is because he can identify with people who are unjustly prosecuted: “I think everyone is to a certain extent. But I think that it is an elemental story that gets into everybody’s heart. Don’t you think that everyone feels that to a certain extent the world is extremely beautiful and extremely sad? And it is full of beautiful heroism and a deep, deep tragedy, and with those contrasts the world is all paradox,” says the writer. Rod believes that we all at some moments of our lives feel like victims of injustice: “don’t you think that a beautiful, beautiful woman gets old is an injustice? The fact the more sensitive and compassionate you’re the less likely you’ll be able to compete? That people hardened for the purpose of domination? So, inheriting human condition is total law injustice.”

“Being unjustly prosecuted” is the theme that Bob explores in his stories and that’s why he likes to write thrillers. “Of all the genres the most important to the culture today is the thriller because a true thriller, a pure thriller is a crime story, all from the victim’s point of view and the sense of being a victim is now universal in society,” says the writer. “Everybody feels that way that the society is somehow overwhelming, various forces, international and national politics. Corporations are these huge empires, and we’re all victims of it, you can be fired at any moment, you can be arrested at any moment, you can be victimized a thousand different ways, you get AIDS. Mother - nature is after our ass and sending out little viruses to kill us off, and we’re the victims of the forces that are beyond our control at all of these levels. And in all of these sources there is in a sense of perpetually entrapped fear that some catastrophic event will happen.”

Bob says that there is an all-pervasive sensation of being a victim and this is not the way it was in the past. “People sure did struggle, but you felt that you had a chance, and it is in your hands and not in someone else’s hands,” continues the writer. “And now we see that our lives are less and less in our control, there are forces we cannot control, so we’re loosing the power of our lives, and feel that we’re victims. And the thriller speaks to that feeling.”

Living lives other than their own

One of the most important constituents of the story telling talent is a writer’s ability to live a life of the characters in the story, to dwell in the story world for a period of time of
its creation. Living the lives other than their own is an ability that distinguishes the talented writers from mediocre ones. The mediocre scribes can only create stories based on what happened to them, while the talented writers can transfer themselves in time, slide inside other people’s minds, take on their personalities, become them and live their lives. This ability is of central importance to being a successful storyteller. Talking about the diversity of screenwriters, Mylo refers to a film called “Steel Magnolias.” The film is a touching emotional story about five women of all different stages in their lives that has been written by a man. “And it was a man who probably just had five brothers who just didn’t know women. That’s what really intrigues me. It’s a real gift to be able to get a good glimpse of that world. And where I think the cream rises to the top, having that ability.”

The participants of this study lived the lives other than their own dozens of times when writing their stories, telling their tales from perspectives of all kinds of people: children, women, men living in other historical times, struggling with the issues the writers never had to face themselves. When I was interviewing Stephen Rivele, he was writing “Kleopatra”, a story told from the Queen’s of Egypt perspective. I asked Steven if it was difficult being a man to write from a woman’s perspective, to which he responded “no”, “not if I’m connected with the character. Like Calamity Jane, a character from the play I wrote earlier in my life was immediately accessible to me, and women who saw the play found it difficult to believe that I had in fact written it. Some women who came to see the play said it was the most moving depiction of the woman they have ever heard: how the woman sees the world, and how she suffers, and how she overcomes. So, it doesn’t matter who the character is if I’ve got the visceral connection with the character, it will come through,” concludes the writer.

So, what is the “visceral” connection that Steve mentions in his response? How do writers ‘get connected to the characters in their stories? When I inquired about their techniques, the writers shared a number of ways they used in order to do it. To move inside into the world of his or her story and write from the character’s perspective, some writers have to get immersed into the character’s consciousness and start seeing the world through his or her eyes. They also need to know what the character wants to say, what the truth of that character is which means taking on a character as a persona. “It is
really not an emotional experience, it is a semiconscious experience, it is almost a mystical experience. *You become that person and then you begin to see the world through that person’s eyes;* explains Steven Rivele. “Copying Beethoven” was an ideal experience of writing a screenplay for Steven because he has lived with the character the most part of his life. The character was as real to him as anybody he has ever known, his music largely has shaped Steve’s consciousness, “I felt like the character was embedded in me, and I needed to talk about him, and I needed to let him talk,” says the writer.

One of the reasons Steve Rivele likes writing historically-based stories so much is because it forces him to create a consciousness and project it into the past to see that period through the eyes of the characters he has created. Casting consciousness into the past allows the writer to experience a certain historical period, the place and the time, and he believes that this is the only way he can do that. And that’s why it is the most satisfying writing for Steve: “That’s why we often hear the idea that history gives you the facts, but fiction gives you the truth.”

*Getting into the character’s head – figuring out the characters’ desires*

*Asking questions from the character’s perspective* is a method that helps the writer to see the world through the character’s eyes. In order to reach a profound understanding of the character and his or her world and to realize the characters are developing in credible ways, the question that the McKee keeps asking himself over and over is “what does my character want?” overall, subconsciously, at this moment in the play, at this moment in the story because when the writer figures out what his or her characters want, then he or she could imagine what they will do in order to get that.

“When you know your characters, and the world they live in, and the nature of their problems and their conflicts, and you could figure out if that’s what they want at the moment, and then you could think of what his or her choices are. And if these are the possible choices for the character, what would this character chose? But you can’t figure out what choice the character would take if you don’t know what they want. And so, you’re constantly sitting out there trying to figure out desire: What does my character want? On the other side, what’s stopping them from getting it? Given that, what are the choices the character has to act, what actions could the character take given the forces of
antagonism, given what the character wants?” says Bob McKee. “If the writer can’t understand the character’s point of view and can’t get into the character’s head and have some amount of compassion, he or she writes a bad character, bad roles,” concludes the guru.

As an illustration of his thinking through the characters’ desires, Bob McKee talks about writing his screenplay “Abraham,” where he needed to answer the main story question ‘why did God speak to Abraham?’ The writer put himself in place of Abraham and tried to understand the major issues he was going through: “Actually, everything about his life is good. He’s got family, he is feeding his people, in most ways life is good. So, I thought ‘why?’” Having realized the character’s dilemma, the writer, comes up with the answer to the main story question: “Because he is going through what we call an existential crisis. Life despite the well-being has no meaning to Abraham. And he has hit the point in his life where he has one problem despite his success; he has no children. In the Bible Sarah is barren which means that his genes will not survive. And he has tried this and tried that and none of it works, and this is a woman for him and she cannot have children and he doesn’t just want a child, he wants a child by this woman and he can’t have one, and therefore, his life has just bottomed out and life is meaningless. “And so I spent the first half hour dramatizing a man undergoing an existential crisis until he reaches the point where life has no meaning and that’s when God speaks to Abraham.”

Connecting with the character’s psyche – drowning in the character

Consistently asking questions about the story and the character is a technique that helps Steve Rivele achieve the state of saturation with his characters. In “Kleopatra” Steve and Chris started out with several questions about her that they wanted to answer: What did it mean for her to think that she was a living Goddess? How did she become an icon in our consciousness or in the consciousness of our civilization? Those kinds of questions represented the intellectual inquiries that drew the writers to the material. Steven says that the answers to these questions, since it involved a living being, a person who actually did exist, could only be found in her psyche. Then the writer elaborates:

And until you connect with her psyche, you’re skating on the ice. And it’s not until the ice breaks and you fall through, and you drown in her character that you can begin to really dramatize her because that’s the only way that you can begin
to really understand her. You have to drown in the character before you can begin to breathe her air. It is a very interesting process, in some sense you have to die to your own consciousness before you can reawaken to her consciousness, and this is the process all the writers go through if they are real writers. I’m talking about drowning and dying to someone else’s consciousness.

The writer’s ability to see the world through the character’s eyes is an important part of the process of saturation with the character. When the writer gets to that point, he knows that he is on the road to “doing something truthful.” Sometimes Steven can achieve this state before he begins to write a story. Sometimes, like with Kleopatra, it is a growing process: “I mean I’m slowly getting into this woman, trying to figure out who she is and how she sees the world.”

When I asked Steven if the process of saturating with the character was an emotional or intellectual experience for him, he responded that it is something qualitatively different from both. The writer acknowledged an intellectual part of the process when he has to conduct research and the semi-conscious, almost mystical part of the experience, when the writer has to take on his character as a persona.

**Using learning resources to enhance the story telling talent**

The writers can enhance their story telling talent if they learn techniques and elements of the craft on a continuous basis.

As a successful athlete practices and learns techniques every day in order to enhance athletic performance, and as a musician improves his or her musical gift through perfecting the methods of playing, working on his hands movements and attending in new ways to interpretation of the music they play, so do screenwriters constantly enhance their talent by learning from various sources of works of art, literature, music and film and their own experiences. They use these resources to develop techniques and methods for writing their stories in order to become better writers. *Classical literature, film, music, life experience, research, and screenwriting methodology* provide different sources for the screenwriters’ talents developmental needs.
Classical literature: the shaping tales of our consciousness

Classical literature is one of the main sources from which the successful writers learn. All of the study participants acknowledged the importance of reading the classical works of literature, which represents the main source of the storytelling culture. My study participants use classical literature as a learning resource to polish their skills and sustain their talent. The writers believe that reading the works of classical masterpieces makes them better writers. “You read a lot of good stuff, like for example yesterday night I sat down and read Jerome Manly Hopkins poetry for a couple of hours,” says Steven Rivele. “I mean, that makes me a better writer. You read the stuff by people who are better than you are and you learn from them.”

This section will address how the use of the literary sources help the writers learn, enhance their talent, and perfect their craft. Specifically, it will look into:

a) Early childhood experiences the study participants had with the works of classic literature and how it influenced the writers’ developmental needs for storytelling.

b) How the works of classic literature help the writers shape their own strategies and techniques for more dramatically effective storytelling.

c) How the classic writers serve as mentors and role models for the writers in the areas of their interests and the genres in which they are writing.

d) How classic literature inspires the writers to create works of greatness, and models the stories that engrain profound meaning, multi-dimensional characters, and rich worlds in which they live.

Every screenwriter participating in my study has role models and studies the masterpieces they created in order to improve their writing talent and craft. Often the great writers’ works provide insights and answers to the questions that the screenwriters are searching for, and they serve as models of methods and techniques that influence the screenwriters when they are writing their stories. Some of my study participants studied the works of great classics early in their childhood.
Early childhood exposure to the classical literary sources

All study participants acknowledged that Greek and Roman mythology and the stories from the Bible played an important role in shaping their story telling gifts. A number of my study participants shared the early experiences they had with the classical literature, their fascination with the stories, morals and meaning they provided. Early childhood exposure of the writers to the ancient sources of the classical literature allowed them to learn the essence of the classical tales and their form. Early readings of ancient tales allowed them to try and adopt the forms, the structure and the morals to the stories they wrote in their childhood, and then later on transfer what they have learned to their adult writing experiences.

Stories from the Bible

Chris Wilkinson recalls that the only way he survived church when he was a child was because he was reading the stories from the Bible. “My experience of religion and church was being bored so senseless. In public school it was like an hour from hell, but the way I got through it when I was a little boy was by reading the Bible, which is where all the good stories are.” Chris believes that the stories from the Bible capture the spiritual realm that is so important for human beings. “Spirituality is so hard wired into us as the species. And you cannot eradicate it and if you try, it’s going to come out in another ways and maybe destructive ways. I believe that there is an absolute link on a bunch of different levels between creativity and spirituality, the most obvious being that when I tell you that the best stories are from the Bible, I’m not kidding you. And maybe not in Christian mythology which I grew up on, but in Greek, that’s where all big stories are coming from,” says the writer.

Greek mythology

Mylo Carbia shared her early childhood fascination with the ancient myths. Mylo was into Greek and Roman mythology when she was 8-10 years old. It had a strong influence on her early creative writing attempts. A young playwright wanted to write the stories that would be similar to the myths she read, and she tried to adopt the classical Greek myths’ morals and the structure to her stories, which she set up in the
contemporary environments. “I was so intrigued by the ethical moral behind some stories in Greek mythology, I could always see a way of how I could change a few elements of the story, and make it modern day,” says the writer. When Mylo was ten she wrote her first play called the ‘Golden Apple’. The young writer took a myth about the Goddess, a wife of the God Eros who was very upset that she wasn’t invited to a wedding. In the Greek myth the Goddess throws out an apple and says: “Name the most beautiful woman in this room. And Aphrodite, Hena and Athena all go to the apple and they want to know who the most beautiful woman is, and they start fighting about it, while Eros stands back in his court and laughs.” In her play Mylo, made the story happening in the elementary school cafeteria where the three girls: Heather, Melissa, and Janet all fighting to be the most beautiful girl in school. That was the way Mylo saw the opportunities to convey the universe’s ethical rules through her own play writing.

Interpreting Aesop’s fables
The foundations of understanding the story were laid for Bob McKee early in his childhood when the boy was asked by his father to interpret the meaning of the morals of Aesop’s fables. The writer recalls that when he was about 8 years old, his father devised an ingenious punishment for him. He would make Bob copy the fable and the moral from the book “Aesop’s Fables” and then he would have his son come into the living room and explain the fable and the moral, and then he would ask Bob what he thought the fable and the moral was all about.

And I would interpret the story myself. I would probably agree with Aesop, but in my own words, that’s what he wanted to know. So, I would have to restate the meaning, but I would have to interpret the meaning for him, and it really impressed him. And I found out that I could impress my father. And I could impress him by my interpretation of the stories. And I was only 8-9 years old when that was happening.

What constitutes a good story well told, interpretation and analysis of the story form and its structure, became McKee’s legacy later in his adult life, a life and professional path that had its onset from interpreting Aesop’s fables at the age of 8. Later the famous Hollywood screenwriting guru writes as an introduction to his book about the significance that this early childhood experience brought to his understanding of the
story: “When I was first learning to read, but not always behaving appropriately, my father introduced me to the fables of Aesop in the hope that these ancient cautionary tales might improve my deportment. Each evening, after working my way through the likes of “The Fox and the Grape,” he would nod and ask, “And what does this story mean to you, Robert?” As I started at these texts and their handsome color illustrations, struggling to find my interpretations, I slowly came to realize that stories mean more than words and pretty picture “ (McKee, 1997).

Screenplay writing and the classical literature

Later in their careers writers still actively resort to the classical stories from the Bible and the Greek mythology. They use these classical sources to shape their stories borrowing story telling strategies and techniques. Steven Rivele acknowledged that when he and Chris Wilkinson write their screenplays, they always identify with one of the classical sources and that every one of their screenplays has a fundamental referent in one of those three areas because those are what Steve calls “the shaping narratives of our consciousness.” “Now on a deeper level, in almost every screenplay we’ve written we were able to identify either the Greek myth that it refers to, or the Biblical story it refers to, or a Shakespeare play it refers to,” says the writer.

Shakespeare’s plays

One classic writer’s name was mentioned more often during our interviews than any other. It was the name of the great English writer William Shakespeare. All of my study participants acknowledged that the works of Shakespeare served as a wealth of ideas, methods, models, and techniques that the screenwriters were constantly learning from.

The plays of Shakespeare represent models of classical story telling. Often screenwriters adopted the form of his plays or the development of his characters to their own stories. “Sometimes we say: okay which one of Shakespeare’s plays are we going to rip off this time?” confesses Steve Rivele. As the writing partners discuss the characters from their stories, they often realize that the character is becoming Richard the Third or Henry the Fourth. When writing “Kleopatra”, the writers thought that at the beginning the story was taking the dark tone from Macbeth, and as the screenplay was developing
further, the writers realized that her character is becoming much more of a Hamlet type: “Kleopatra, I just said the other day, is becoming much more of a Hamlet type of figure in a sense that she has a profound conflict over her identity. And based on her own identity, what she should do. And ultimately like in Hamlet, the resolution of that conflict is death. Hamlet decides to die and in the 5th act he says: if it not now, then it is to come and if it is not to come, and if it is not now, then surely it will come. The readiness is all, since we not owe of what we live, what is to live the times? Let be. So, he is talking about his death, he reconciled himself to his death. Kleopatra has to do the same thing and since everybody knows that Kleopatra committed suicide. One of the challenges of this screenplay is to explain why she did it and why she thought that it was a victory. So, she is a Hamlet character in that regard,” concludes the writer.

When Bob McKee was writing his screenplay “Miss Julie Montgomery” he was drawing a parallel between his character John and Shakespearean Hamlet. “John is a very dimensional complex person, full of these dynamics pushing him and pulling him constantly and therefore, he becomes like Hamlet. The greatest character that was ever written was Hamlet; he is indecisive because Hamlet doesn’t know what he wants. Because Hamlet can see all the sides and John can see all the sides: what’s wrong with being the head of the servants at the governor’s mansion? It’s the best job for a black man in Louisiana. Or I could run away and not sell out, it’s not just that he is a governor, he is a racist governor.” John is a complicated human being. Here’s John’s dilemma: to be free and poor or to work for a racist governor and be rich. You can have freedom and poverty or be a slave and rich. That’s the dilemma. Look most of this world lives under governments. Why? Because they all think that without that strong man we’ll all starve. So, I sell my freedom for food. That’s how people live, most human beings on this planet,” says the writer.

*The genius of Shakespeare as a source of inspiration*

“My hero is everyone else’s hero,” confessed Bob McKee during our interview. “You see, I believe, Marina, in the second coming of Christ. But I think that it’s already happened. I think that God came to Earth the second time and he did his work, and while he was here, he called himself Shakespeare. Shakespeare is the Mount Everest and there
is no K-2. Everybody else is just a mountain. And if you take your time, and if you read and understand Shakespeare, he is such a God! This mind was the greatest mind that ever lived. He was the greatest genius talent ever lived, and his humanity is so powerful, his understanding of human nature is so incredible, that of course he is the inspiration and should be an inspiration for anybody,” says Bob.

Shakespearean classic works served as inspiration for all of my study participants. “Shakespeare is not about story, story, story,” contemplates Rod Taylor about the nature of the great writer’s works. “It is about poetry that comes through his characters.” This parallel between poetic nature of Shakespearean characters and his own poetic approach to writing reconfirms the Rod’s approach and philosophy to creating his stories.

“I’ll tell you that one of the reasons that my career had stumbled at times the way it did, is because the greatest screenwriter that has ever lived is Irma Bergman, the greatest playwright who ever lived was Shakespeare, and I know all of these writers, and the thought that I’m going to step into the scene arena, and try to do something, that these geniuses have done, it is just … (laughs), because you never, ever, ever are going to write like these guys. And I think that one of the reasons that writers become alcoholics and lead self-destructive lives, because if they have any understanding of this, they realize how really insignificant what they do is compared to these geniuses. They get the money and they get rewarded, but they know in their heart that “I’m no Shakespeare, I’m no Dostoevsky, I’m just a writer, and it is not going to mean anything. So, when you measure yourself against geniuses like that, it is very intimidating. You think of your life as somewhat pointless. I hope that the “Story” will stand up and will live for a long time,” says the writer.

**Shakespeare’s understands of the character’s perspective**

During our conversation Bob shared that he was writing an essay on writing a character - specific dialogue. In his essay, the screenwriting guru argues that the best dialogue is sensory dialogue that is not abstract, dry academic, but it is rich with images and sounds, smell, and touch, and feel; that the best dialogue causes the listener to imagine, to see, and hear what the character sees and hears, it is sensory. Bob is convinced that sensory images that will find their way into the language of the character,
come from the character’s mind. “And if you really take the pains to really understand your character, and their whole life experience – what they may have seen, may have heard, that they only have seen and heard and touched from their experience, their conscious and unconscious mind, that they will use expressions that are only theirs based upon their lives,” says the screenwriting guru.

As an illustration of a sensory dialogue, Bob takes one line from Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” where Cassius is trying to persuade Buddhist to kill Caesar. And he says to Buddhist – “man, he strides the narrow world, like a Colossus and we, petty men, sneak about under his huge legs looking for dishonorable grave.”

What was striking in these lines of Shakespeare’s poem were the key images the great writer portrays: a Colossus, a huge statue at the Harbor roads with huge legs, and ships going in between his legs into the harbor. “That is like someone today talking about Eiffel Tower, Empire State Building, it is a part of his culture,’ explains the writer. ‘And so he probably traveled the world, he probably sailed underneath the Colossus, the images in his mind, right? But the key word that he says – ‘he strides the narrow world like a Colossus.’ Now, why is the “narrow world”? What’s the cliché? The cliché is the ‘wide world.’ Isn’t what most people would say? He says – “narrow world”. Because he is a Roman senator, and he knows exactly how wide the world is. It is only as wide as the Roman Empire and he gets reports as a senator, from Spain to Syria to Spain to Libia, And he knows exactly how wide the world is and to him it is a narrow world, and narrow enough that the man like Caesar could control the whole thing. Now, how the hell would Shakespeare know that from Cassius’ point of view the world would not seem wide; it would seem narrow? This is unspeakable genius; he put himself in Cassius’ mind. And he thought the way Cassius would think about the world, and he somehow realized that from Cassius’ point of view the world is narrow. And that is just so brilliant, beyond words. And that’s one sentence of 30 some plays. And the world is full of magnificent writers, but there is only one Shakespeare. And so, there are others like Samuel Beckett and Hemingway, but every penny down Shakespeare.”
Adopting a story telling technique from the plays of Shakespeare

Another strategy Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson adopted from the plays of Shakespeare when they were writing “Kleopatra” was the motif of ordinary people commenting on extraordinary events. “We have a motif that runs through the entire script, ordinary people commenting on the extraordinary actions that are taking place. Now, the fact is that they provide a new dimension and a new depth to the story that would otherwise not be there because the actions of these great people affected ordinary people. So, it is legitimate to put the reflections of the ordinary people in. But on the other hand, it gives the audience a new perspective for viewing the action through the eyes of the ordinary people in the script. So, it is not irrelevant and also in most cases they form comic relief at critical moments of the script. Because of the simple lack of culture of these executives, they didn’t understand what role these scenes played.

If you look at the tragedies of Shakespeare invariably at critical moments in drama, he introduces what they used to call in Elizabethan theater, the clowns who comment on the action in an entertaining way. And that provides what they call in drama the comic relief. “Just after Duncan is murdered in Macbeth, what does Shakespeare do? He goes to the gate people, who are drunk and some of them are banging on the door at the gate of the castle to get in, and he is too drunk to answer the door. That’s comic relief. When Hamlet comes back from his trip from England where he was supposed to have been killed, what does Shakespeare do? He has him talking to the gravedigger, who is a fool and a clown, and he comments on the action. These are some of the most entertaining and enlightening scenes in all of Shakespeare,” says the writer. Adopting Shakespeare’s method, the writers did the same thing with Roman solders and citizens of Alexandria and people on Kleopatra’s barge commenting in a humorous manner as to what is happening in the story.

Classics help to find the answers to the existential questions

Sometimes the screenwriters resort to the works of the classics in order to find the answers to the existential questions that interest them, which are provided through the great classic writers’ stories. Stephen Rivele’s purpose of writing is to find the answers to one of the fundamental questions of life that interest him. “Tolstoy said that all art ultimately asks questions that are characteristically religious and that’s true. Most of the
issues that interest me, subjects are characteristically religious issues. They ask some form of question about a soul of a man that I want to answer. That’s why I pick a project and that’s why I start a project,” shares the writer. Questions that interest the writer are the fundamental questions about life, they are the questions of God, Freedom, and Immortality. I find things in literature that respond to them, I’m drawn to them and that’s why I’m drawn to Tolstoy because he was essentially interested in the same questions that I am. And I responded to him immediately. Jerome Manly Hopkins was interested in the same types of questions, Sophocles was interested in the same types of questions. So, those are the writers that I’m drawn to.”

Stephen says he doesn’t worship God, but he does worship two people: Tolstoy and Beethoven. The reason Rivele worships Tolstoy is because the great writer’s whole nature was tuned to the achievement of the expression of the spiritual truth through art. “Until that point when he was enrobing his spirituality in his art, creating being living objects, that still speak to us. I mean, “Anna Karenina”, for example, which I think is the greatest novel ever written, being, it’s more than a novel, the people who inhabit it, the people who you feel you know as well as people who you’ve lived with, and the spiritual truth that is coming through that novel with which Tolstoy was struggling, are some of the most important truths that have ever been expressed,” says the writer.

**Learning structuring war battles techniques from Tolstoy**

The writers learn the techniques of portraying certain scenes in their stories from the classics. When Steven Rivele was writing his Civil War novel, he went and looked at ‘War and Peace” from the point of view how Tolstoy structured battle scenes. The writer read a lot of battle scenes from Tolstoy, and then he went to Margaret Mitchell’s ‘Gone with the Wind’ to see how she handled her battle scenes, and there are none. It is a book about Civil War with no battle scenes in it.

And although Steve read “War and Peace” nine times, he went back and read it the tenth time and looked at it from the purely technical point of view of how Tolstoy creates these effects. And that’s what the writer reports he learned from the great writer: “I was stunned at the brilliant slide of his hand. He creates these wonderful, vivid enormous effects with very little effort, very tiny gestures, I mean the man is a master; he is brilliant.” One of the things that the writer learned from this experience was you don’t
have to create big prose to create big effects. “On the contrary, small, leaner, sharper prose will create the effects because the audience’s imagination will take off. So, you don’t spell it out for the audience, you hit the minor cord here, you put a little splash of the paint there, and the audience will take that and run with that in their imagination, they will do all the work for you. It is like some of the effects that Rembrandt creates, just single dots of paint provoke all kinds of light and color and shadow,” says the writer.

**Learning the writing style from Ann Rice**

Ann Rice, who writes horror stories about vampires, is the writer who has influenced Mylo’s writing style to a great extent. “I like her style is because she is so dark and edgy. I’m always fascinated by that, although I don’t write in that genre.” Mylo likes Ann Rice’s style because the famous writer has a way of telling dark and edgy stories with sympathy to very evil characters. “You fall in love with murderers. It is Ann Rice’s ability to build empathy for the bad guy, without losing sense of who is the antagonist in the story, I think has influenced me the most,” reflects the writer. “I just cannot create uni-dimensional, one-dimensional characters. My bad guys have a good side to them. And Ann Rice is partly to attribute that.”

**Film**

All of my study participants reported that they learn from the classical and contemporary films and screenplays and their creators, the film directors and screenplay writers when writing their movies. My study participants acknowledged that they used the film as a learning resource to enhance their storytelling gift in the following ways:

1. To borrow some of the techniques of effective story telling
2. To give their stories a certain feel
3. To learn more about the difference between the films that work and the films that don’t

**Borrowing from the works of others**

All my study participants reported that getting ideas from other films in order to write their own stories is something that they practiced actively. “In order to be a writer you need to have a certain literary vocabulary, you had to have read a certain amount, and you had to have read good things,” says Steven Rivele. “And you’re constantly borrowing
from your own mental library when you’re writing. I mean very little of what you do is original because very little original stuff left to be written. So, you’re constantly borrowing and in the screenplay form, you’re constantly borrowing mostly from other films,” concludes the writer.

Sometimes the writers search for ideas and techniques to make their film more powerful consciously, and oftentimes, the writers create scenes and characters that remind one of other films subconsciously. Mylo admitted that she watches films relevant to the stories she writes and asks her friends to read her story in order to see if she didn’t subconsciously ‘copy cat’ the scenes from those movies. Rivele and Wilkinson’s writing rule is that if they “rip off other films”, they only rip off things that work. “We rip off from ‘Laurence of Arabia’ or ‘Citizen Kane’. Sometimes we do it consciously; sometimes it is completely unconscious. But when we read the reviews of our work, we are always surprised that the reviewers say that we clearly tried to echo some other film, and it never occurred to us. Well, it is not a coincidence; it is probably a subconscious or semiconscious process. Like the dining room scene that I referred to in ‘Nixon’, people say that it was a wonderful homage to that sequence in ‘Citizen Kane’ where Kane and his wife are at the dinner table and you see the relationship disintegrate over the series of three or four scenes. And it never occurred to us that that’s we were doing. But of course that’s what we were doing because we admire it so much,” says the writer.

The influence of the favorite film directors

Often the writers use the works of the classic film directors when they want to create a certain effect in their film that represents a style of that particular director. Chris and Steve when working on the thriller “The Death of Conrad Shepherd” were asked by the Hollywood studio executives if the screenplay could have a “Hitchcock” feeling to it. In order to render that effect to the story, the writers watched all 52 films made by the famous film director.

Often other film directors’ work serves as an inspirational example to the screenwriters or their directing style appeals to them and they try to adopt certain style characteristics in the stories they write. Quentin Tarantino is such a role model for Mylo Carbia. The writer shared that Tarantino’s style of writing is different from Mylo’s, but the famous film director inspires her in many different ways. “Although my writing style
is nothing like Tarantino’s, I enjoy his writing, love reading screenplays, yet, oddly enough, I don’t write a damn thing like him. So, in some way, I’m inspired by his ability to break the rules.” Quentin Tarantino screenplays have notes; he is talking to his readers and he explains what’s happening in the scene, and then “he’ll have some off the wall comments, that you just want to laugh because you know that he is speaking to you, the person reading a screenplay. That’s nothing like I incorporated into my writing, but in some ways he inspired my confidence to break the rules when I feel I need to.”

Another person who influences Mylo is a film director David Fincher. She shared during our interview that she would like him to direct her screenplay “The Statute of Limitations.” “I think nobody shoots movies like David Fincher: “Panic Room,” “Fight Club,” “Seven”. His way of really being able to create suspense through the way the movie is shot. The way he shoots it – the angles, the point of view, add so much to the story, especially when adding suspense, thriller or drama to it. You see “Panic Room” is a perfect example. If that movie was given to another person who is not as experienced, that would be the most boring movie you can ever imagine seeing these people sit in the room for two hours, while those guys are trying to get in. But Fincher style is what made that film a success,” says the writer.

Drawing Upon the Films that Moved the Writer

“The Blair Witch Project”

Sometimes the writers resort to the movies that moved and touched them in a certain way as models for writing parts of their own films. Mylo admitted that she often draws upon the movies that moved her in order to make her stories more powerful. The writer shared that her story “The Statute of Limitations’ had a post rape scene which is the most traumatic scene in the entire movie where the rapists take a turkey buster and brush the insides of the victim with the peroxide in order to erase the traces of their sperm. The writer decided to make that scene more powerful by building more tension and suspense into it. In order to do that, Mylo decided to draw upon her experiences as the audience member and she started thinking about some of the tense, suspenseful moments of cinematic experience she has ever had. The writer immediately thought about the film “The Blair Witch Project” and the techniques the filmmakers used to
induce the fearful reaction in the audience, and especially the scene where the girl’s green eyes completely half way out of the frame and she is crying and asking for forgiveness from the parents of those two guys who she murdered this time. And we see an unbelievable fear in her eyes when she is sitting in a tent. The film is done in a mock documentary style. The audience thinks that the story is real. The whole movie is filmed in such a way that it shows the reactions of the people to the demon when she is outside, and then she is getting into a tent, and the audience sees them running and screaming in a total chaos. “And what’s amazing is that in the entire movie you never see the Blair witch which serves as a brilliant example of story telling through the reactions that are more powerful than seeing the scary thing because human imagination is so much more powerful than anything that we can see visually,” says the writer.

Following the example from the film, Mylo decided to re-write her post rape scene by showing the horrible consequences of the rape through the reactions of the rapists to their own actions. The writer shares that the re-written scene was so powerful that it scared her: “I had to walk away from my computer and put my lights on. So, I can freak myself out, but when I look at this great scene, I think: how can I make it even better?”

Borrowing techniques from films of Quentin Tarantino

Films of Quentin Tarantino serve Mylo as models of certain techniques that she incorporates in her stories. The writer needed to write a chaotic scene, she thought that Tarantino does a great job of chaotic scenes with snappy dialogue “. He is one of the best dialogue writers. Most of the time people either love or hate his dialogue and his film making style. “You see people ramble on and on about bullshit in his movie but the thing is that I feel that it is so real in his movies, it’s just like chatting with someone who you really like to talk to. So, any time I’m looking for a way to make some dialogue witty, I draw upon an emotion that I felt in another movie.” So, that’s how I approach that. If I need a scene that’s chaotic, then I draw upon some of the greatest films where the scenes were chaotic,” concludes the writer.

Mylo elaborates that she doesn’t go into other people’s scripts to see how they wrote the scene. Instead, the writer first thinks about the goals that she needs to accomplish in a scene in order to move the story forward. “Writing is an emotional
process, so in this scene I say to myself: “I want the audience to feel FYZ,’ I want the audience to feel let’s say, pity, then I draw on my own emotional experience and say: ‘what movie has a powerful scene of pity?’ Whatever that would be, I would think back as to the style that was used to tell that story. Then I may look at that style and try to incorporate it for that particular scene,” shares the writer.

Why does the movie work?

Often writers watch the films and make their own analyses of what worked and what didn’t work in a film, what makes a film successful and what makes it fail. For Chris Wilkinson a good film is something that he connects with emotionally. “If in the movie I start thinking – gee, that was a good shot, or that is one nice music cue or I like the way the scene is put together, that means that movie is not working because I’m not swept up in it. For the writer the movie “Titanic” was like that. I can recognize one of the stupidest dialogues I’ve ever heard. I didn’t care. And I was the one who said – ‘this will never work’. That song in that interval, a bar mitzvah band can play it and I’m on the floor. That is the perfect example of how all the things I don’t like and all the rules, and remember I hate - this was so overblown and it cost so much money! I’m dying to hate it; it’s got everything I need to hate a movie. And when the movie was over, I had this woman sitting next to me and she said – ‘I don’t think that this was that good’ I almost took her teeth out. It was like – and what the hell do you know!!!”

Chris says that this film is an example when the sum is so much greater. “If you read that script, you go like – well, this is retarded. And Kate Winslet is a nice looking fat girl and Leonardo… I think Bob McKee said that – yeah, that’s your real hit man except that he comes home and weeps. And her fiancé performance, if he had a moustache, he would twirl it. And the little stuff like what Hitchcock called the refrigerator issue, when you are standing by the refrigerator after you’ve seen the movie, you think, wait a second the water is freezing cold, you wouldn’t be able.. I don’t care. The thing is working; it is working! I’m not conscious, I couldn’t tell you why. I was absolutely caught up in it. That is a perfect example, I don’t think that this is a great film, I think that it is a good film. You can go and say – the acting sucks, the dialogue sucks, it
doesn’t matter – it works. Therefore, this is a perfect example of how this movie has violated all my rules, if I had them.”

Then the writer shares an experience that was the opposite of “Titanic”: watching the film “The Hours” by David Hara. “I must tell you, it must be a gender thing, I didn’t get that movie. I appreciated that it was brilliantly directed, and brilliantly acted, and brilliantly written – it was structurally very unusual and how it was held together. It was kind of reverse experience of “Titanic” where everything is brilliant, characters are brilliant, dialogue is brilliant. I just couldn’t care less of any of it, the essential message of the movie is - life is shit and then you die and I know that.

Whereas the thing about “Titanic” if you look at the component parts – what is it? Except for the fact that every time I hear that song by Celine Dione who I hate, the two bars of it, I start sobbing: “the fat girl is not going to be with Leonardo!” It is weird, it is when I can completely admire the component parts but is just never got to me. But I think that it is a gender thing – a lot more women got that movie more than men, I think.”

Music

Some writers reported that music served as a source of inspiration for starting to write and, subsequently, deciding to devote themselves to the creative realm, others shared that music helped them to learn the discipline of approaching the screenwriting craft. Music was also a resource, which helped some screenwriters reach an understanding of some of the most important aspects of story telling craft.

**Learning the discipline of the craft**

Chris Wilkinson attributes his learning the screenwriting craft to his skills of being a musician. He admitted in our interviews that for him as an artist his relationship to the art is really based on his training as a musician. Chris started playing music early in his childhood. When he was a boy, he was a trombone prodigy. Chris recalls that when he was 12, his family moved from Philadelphia to the suburbs, White Marsh area. The orchestras were awful in that area and he remembers not even wanting to play because the quality of musicianship was much worse. That started Chris getting interested in playing guitar: “And I was very interested in rock music and blues music and took up the
guitar and in my mid teens I got really serious about guitar. Even in my mid twenties I always played in bands … For me this is the discipline where I learned to be a screenwriter.”

During our interview Chris confessed that the discipline of being a musician is the ultimate kind of a discipline for him. Chris still plays music, and it is music that he relates everything to: “the discipline of learning an instrument, the way that he approaches craft, ‘and something in between craft, something greater that might emerge from just craft.’”

Learning the insights about story telling

Music also served as a learning source for understanding some insights about the art of story telling. The music of Beethoven taught Steven Rivele insights that the writer could apply to writing his stories, which is creating a living work through achieving a level of inevitability in the story and the character development. Steven shares that once he was in Paris and at the concert and he was listening to Beethoven’s String Quartet. The great composer wrote a great heartbreaking String Quartet when he thought he was dying and he wasn’t going to finish the cycle of quartets. The writer shares the effect the great composer’s music had on him:

And I remember just listening to the theme of the opening movement, and thinking, there is no other statement that could have been made…And I just realized, it was a humbling experience, there is no other expression that could have been made by this man, at this time, in this piece. The inevitability of it is just so breathtakingly beautiful, and that’s what you want to reach, you want to reach that point of inevitability where you cannot say anything but what you’re about to say because the character demands it. And when you’ve reached that point, then you’ve got a living work.

The music of Beethoven opened up for the writer the realms that provided him with the answers to the existential questions he was exploring all his life in all his stories: “At some point, he was beyond the tragedy at that point of his life, which was amazing to me because I always thought in my younger years that tragedy was the final stop in the train of life. But things like the Late String Quartets and the Late Bach organ music show you that there is a gesture that is to be made beyond you, or to put it in other words, there is a gesture made toward you beyond tragedy. And ultimately what it translates to is the hope of something after death.”
Life Experience

The importance of experience in writing stories cannot be underestimated. All writers admitted that having lived through certain things in life helped them to write their stories. Some acknowledged that the lack of experience made it difficult or impossible for them to write or that their writing was immature and uninteresting. Getting sufficient experience for writing was the goal in such cases.

Once the experience was gained, it helped the writers to form mental reservoir or mental residue of memories that they used to write their stories and its characters. The writers distinguish among the types of life experiences that shaped their mental reservoir. The writers’ talked about the experiences of personal nature of the events that happened to them in their childhood or in their life that affected them strongly emotionally that they later used to write characters who went through similar traumatic experiences in depiction of events. The writers’ mental reservoir also included experiences of observing life, meeting people and understanding and interpreting life events around them, forming composites of these people and events to tell their stories. It also embraced experiences related to the film industry, and the specific filmmaking culture, and understanding of the audience’s expectations. Certain life experiences shaped the writers’ religious, philosophical, spiritual, and social beliefs that influenced their writing. The writers would find the ways to incorporate these beliefs into their stories manifesting their position in the world.

Accumulating life experiences

Some of my study participants tried to write stories early in their lives and having realized that the lack of experience makes itself known, abandoned writing for some time and went pursuing their dreams and accumulating experience. When Bob McKee started to write in college, he was an English major and did his Masters in Theater. Bob took creative writing courses in writing plays and he studied under Kenneth Rowe, who was a great teacher and the mentor to people like Eugene O’Neil, and who wrote a great book “Write That Play”. “And I was fortunate when I was at the University he was at his last days there of teaching. So, I wrote plays and then I read them and I thought ‘My God, it is the work of an immature person’. But there was nothing I could do about that because I
was immature. So, I just set writing aside and I became a theater director and an actor for
the next 20 years.”

Chris Wilkinson had a strong opinion about the importance of the experience for
writing. “You have to live,” claims the writer. “Did you read the ‘Gulag Archipelago’? Solzhenitsyn
didn’t become a writer till he sat in the prison camp for ten years. That
formed him as a writer. I don’t think that anybody writes anything worthwhile, and it is
not just talent. I think that very young people, in their twenties, very rarely they can write
anything that is worth anything until somebody hits their thirties because they haven’t
had the life experience to deal with it. There are exceptions to it, and there are some
brilliant people who have written brilliant things, but I think that it is a rule for the most
of us,’ claims the writer. “Some people are just blessed with the ability to write, but what
they write and how they write it depends on the quality of their life experiences and their
ability to be truthful in their life experience,’’ continues the writer.

Creating the mental residual, the unconscious reservoir of memories

Throughout the years of experiencing life, the writers create the mental reservoir
of memories of experiences, and they apply to writing their stories. The mental reservoir
accumulates every story the writer ever experienced, every film he or she has ever seen,
every bar table conversation he or she ever had, whatever happened to them, events that
occurred to them and people they met.

“Every story ever experienced whether it was art or not, becomes a total reservoir
of stories that sit inside of you, and what your unconscious mind does is it searches
through all of those thoughts and ideas and reduces all of that to a model of
understanding the story,” contemplates Bob. “You can only create it from what you
already know. It’s your brain that takes everything that ever happens to you, day in and
day out, 24 hours a day, everything is in there. So what else do you create it from?
There’s nothing else but experience, except research when you go and create new
knowledge and put stuff in your head deliberately. But otherwise, everything that ever
happened to you is already there. But it doesn’t mean that I’ve ever been on the train
platform, it just means that I understand trains, and I understand people, and
embarrassment, and I’m alive, and so I know.”
Using yourself when writing

Sometimes the writers try to write stories based purely on their personal experiences. “You have to use yourself no matter what you’re writing,” says Chris Wilkinson. Writing an autobiographical story, a screenplay called “Custody” about his experience of getting the custody of his son when he was getting divorced was very important to Chris. Building the story on the events that occurred to him, the writer made the story much more extreme than what happened to him. This experience was extremely emotional for Chris and he tried to incorporate these emotions into his story. Chris talked about the importance of using his own emotional reactions in his writing because in his opinion only emotional response reveals the truth of the moment in the story in the midst of the creative process. Chris acknowledges that although this autobiographical writing experience was therapeutic for him, and he put the story aside for the present time, he does want to try and produce it as a film sometime in the future because it has a strong message about the parental rights and responsibilities and the laws representing them.

Steve Rivele shared how his personal life experience, the death of his mother affected him when he was writing “Kleopatra”. Kleopatra also lost her mother when she was a child and it had a profound effect on her and that’s something that Steve can identify with. “My mother committed a suicide when I was 15, and it probably is a single defining moment in my life. And there is nothing in my life that doesn’t refer back to that, nothing. So, when Kleopatra looses her mother at a very early age and the whole family turns on her, I mean that’s something I can identify with.” The way the writer reacts to this parallel with his character is that when he writes about it, he starts feeling what the character feels. When I asked the writer how these two personal issues are effecting what he writes, he responded: “The things that she says and the views that drive her is just a part of my make up and they well up inside me every time the note on that keyboard is touched. I know exactly what she is going through because I went through it.” The writer admits that his personal experience makes it a lot easier for him to write about her in that regard. “It is probably more authentic and deeper in a spontaneous way than other aspects of her that I can’t necessary identify with like her relationship with her sister because I never had a sister. But it is a part of what I do for living and I try
to imagine those situations. So, one is spontaneous and very present to me and the other has to be a gesture of imagination and creativity.”

**Integrating writers' personal traits into characters**

Often the writers find the parallels with the characters in their stories based on their own personal traits not just experiences. When the writers find such parallels it becomes easier for them to create the character from inside out because the writer has a much better understanding of the characters’ experiences based on the found similarity. Such a parallel for Steven with the great composer when he was creating the character of Beethoven in his screenplay “Copying Beethoven” was the *issue of loneliness*. This issue, confessed Steven, interested him a great deal because Steve himself had always been a lonely person. “Beethoven talks about his loneliness almost in sacred terms and that’s pretty much me. For me, the essential loneliness I’ve always experienced almost became a religion. And it does for Beethoven in our screenplay. And he is very weary about letting anybody near him for that reason. There are places in me where only I dwell in which I neither expose to anyone else nor allow anyone to approach. I don’t know how much more than that I want to say, but since I was a child, I was keen of my separateness from anyone else in the world and I tend to internalize tragedy a great deal, and I suppose it is part of it.”

Bob McKee clearly sees the parallel between himself and the character of John in his story “Miss Julie Montgomery”: “I’m coming from the lower middle class, working class background and I understand his desire to rise up into the world. I also understand his desire not to work for anyone and be free. So, there are threads that have counterparts in my own life, otherwise sympathy for John and Julie, they are both in terrible situations, a black man in the South at the turn of the century, a white woman in the South at the turn of the century, both of these people are in the underclass with white men around the world,” says the writer.

**Close observers of life**

The writers create stories from their talent and from the sum total of their lives. They write stories from what they already know. It doesn’t mean that their writing has to be pure autobiographical, that they have to Xerox scenes from their lives. It simply means
that they know people and understand situations. My study participants reported that more often than not, they create their characters from their observations in real life, by integrating the traits of people they met in their lives, by creating “composites” of these people. “Sometimes you base a character on someone you used to know,” comments Rod Taylor. “But a lot of times it is a composite of people you used to know, and people you once met, and all that space in between that just fills itself in. And then you turn your script to the studio and they start composing things on it.”

Chris Wilkinson admitted that when he was writing stories about powerful historical figures, he often resorts to the images of powerful people in the film business that he knows of. It helps him to create certain behavior, reactions, and even dialogue.

Steve Rivele admits the power of observation of people and life that help him to create his stories: “So, you make yourself a better writer by reading really good people, but also you pay attention to experience, you pay attention to life, you pay attention to people. I watch people all the time, and I watch the gestures, and I listen to how they talk, and the relationship between what they are saying and what they mean,” shares Steve Rivele.

Bob McKee acknowledged that he used his memories of his ex-wife when he was creating the character of Julie in “Miss Julie Montgomery”: “Yeah, I certainly know a woman like that. It was my first wife neurotic and self-destructive. She didn’t commit suicide, but there is a lot of Daisy in Julie.”

**Industry experience**

“So, it is the combination of the craft experience and the life experience. And in the case of this industry, industry experience because it is such a bazaar codified industry,” says Chris Wilkinson. “Someone can tell you go and fuck yourself in the nicest way, and somebody from the outside of the industry wouldn’t even understand what is going on because this is industry specific,” says the writer. Within the film industry, Chris regards as extremely important the experience of using film conventions. “I think that with experience, you can get things through by making use of the conventions, if that makes any sense. When you’re very familiar with what the expectations are, it is like censorship,” says the writer. “You can make the audience your co-conspirator. And I think that when you have a lot of experience, you can do that in constructing a story.
You can do really, really wild things as long as some character principles and story expectations are acute to it."

Understanding the different facets of film business culture helps the writers overcome the challenges that the world of Hollywood imposes on them, to try to preserve the integrity of their stories and see their screenplays on the big screen.

**Research**

All my study participants use research as a tool when writing their stories. Reading first hand writing about a specific historical time and people who lived there, watching feature films and documentaries to learn more information, reading literature, doing research on the internet, and reading scientific magazines are the primary sources of the information the writers acknowledged they used for conducting their research. When I asked my study participants with what purpose they usually used research, all writers reported that they actively used research as a learning tool to learn more about the subject matter of the story. The writers differed however, in how they applied the tool of learning about the story subject matter: some of them used it to find more information in response to the questions they placed, while others used it to confirm the ideas they came up with.

**Using research as a way to validate the writers’ ideas**

Mylo Carbia shared that research can stop her creative flow if she uses it in a wrong way. Research doesn’t block her creativity when the writer comes up with an idea first and then does research to confirm it. But if she does research in advance before she comes up with an original idea it usually stops her creativity. If she comes up with the solution and does research to see if it is feasible, it keeps the writer’s creative flow going because she is just now backing it up. “If I do research that says it’s not feasible, then I would just come up with another idea. But I don’t do research to get ideas because that kills all creativity. I only do it to validate my ideas,” says the writer,

In Mylo’s screenplay “The Statute of Limitations” the main character Ava faces a situation when Wesley’s pregnant wife tries to attack her thinking that she is pregnant with her husband’s baby, and in the struggle for the gun she falls and hits the floor with her head and dies. To save the baby inside her, Ava takes a knife and does a c-section.
She cuts the baby out of the dead woman’s stomach and takes it. Mylo shares that this scene was channeled to her and she wanted to confirm if this could really get her audience’s buy in. So she went to the Internet and found out that there have been many true cases of people stealing babies out of women’s stomachs and that it was not insane to think that a person would be crazy enough to perform a home made C section. “I read one case when the neighbor walked in on a woman who literally had a stroke during her labor and fell on the floor dead. And the neighbor wanted to save the baby and got the butcher knife and cut it out and saved it and then called 911. I’ve read about a couple of murders where women went after mistresses who were pregnant with their husband’s child and would kill them and would cut the baby out, and would take it and raise it, there were actually stories like that. So, once I saw it in reality I thought that audience would buy it,” shares the writer.

Using research to learn about the subject matter

When the writers create stories about historical figures, conducting research becomes extremely important because the story has to be factually based. Steve and Chris shared that they usually start with a project that appeals to them and they don’t necessary know a great deal about it, and so the research process becomes a learning process. Before saying yes to writing a story, the writers do some research to find out what the potential for the subject matter is. So, the writers start this process of going deeper and deeper into the material. “We’ve been fortunate in that we’ve never gotten deeply into our research and realized that there wasn’t as much there as we thought. But I suppose that could happen. But we do it as a learning process to explore the material and open up the possibilities within the material,” says the writer.

Other times when the writers take on the stories written by other people in order to re-write them, two things can happen when they conduct research – first of all, they learn more about the subject matter of the story, like it happened when they writers were re-writing the thriller “The Death of Conrad Shepherd”, they learned a great deal about the Soviet system and the realities of Gulag through reading Solzhenitsyn and other authors and watching documentaries on Gulag. The second thing that happened was that
the writers understood some fundamental flaws of the material and why the material of
the story didn’t work.

Research is a part of the creative process and it represents an intellectual component
of it. When writing stories about historical personalities, the writers have to reach the
status of the question, which means that they have to know at least as much about the
character as the historical sources agree on. And beyond that the writer needs to know
what the character wants to say, and what the truth of that character is, and that means
taking on a character as a persona.

When writing biographical films, the writers need to understand who the person
they are writing about is and they need to create an authentic portrait about that person
through selecting events from his or her life that help to elucidate that character in the
best dramatic way. The main criterion for selecting the story events is based on their
research. As the writers research the material, they form their impressions of the main
characters and if it is about one person like in Nixon, Ali and Kleopatra, they focus on
one principle character and they try to understand who that person is and what we’re
trying to say about him or her. And then we select the events in that person’s life that
allow us to dramatize the character as we’re trying to present him or her. And then the
process of creating a character portrait becomes like a mosaic. The writer starts selecting
the scenes that can be assembled into a coherent portrait. “It is all done by hand and it is
all done by magic, you receive an illusion of a real person, but that’s what we do,” shares
Steven Rivele.

Winning the war on clichés – creating the specific world of the story

Conducting research helps the writer create a specific context where the story
characters can function and operate, it gives the writers an opportunity to get to the
specific, the unusual, the unique, to the real moments of truth, the big moments of the
story. If it didn’t happen, if the specific small world of the story wasn’t created, all films
would run a risk of being alike, creating a world of clichés. The specifics that are found
through research make all the difference between a good and mediocre film. Chris
shared during our interview the experience of watching a film: “I just saw the
“Shawshank Redemption” where Morgan Freeman had to ask the guy to tell him that it is
okay to go to the bathroom,” shares Chris Wilkinson. “A moment like that you would never think of if you didn’t do research. I don’t know if it was in Stephen King’s book, but I can tell you that it came from somebody doing research or being a prisoner. A moment like that is specific and wonderful.”

All my study participants shared that the real work of writing anything and one of the greatest pleasures of it is in finding those types of gems of story telling that come through conducting research. McKee (1997) emphasizes the importance of creating a ‘small world’ of the story. “A vast, populous world stretches the mind so thinly that knowledge must be superficial. A limited world and restricted cast offer the possibility of knowledge in depth and breath,” writes the screenwriting guru. “The irony of setting versus story is this: the larger the world, the more diluted the knowledge of the writer, therefore fewer his creative choices and the more clichéd the story. The smaller the world, the more complete the knowledge of the writer, therefore, the greater his creative choices. Result: a fully original story and victory in the war on cliché. The key to winning this war is research, taking time and effort to acquire knowledge.” (p. 72)

**Research resources**

Resources for conducting research are vast. Reading classical and modern literature, watching documentaries and film, reading scientific publications, and getting on the Internet are some of the ways my study participants conduct their research.

In order to understand the world of American South at the beginning of the century in order to represent it authentically in his story, McKee read a lot of first hand writings. “And I did a lot of research about America at the turn of the century in the South, and I read a lot of speeches, novels, written by the southern writers, not necessarily good novels,” shares the writer.

When writing her thriller “The Violets are Red’ about the revenge that an abused woman takes against her husband, Mylo Carbia joined an Internet message board for abused women and became an active member of it.

When writing the thriller on Gulag, Chris Wilkinson and Steve Rivele shared their research, they read a lot of literature on the Soviet era and watched documentaries. “I love getting documentary films on the subject. It is interesting; there is a three hour
documentary on Gulag that is dreadfully dull. Where you’re hearing just the dull stories, whereas Solzhenitsyn is just such a great writer that takes you there,” says Chris.

A lot of stories that Rod Taylor writes are based on scientific concepts, they have a science fiction angle. Rod loves sciences and studies sciences; reading scientific publications is his hobby. The writer shared that he subscribes to “Science News Magazine”, which was an actual scientific trade paper, not like “Omni” or the other magazines off the news rack. “The great deal of scientific news in ‘Science News Magazine’ is completely indecipherable,” says the writer. “There is geology there that you don’t understand unless you’re a geologist. But by reading it you kind of get a general familiarity with sciences. I’m always reading online. I have several friends who are doctors. I always enjoyed it. Some people study baseball. I study sciences. Even now I receive 4-5 different online letters.”

**Screenwriting Methodology**

Learning the screenwriting methodology to master the basics of the storytelling techniques is a popular trend nowadays. McKee teaches screenwriting methodology in his three seminars: the story seminar, the horror seminar, the comedy seminar and a thriller seminar. The famous Hollywood guru mentioned during our interview that his classes are gaining more and more popularity; his audience counts up to two- to three-hundred people per class. He is probably the most popular contemporary expert on screenwriting in the world. During his seminars he teaches the foundations of the storytelling, the story structure, character development, and more.

During my interviews with my study participants we touched upon the subject of mastering the methodology as a resource for learning the storytelling craft. My study participants’ opinions on the subject of learning the screenwriting methodology were split. The majority of my study participants didn’t believe that it is possible to learn how to write screenplays through courses on methodology. Only one of my study participants expressed a strong belief in learning the methodology, not counting McKee himself. I was interested in finding out the opinions on methodology teaching from my study participants taking into consideration that the individuals who expressed the disbelief in methodology teaching and learning were established successful Hollywood screenwriters,
whose multiple stories were made into films and some of them were Academy Award nominated for their work.

My study showed a trend that successful, established screenwriters, whose multiple screenplays were made into films didn’t believe in learning or teaching the screenwriting methodology. There were a number of reasons of why these writers didn’t consider learning a screenwriting methodology as a possible way into the profession or as a learning resource. First was that these writers’ dedication to the writing profession was based on the belief that writing was their calling, their sacred obligation and not something that they could take a course and learn how to do. They believed that they were chosen by the higher force to be appointed artists. “Everything in Hollywood has been erected as the means to accomplish its ends are destructive to the actual writing process, but they can totally justify it when they point to the bad writers. If they point to the writer who is an idiot, he couldn’t have done it without this methodology, he couldn’t have done it without those rules, without these requirements, then you shouldn’t have done it at all, period. He shouldn’t be in this. This is not really an institute for all, this is for those ones who were selected – spiritually, biologically, or whatever, to do this,” claims Rod Taylor. Teaching screenplay writing methodology has an implication that anyone can do it, once you learn a methodology.

Second, practicing screenwriters considered the view that there is a methodology that can be learned very dangerous and destructive because they create a myth that there is a set of rules that can be learned that leads to success: “Virtually all college programs with few exceptions, especially in dramatic arts, the colleges are useless, they are worse than useless, they are destructive,” says Chris Wilkinson. “Teaching methodology is also very dangerous in some ways because of all these screenplay courses movies are becoming so formulaic and because so many people are consciously aware that act one is between pages 28 and 35, and inciting incident should happen. It is an interesting way of looking at that. That’s how this one guy looks at this and there are situations when it is helpful. And I think there are situations where it can be tremendously harmful and dangerous.” The writer thinks that the potential damage that these gurus do to people is the thinking that there is a potential set of rules.” To support how harmful learning methodology can be on the creative process, Chris Wilkinson talks about one of his
friends who went to a screenwriting seminar and the product they’ve produced after the seminar was one of the worst work they have ever done. “You know Larry Kazdan? I recently saw his ‘Dream Catcher’ and this is the worst movie I’ve ever seen. And it is interesting that after Larry took the course, he wrote the most unwatchable piece of shit – I couldn’t believe it! And it is really one of the worst movies I’ve ever seen and I went to the premier and what do you say. I hope that this doesn’t happen to me.”

“They can be very rationalistic and they think about the story and what happens,” talks Rod Taylor about people who teach methodology and who follow it. “They start creating ‘Mister Potato – Head’ and they stick various attributes on them and they say – here’s his ears, here’s his nose, they sort of make up things. And that’s a deductive process, really. Well, everyone uses processes and benefits by them, but when someone makes it a doctrine, that’s when there is a problem. To me writers, whether it is a screenplay, or a novel, or poetry, you job is to wander around in the wilderness, and bring back interesting things, incredible things: whether it is a head of the dragon or a beautiful rock that you found, entangled with the roots of the tree or strange and exotic animal or whatever. That’s what you do, that’s where you’re supposed to go. And so I have contempt for any system that not only discourages it, but actively prosecutes that process.” Rod Taylor expresses frustration with the methodological approach to creating stories: “A lot of people write, especially these days more than ever before, and they say: ‘what has to happen in this script now? In act one I want to have the government to come and make him an offer, and then this happens. This is fine and maybe that’s the way of doing it, but I don’t think that you can really achieve anything that way,” concludes Rod.

The third reason the screenwriters didn’t believe in learning someone else’s screenwriting methodology was because they were convinced that a writer should invent his or her own methodology. “It is an indescribable magical thing that does have a methodology but I think you are much better on stumbling over your own methodology than adopting someone else’s,” says Chris Wilkinson.

Another point of concern of the established screenwriters who opposed the methodology was that usually the people who are teaching the screenwriting classes are not the practicing writers themselves, but rather people who analyzed the screenwriting
process. Chris Wilkinson who attended McKee’s story seminar found it interesting and well thought out. “I think that Bob is a brilliant teacher, the thing with brilliant teachers is that what they are usually brilliant at. I don’t know if one would say that he is a brilliant writer. Let’s put it this way – a truly brilliant writer, you can’t learn anything from. If Shakespeare would teach a course on writing, I doubt that you could get anything from him. Or Author Miller for the most part, these people are horrible teachers. And this is an analogy in terms of teaching the arts and being an artist. And in many cases the best teachers aren’t particularly good artists. I’m not that familiar with Bob’s writing, but I know that he is known as a teacher, not as a writer. And I did learn a few things or had a few things re-affirmed,” says the writer. “It is a problem with all gurus, ultimately you can’t learn anything till you learn from yourself.”

These screenwriters viewed learning the methodology as a way for developing craft. “You can become a better craftsman,” concludes Chris. But for these type of writers knowing craft is not enough: “People who go to courses on how to write screenplays they mostly do it in order to sell something. They are not artists. But most of the writers in Hollywood are not artists; they consider themselves craftsmen,” contemplates Rod Taylor. The writer draws the line between a craftsman and an artist: “The craftsman knows form and the artist knows concept. The artist knows truth and the craftsman knows facts. The wisdom that underlies the events and informs events, I would say, that’s art. I can’t define the indefinable and that’s what the art would be. Personally, I don’t think that there is art without truth. That’s why I think that people’s caricature with arrows – that’s craft.”

When I asked Rod what was the difference between a craftsman and an artist, he explained:

The craftsman knows form and the artist knows concept. The artist knows truth and the craftsman knows facts. The wisdom that underlies the events and informs events, I would say, that’s art. I can’t define the indefinable and that’s what the art would be. Personally, I don’t think that there is art without truth. That’s why I think that people’s caricature with arrows – that’s craft. It is like a difference between creativity and methodology. Methodology is what they teach. Creativity in its truest sense involves not only the process, which encompasses methodology, but involves an ability to know and to articulate truth, often through the actions and nuances of the character, not just stated: here’s a piece of truth.”
Chris Wilkinson admitted that McKee’s is a useful course for any stage of screenwriting. However, the writer is convinced there is no way one could teach somebody how to write. There is no formula. And what McKee is offering is “just a very interesting well thought out way of looking at the screenwriting process.”

The way Chris sees McKee’s course can be helpful for the professional writer is that “we’re looking at someone who actually systematized the process in a very fascinating way. You hear about the stuff you do anyway, but someone who invented a methodology. And he is not really suggesting this is The Methodology.”

The reason Chris took Bob’s course was because he read Bob’s book “Story” and he was very impressed with it. “And I thought I’ll take the course, why not? And I got a lot out of it. I agreed with some things I was enlightened with some things. I disagreed with some things.”

Why McKee’s seminar is so important

Mylo, a beginning screenwriter believes that McKee’s seminar is very important, and the reason it is because nothing Bob McKee is saying is new, “it is just so perfectly packaged, so perfectly and practically put and that’s what makes it so brilliant, so if the writer doesn’t get the universal laws that Bob McKee talks about in the story structure, you might as well just hang it up and move on to the next thing,’ claims the writer. “Oh, he is just so brilliant in being able to logically and methodically lay out what I think I know instinctively as a writer.”

Mylo shares that she met people who have ten scripts written and still keep plugging away. “I wish that those writers, aspiring writers would really pay attention to what Bob McKee has to say. I really feel that writers who read his book and sat through his seminar, and the writer says to himself ‘what Robert McKee just said I can’t do’, that I would seriously advise that writer to not necessarily pursue that type of writing. If you cannot grasp the formula, if you cannot grasp the universal laws of the story structure because Bob McKee has so brilliantly written down the universal laws of the story structure, if you cannot grasp that, then I think that maybe you should start writing
novels, you should get into another type of creative writing outlet. Definitely not screenwriting,” believes the writer.

Mylo shares that she after she writes her story on one page, she runs a mental checklist of things that she learned from McKee’s seminar. “I’ve read so many people in screenwriting who are known as experts of the screenwriting in educational field. And I just see McKee so dead on when he talks about expectations within genres which he has greatly outlined in “The Story” and he also has it greatly outlined in his seminars: the Story seminar, horror seminar and the comedy seminar. It is very important to evaluate for me my one page story – where does it fall in line with the expectations of the genre?” explains the writer her application of McKee’s approach to story writing.

The screenwriting guru acknowledges that experienced screenwriters can create the elements of form on their own, often not even being aware of it without attending his seminars. Bob admits that some writers could not explain the nature of the formal requirements for the story, and specifically, the requirements for the inciting incident, “but they still come up with the great inciting incident because they have seen stories over life, and they understand by their sense of taste that something is boring. They start thinking what would make it interesting, and they start looking for a way to satisfy them, to make it interesting for themselves, to people they talk to and pitch to. These writers can’t explain the very definition of the inciting incident, but they do understand the principle ‘works, doesn’t work.’ So whether the writer has a formal education that allows them to think in these terms formally or not, the form is there. By trial and by error they try a dozen different ways until they finally find: ‘works’. Well, I could explain why it works. Now do they need to hear my explanation? No, because they got the taste and understanding of the story, but I could save them a lot of time,” explains the writer the value of his course on methodology.

Visualization Talent

Film primarily is a visual medium. Eighty percent of film is visual and only twenty percent is auditory. The old name for movies was “the moving pictures.” The screenplay consists of the dialogue and visual descriptions of the scene settings. It is through the combination of the two that the story is told. “We want to see, not hear as our energies go
to our eyes, only half-listening to the soundtrack” (McKee, 1997, p. 389). The screenwriters are the originators of the visual imagery of the film.

As all study participants emphasized an importance of having a gift for story visualization, they talked about three types of visualization abilities that are important for the screenwriters. They are:

1. An ability to get into and live in the visual world of the story while creating it.
2. An ability to use the visualization tool when fixing the problems in the existing story.
3. An ability to visualize the story from the audience’s point of view

**An ability to live in the visual world of the story**

All my study participants admitted that an ability to get into and live in the visual world of the story while creating it is essential to writing a screenplay. However, all the writers differed in the range of their ways of getting into the visual world of their stories. Some of them had to live the story on the stage as actors and directors, which helped them to understand the visual world of the story, and later on write adaptations of it as a film. Others channel their stories and see them visually in one piece from beginning to end. Yet others gradually grow their stories going from one image to another wondering what these images mean. Some of my study participants had to reach a point of saturation with the story when the visual world of the story spreads out in front of them in a moment of revelation.

The stage experience of acting in “Miss Julie Montgomery” was crucial for laying out the scenes of the story in a visual way for Bob McKee. Twenty years later when the writer decided to adopt the play to a screenplay version, he resorted to his acting experience as the means that helped him to get inspiration to write his adaptation and assisted him in visualizing it. “I just go into that world; I see that world. I’ve lived in it enough, I’ve read about it enough, I’ve thought about it enough, I know that world,' says Bob. ‘And so, I’m invisible to them, but I’m just riding along with them (characters of the story),” shares the writer on his ability to get into the world of his story.

Mylo channels her stories; they come to her in one piece. She shares that the visual type of thinking comes easily to the writer. In our conversation the writer semi-jokingly expresses her wish for the type of technology that would help her to record the
story that she receives through channeling: “If there was any type of technology in the future to reach into the mind’s eye because then all I’d have to do is to sit in the room for about an hour and I would have movies start to finish. The hardest part and something that takes time is to translate the visual into the words,” contemplates the writer.

Mylo gives me an analogy. She asks me what movie I like, and I name “Frida.” Mylo says that she is going to ask me to go to the movie theater and watch “Frida”, where my job would be to watch a move and then write a script. The writer notes that I would have to watch the film from the beginning to an end and then sit down and ask the projectionist to play the movie scene by scene while I was recording it in the form of a screenplay. “When you describe what you’re seeing on the screen, you’re probably going to come up with five different ways to write it down. And then you would get to the next scene, and the next scene and it would take you quite some time to write a script of the movie you just saw. That’s exactly how I work,” explains Mylo her screenwriting method.

Rod Taylor’s visualization technique is based on seeing the images of the story emerging in his mind and then interpreting them into the story plot. “Once I see that image, I put it in there. Once I receive images I then have to figure out what it means. And it is not that I think: ‘and here this happens’, I had to figure out: ‘what does it mean?’” explains the writer the use of visualization technique in his creative approach.

Stephen Rivele has to achieve a state of saturation with the story before it starts visually unfolding in front of him, and once that happens, the writer starts seeing the story characters, hear their voices in his head and visualizing the story scenes.

Living in the visual world of the story is the key visualization talent for the screenwriters that allows them to see the story first in order to tell it, it is talent that according to Mylo allows ‘to see the movie playing in your mind.” Once that happens, the screenwriters have to be able to visually describe it in the form of a screenplay. And that’s where the next talent of writing visually comes into play.

**Using the visual tool to solve the story contradictions**

The stories that my study participants write are multidimensional, they have complex structure and character dynamics, plots, and twists. Writing a thriller for
example, in a lot of ways involves a complex problem solving process. The writer has a challenge of keeping a seamless flow of the story scenes and story dynamics, its plot and subplots together in one harmoniously united whole progressing towards the end in a meaningful way. When I asked Mylo how she manages to keep all the developing pieces of the story in her mind and what tools she uses to do it, she said that one of the sure ways to keep the story scenes in order and the relationship of all parts uncomplicated is to utilize the visual tool of getting inside the parallel world of the story.

“The only way to keep the story uncomplicated is to create a parallel visual universe of the story. If a person tried to link all the scenes on paper, when you’re looking on the scenes on paper trying to make sure it flows, forget it, you’re dead. You might as well be trying to solve a 15 page mathematical equation, that’s what it looks like. The only way is to create a parallel world where your characters live. Once you establish that, you can see it, that’s when you can step back and see whether or not that works, the links are still there, you know,” says the writer. Mylo admitted that she often goes visually through the scenes and sequences to make sure that it all works and it’s logical, that’s how she discovers problems. “I think it is absolutely important, we have to have that movie in our head. We have to be able to not only watch the movie in our head when we’re writing and reading the scripts, we also, have to be able to create that parallel universe so that we can go in there and fix problems and inconsistencies.”

As an example of solving the story’s contradictions by using the visual tool of getting into the story’s visual world, the writer discusses how she found and fixed an important detail in the story. In one of the “The Statute of Limitation’s” climactic scenes the door was left open and one of the central characters, Wesley walked into Ava’s penthouse where she was sitting and waiting for him, knowing that she just killed his wife and son and that he is going to come after her. At the end of that sequence Wesley is standing on the terrace looking on Eva’s dead body on the street. “I actually had that the police is bashing down the door. This is what I had in the script – they are bashing down the door, and finally they break down the door and the lead investigator comes in and says: ‘Wesley, what happened to Ava?’ And only when I got into the parallel universe of the story, did I discover, that my door was already opened. And I said – aha! The cops don’t bash on the door, they walk in!”
An ability to visualize the screenplay from the audience’s point of view

A screenplay as a product has a number of audiences. Its first audience is film producers who are involved in the production of the film, then it is film directors and actors, and finally it is people who come to the theater to see the film. Stephen Rivele believes that an important set of skills that the writer has to have is the ability to visualize the screenplay from the audience’s point of view. Steve talked about how instrumental it is for the writer to have some sense of what the audience is going to see on the screen. The writer emphasizes that it is different from just being able to visualize. “It is like the difference between speaking the language and being able to tell a moving story in that language. You have to be able to perceive the material as the audience is going to perceive it,” says the writer.

If the film goes through the Hollywood development process, the next phase after producers’ review (if the film is given a green light for further development), is to get it to the film director. The film director, while reading the screenplay, prepares it for the pre-production process, figuring out the visual scenes from the descriptions provided by the writers in the screenplay. In order for the film director to have an idea about the imagery of the scene, the screenwriter has to create it in the most vivid and visual ways.

The following is the description of the beginning of the story of “Kleopatra” that gives an idea of the writer’s created description of the imagery of the scene.

Deep in a starless night. A beacon, towering, blue-flamed, sweeps over the harbor, slices inland, throwing the desert hills into stark relief. They bristle with the torches of moving troops, thousands, tens of thousands of them. Then the light flares across the city: red-tiled roofs, palm courts, stately temples, the elegant, sophisticated capital of the Eastern world.

Title: “Alexandria 30 BC”

The city appears deserted, not a cart on the broad boulevards, not a light in the endless labyrinth of side streets. The capital of Egypt, the soul of the world, stands frozen with fear.
Then, deep within the city an unearthly whisper, a muted voice from another world:
flutes and drums, chanting, singing, wailing.

EXT. ALEXANDER THE GREAT’S TOMB - - NIGHT
A massive Doric temple dominates the center of the city. The entrance is guarded by
coiling bronze cobras. Then, suddenly, the doors are open, an explosion of sound:
Figures are careening down the steps, spilling into the Canopic Way, writhing, dancing,
mesmerized. A frightening procession, half-carnival, half-funeral. Men and women, boys
and girls, fantastically arrayed. They laugh and drink, weep and flagellate themselves, a
pagan festival, an exorcism.

From this relatively short description we can vividly imagine the depicted
by the writers starting in Alexandria pagan carnival during which the son of Kleopatra
and Caesar, Caesareon will escape Alexandria in order to save his life. This description
will, first of all, create the visual context within which the story takes place, and second
of all, allows the film director who reads it to plan the scene for the shoot.

The next audience that the writer has to consider is the actors in the film. In
order to play the character in the film, actors look for certain actionable visual cues in the
descriptions and the dialogue in the screenplay that will reveal the essence of that
character to them, his or her motivations, intentions, and desires. One of the principles of
writing visually is: ‘if you can’t see it, it isn’t happening’. Mylo Carbia shares that when
she was writing her screenplay “The Statute of Limitations,” she wrote a line: “Ava is
tickled pink as she drives on, she finally found someone who is interested in her.” But
then the writer realized that it would be impossible to act it and shoot it, and “if you can’t
shoot it, throw it out. It’s enough to say: ‘she is tickled to death as she drives off. We
really don’t care why and if we don’t see it, there is no point of having it in the script,”
explains Mylo her change in the description. The rule is that the writer should not write
emotions in the back of someone’s head that are not visual. ‘We cannot write reasons,
like why someone is angry; like he is angry because he just came back from the store and
got ripped by a cashier. You’d better show me the damn cashier ripping him in the scene
before. If you can’t shoot it, you can’t write it. And that’s the skill that can be
developed,” concludes Mylo.
“A film flows through the imagination,” writes Robert McKee. “No small task. The first step is to recognize exactly what it is we describe – the sensation of looking at the screen. Ninety percent of all verbal expression has no filmic equivalent. “He’s been sitting there for a long time” can’t be photographed. So we constantly discipline the imagination with this question: What do I see on the screen? Then describe only what is photographic: Perhaps ‘He stubs out his tenth cigarette,’ ‘He nervously glances at his watch,’ or ‘He yawns trying to stay awake’ to suggest waiting for a long time.” (p. 35)

While living in the visual world of the story when creating it and being able to describe it visually is the key, the writers also emphasized the importance of the ability to re-enter the visual world of the story in order to solve the story problems and contradictions.

**Can visualization talent be developed?**

All my study participants believe that a screenwriter should be born with visualization gift, that once they have it, they can work on enhancing it.

When I asked Mylo if she believed that the ability of getting transferred into the parallel world of the story can be learned, she answered that she didn’t think so. “I really think that it is something that is wired in the brain, the ability to do that or not. I think it’s just if you can visualize or you can’t visualize.” Mylo suggests a visualization test to see if a person has a gift, if a person can pick furniture and visualize what it would look like in a room, then as a writer he or she will be able to visualize the story’s parallel world. “If you’re a person who can look at color blue of a shower curtain and say ‘that would look good in my bathroom,’ then you can visualize the parallel world. If someone walks into a house that is in a need of complete renovation, and they have a partner or an architect saying that there is a potential here, and we can have a bookcase there. But if they are staring and they really can’t see that, then they are not going to be good.”

**Enhancing visualization talent**

There are various ways to enhance the visualization gift. My study participants shared that such experiences as watching film, directing plays and movies, trying to imagine the story through the story characters’ points of view, through reading other
authors’ screenplays and trying to visualize them sustain and develop their visualization gift.

Acting and directing

Bob shares that when he was a theater director twenty years ago, he lived in the visual world of the stories dozens of times over. “I’ve been a director, I’ve sat there and played God with a cast of actors, and so I know exactly what it is to be a director – it is kind of invisible in a sense, you see. You’re sitting there in the theater, you have a bunch of actors and you’re sitting over the top of it, and you’re watching every moment, and you know the difference between truth and lie. I’ve read the script, I’ve studied it from all the characters’ points of view, I visualized it, I can get up there and act any of these characters – a man, a woman, a child.”

Childhood experiences of watching film

Bob McKee shares that watching European films when he was a boy helped him with the development of the visualization gift early in his childhood. He considers watching movies as being a part of the audience a passive visual experience while writing movies as a screenwriter an active visual experience. Bob goes back to his recollections when he was a boy and went to the movies and that was a parallel universe. “You’re invisible to these people on the screen, on the stage, on the page, it is exactly the same experience. In a way, you sit there invisible to them, and they are behaving as if you weren’t there, but you are. You’re seeing to the surface of these characters, you know when they are feeling and thinking. The characters don’t know, you’re God. All you’re doing is recreating your experience of going to the movies, of going to the theater, of reading a novel in which you’re an invisible being watching all of these characters doing whatever, and so when you write, it is exactly the same thing, but only now, you do it.” Bob thinks that the only difference between being an audience and being a writer is the difference between passive and active. “As audience, you’re a passive invisible observer, as a writer, you’re an active invisible observer and you’re going to make them to do what you want them to do because now you can do it actively instead of passively. But it is not that big of a leap,” says the writer. “For a lot of people it seems to be impossible, but for the
writer, it is just natural. They become active, they are not the audience any more; they are the creator. It is the same experience,” concludes the writer.

**Visualizing the screenplays of other screenwriters**

Some study participants admitted that reading the works of other screenwriters can help them to enhance their visualization ability. Mylo reads the screenplays of the films that she has not seen yet as a way to practice her visualization skills. The writer believes that by doing that she can see how close to the actual film she can visualize the scenes in the movie: “I read ‘The Beautiful Mind’ script before I saw the movie, and to be honest with you I sat back and thought ‘what the hell are they talking about? I could not visualize the first five pages of the screenplay. And I started reading and I closed my eyes and made myself visualize it. And then I was able to finally to come up with the picture and then when I finally went to see the movie, it was what I had envisioned, but that was an example of something that didn’t come quickly to me. And what it does, it hones visualization skills by reading the script once and then seeing the movie,” shares the writer.

When working on the screenplays the writers also resort to the films made by other filmmakers to see how they used visualization techniques to enhance the message in their films. When Chris Wilkinson worked on the thriller “The Death of Conrad Shepherd” he watched all films made by Hitchcock to see how the film master visually built his movies. “It is a perfect example of the visual master. It is all is so seamless, I mean the most outrageous composition. But you can see the flashy camera shots and it is understandable because any great director is going to see a virtuoso camera moves and the virtuoso blocking, and memorable images, but they are not there for their own sake, they are connected to the fabric of the work as a deeper piece, as a whole.”

**The Language Talent**

All of my study participants acknowledged the importance of having the natural ability for languages, or language gift when creating screenplays. The majority of them never took a writing course before they started writing. They believed that their language talent, their natural ability for writing has served as the foundation of their ability to
write, the foundation upon which they built their stories with the help of the learned aspects of the screenwriting craft and the experience they have had.

Steven Rivele during our interviews shared that he never took a writing course and he doesn’t believe that it is possible to teach a person how to write in a formal way. The writer learned how to write by writing his novels and screenplays, by sharpening his skills and growing his talent. Steve strongly believes that if it weren’t for his language gift, he would have never been successful. Steve recalls that from a very early age he was a serious intellectually inclined person and he loved language: “I loved words, fascinated by languages, and I started writing when I was 8 years old. I was born with this ability. I just have a natural ability for languages and a love of language. I live in language as you breathe the air, or as fish moves in the water, it is the medium primarily through which I move and I read all the time, and I read everything, and I have a tremendous memory, so all that contributes to it. But if I hadn’t been born with a natural ability for languages, no matter how much I read, I would have never succeeded,” says the writer.

**The verbal language is a barrier to expressing the truth**

Despite the fact that language is the main medium of writing stories, some of my study participants talked about the limiting power of it to express the truth. Steve defined the creative process as breathing in and breathing out the creative spirit. “The breathing out is difficult because you have to find the mobile language and it is a very hard work,” says Steve. Search for mobile language to tell the story is the writer’s ultimate goal. “You see something clearly, you finally understand something of real importance, you have to find a way to communicate it if you’re an artist of any kind. In art ultimately that’s what the artists do.” In our further conversations about creating the story language, Steve shared with me that he believes that the verbal language is the least expressive mode of communication “I wish I was a musician, “said the writer to my big surprise. Steven explained that in his mind the language is the barrier to experiencing God:

> It is the means for expressing the experience of God, but it is very faulty means as everyone who’s ever attempted knows. And that’s why the great mystics of our tradition end up talking about paradoxes. And that’s why my favorite writer Samuel Beckett was constantly at odds with the language in his plays. He constantly was trying to break down language into some other form of utterance, and express the essential silence that was the only thing that had importance for him. And that’s why his last play ‘Breath’ has no words in it. Even Tolstoy, for
example, he has these great Himalayas of words in “War and Peace” and “Anna Karenina” and ‘Resurrection’. And then he himself said that the only good work of literature he ever wrote was his last short story called ‘Alyosha Gorshok’. It is only one and a half pages long.

Steve studied all works of Tolstoy and found out that his work is an inverted pyramid from “War and Peace” which was 1600 pages long, to “Anna Karenina” which was 800 pages long, to “Ressurection” which was 500 pages long, to ‘Father Sergei’, which was 175 pages long, to the “Death of Ivan Iliyich” which was 35 pages long to “Aloysha Gorshok” which was only 1.5 pages. The Great Russian writer was constantly trying to pair down the expression of the truth that he understood and get it into the most pure refined form. “In other words, he was trying to write musically in the end, “ says Steve, “So, that’s why poetry is the purest form of language because it is the most intense form of language. It is only in poetry have I ever found the expression of the truth that interests me that even approaches to music. The poetry is also the most musical form of language.” Ultimately, what they are trying to express is unutterable. And so, if you’re trying to put it into words, you’re compromising it and you’re corrupting it. “That’s why the writer thinks that music is the purest of all art forms because it is not conceptual. “It’s almost a pure experience, rather than an attempt to formulate the truth in concepts, I mean it is a fundamental contradiction. You cannot formulate the truth in concepts because when you do, you betray the truth because a concept, I mean it comes from the Latin ‘concepio’ which means ‘together’, a concept has at least two parts, when the truth doesn’t have any parts, so there is a betrayal.” Therefore, in the attempt to convey truthfulness lays the challenge of an artist:

That’s what art is. It is the ability to convey that which cannot be conveyed to those to whom it must be conveyed. It is essentially a contradictory enterprise. But the beauty of it is in the attempt to resolve that contradiction. And that’s where the struggle comes and that’s where the suffering comes, and that’s where the triumph comes, the attempt to which you at least struggle to resolve that contradiction. That which we are saying cannot be said, and to say it, betrays its nature. We have to say it, it has to be said somehow, people need to hear it. And that’s the most mystifying phrases in the Gospel when Jesus says to his disciples: I teach you in parable so hearing you will not understand. That’s what Jesus tried to say: what I’m trying to tell you, cannot be said, but I’m going to find some form in which to say it. But you have to understand, that the form in which I’m saying it is a betrayal of what I’m saying.
The writer is convinced that Jesus arrived at the understanding of the essential artistic conflict: the very process itself is the betrayal of the truth and yet, it is the only process in which the truth can be uttered. “That provides its tension, its dynamism, its universal quality, its enduring quality, because it is essentially a human struggle, and we’re all humans,” says the writer. “In the Western mind, we can only think in terms of concepts, predicts, verbs, there is two parts at least,” continued Steven. “Beethoven says: it’s not the notes, it is the silence between the notes. And I would say the same thing – it is not the words on a page, it is the blank spaces between the words on the page that are important, but you can’t express that. You can only experience that. Well, those of us who work in the arts have to find the form to express it. Our job is to purify, and purify, and purify that form, to bring it closer to that which is being uttered. And that which is being uttered is unutterable. So, ultimately we devolve into silence, all of us.”

The language of poetry

“There was a poet in the 20th century who said: the minimum requirement for a poem is a miracle. And I always liked that - it is very true. “ Rod Taylor

The highest form of language is poetry agreed my study participants. Two of my study participants write poetry – Rod Taylor and Steven Rivele. Rod Taylor admitted that he writes screenplays the way he writes poetry. “And that was a beautiful story, it was like a poem,” says the writer about one of his first screenplays about the Indians. Rod is convinced that poetry is the most expressive language. “I think the moment of visual truth and harmony – our poetry. The moment in the novel that I can care about is the moment that is achieved through poetry. I think that the moments in music that connect with you are moments that connect through poetry. So, we try to categorize things and separate music from poetry. Why isn’t poetry music? It is music. And therefore, music is poetry.”

“Poetry is full of images, so poetry is visual. And it is narrative often and consequently it is similar to a novel. You know at the beginning of time, all knowledge was one. And mankind has specialized in diffusing knowledge. Poetry is not about story, poetry is all about the truth that lies within things. And Shakespeare is not about story,
story, story. It is about poetry that comes through these characters. And what you need to do when you write it is to make sure that your rationality does not get in the way.”

“Poetry is another kind of language,” says Rod. “In a sense, it is not communication. If one thinks about the original purpose of language, you know, whenever God gave Adam language before he gave Adam Eve. So, there was really no one for Adam to speak to. And yet he had language. And at that time words were not there to communicate. Words were objects of contemplation. They were things with a life of their own. They were portals into some place else. And they still are. It is just generally a forgotten function. And it is actually the primary function. But we subverted all of it to our own purposes, just to our convenience. And now everybody thinks that the words are just to communicate. “Go over there, bring me that. I’m hungry” (laughs).

In a way, stories are portals to some place else, they take us to the worlds we have never seen before, the worlds that we have never known, or the worlds that are close by near us, and we either recognize them by thinking ‘oh, yes, the life if exactly like this,’ or with surprise we find familiarity of it so unknown – we never thought about them that way. The writers are the magicians who create these worlds by the movement of their pen, their superb imagination, and talent.

Writing dialogue

And yet as difficult as it is, the writers try to find the means of expressing the truth and the meaning of their stories, they try to find the “mobile language” to do it. Writing powerful character dialogue is another key aspect to creating a successful screenplay.

Through dialogue and descriptions the story is told in the screenplay. The screenplay is a mix of visual and auditory means. Through dialogue the character expresses his or her desires or intentions. Some study participants talked about the challenges of writing dialogue. They all acknowledged that writing dialogue is a minor art form, the challenge being that the characters have to express themselves and they have to convey certain ideas and certain information. Steve Rivele shares that while sounding like conventional speech, the characters’ dialogue should serve the purposes of drama. In order to accomplish the dramatic goals of the dialogue, which still should sound like natural speech, it has to be very carefully crafted.
“The playwright may spin elaborate and ornate dialogue – but not the screenwriter,” writes Bob McKee. “Screen dialogue demands short, simply constructed sentences, generally a movement from noun to verb to object or from noun to verb to complement in that order.” According to McKee, dialogue is not a conversation because conversation isn’t about making points or achieving closure. “Screen dialogue must have a swing of everyday talk, but content well above normal. First, screen dialogue requires compression and economy. Screen dialogue must say the maximum in the fewest possible words. Second, it must have direction. Each exchange of dialogue must turn the beats of the scene in one direction or another across the changing behavior. Third, it should have purpose. “Speak like common people do,” Aristotle advised, “but think as wise men do.” (McKee, 1997, p. 389)

**Factors that form dialogue**

A writer takes a number of factors into consideration when shaping the characters’ dialogue. It is determined first of all by the **nature of the scene** and by the **nature of the character and dramatic situation**. But more often than not, the writer hears the characters’ voices sounding in his head. “When I reach the point when I hear the characters’ voices in my head, then I feel comfortable writing his or her dialogue, virtually putting words into his or her mouth,” shares Steven Rivele. Rod Taylor when writing dialogue gets an image of the characters in his mind, they come fully equipped with the personality and they start talking to the writer. “They tell you. Characters are not accretions of the decision-making process. **They are full blown and organic entities.** And they have a life, they have a way of feeling; they have a way of talking. The writer hears the characters’ voices in his head. Once you have an image of him in your mind, he is going to tell you where he is going from there, you don’t tell him where to go. You don’t say, okay, Trevis Beekle character, now go here, go there. You basically edit what he does and what he says because he is alive,” explains the writer.

**The role of vocabulary**

One of the most important things in the ability to use the language effectively is having a large vocabulary. “Think about it: ‘he walks over to the other side of the room’, 
he ‘staggers over’ to the other side of the room, he ‘strides over’ to the other side of the room,” contemplates Mylo. “Walking’ is plain vanilla, ‘staggering’ means that he is either tired or drunk, ‘striding’ means that he is cocky. What we’re doing is that by choosing the appropriate words we’re conveying emotion.”

The writer says that without the mastery of the language in writing it, it is really hard to convey an emotion. If Mylo wrote in Spanish and had a very limited vocabulary of the language, her descriptions would be very boring: “because the only word I know for ‘walk’ is walk. And yet, there are other words in the language that would be able to convey something more powerful.” The writer believes that is something that can be learned because as the person’s vocabulary increases in the language that you’re studying, his or her ability to express increases too. “I think that it is definitely a skill; it is a technique,” concludes the writer.

**Determining the level of diction**

In the beginning of their creative journey the writers define the tone of diction, the verbal character of the story and the language they’re going to use in a screenplay, which is dictated by the nature of the subject and the nature of the principal characters.

In “Kleopatra”, Steve and Chris spent a long time discussing what the verbal tone of the piece would be, what characterizations and scene descriptions would sound like, and how characters would speak. One of the things that the authors wanted to avoid was a mistake of all previous Kleopatras - they didn’t want for story characters to talk as if they were the 21 century urban Americans. But at the same time, they didn’t want them to talk in a stilted and archaic speech. So, the question became: what idiom would they adopt that would suggest to the audience that these people are not speaking contemporary English without the audience having to struggle to understand what the characters were saying?

And one of the solutions the writers came up with was that they would not use contractions in the dialogues. They would not write Kleopatra’s dialogue in the blank verse, a poetry that doesn’t rhyme, but it would become the blank verse without it being written as verse. So, for example, when Kleopatra is talking to God or when she is talking to other principal characters, the quality of the language would be such that the audience
would have a consciousness that she is not speaking modern American English, but in British English. However, the writers very quickly abandoned the idea of not using contractions because it began to sound stilted. So, what they decided was that the characters will use contractions when they were speaking in a private way. But when they were speaking in a public way, they would not use contractions. “And when she is speaking in her persona as Queen or as Goddess she will speak in an averse like language. But when she speaks to her nurse for example, she will speak in fairly ordinary prose,” explains Steven their solution for writing dialogue for ‘Kleopatra.’

Steven gets some of his ideas for the choice of language from Shakespeare, who used three forms of languages in his plays: prose, blank verse, and the rhymed verse. And he chose depending on the character and the dramatic situation and the nature of the relationships between the characters. “And we’re going to do something like that,” says Steve.

The writers say that they have to be very subtle about the choice of the languages in “Kleopatra” because a modern American audience would not respond if the language the writers choose to create is too didactic.

To a certain extent the language in the story is shaped by what the character is talking about and much of that is determined by research. Steve and Chris were writing a scene about the relationships of Egypt to Rome in a dialogue between Kleopatra when she was a little girl and her father. The writers started thinking that her father would enumerate the provinces that were swallowed up by Rome, and then they realized that the audience doesn’t care about what the names of these provinces are. It was a father who was drunk and who was talking to his twelve-year-old daughter. The writers didn’t want him to sound as if he was giving Kleopatra history lessons. So the level of diction in that piece came way down. But when Kleopatra starts talking about the relationship of Egypt to Rome when she becomes a Queen, the level of diction goes all the way up.

**Writing ‘trialogues’**

When I asked Bob about his approach to writing the story dialogue, he replied that never writes “dialogues” - back and forth, back and forth, people talking about themselves. He says that it wouldn’t be true because it is very rare when two people can
sit down and really talk from the heart about what they really think and feel. “This only happens in most powerful moments in life when two people look at each other and put all the shit aside. What do people do? What they do is they create a ‘trialogue’, which is the third thing.” When Bob can see the third thing in the scene, then he can write the scene. “I don’t think of the words first, I think: ‘what does she want, what does he want, and then – ‘what’s the third thing? What’s the trialogue? What’s the third corner?’” explains the writer his approach.

When Bob writes his stories he sees them visually. “You see two characters in the room first. You know their history and then you got to figure what is going on: ‘what does he want? What does she want? And what is the third thing? People usually talk about the third thing, the future, the childhood, which creates the text. That’s what they talk about. But what is really going on is something else.”

In Bob’s screenplay “Miss Julie Montgomery”, there is a scene where two characters Riva and John who have been lovers for a year are in the kitchen and Riva serves John his dinner. “But they can’t talk about their relationship. Why would they? They talk about food, she wants to please John, she made his favorite dish. She brings it to the table and he says: ‘the plate is cold.’ They talk about the 3rd thing. And you see the tension in the relationship. She wants to please him, he is an asshole, playing the king of the hill, he is being pampered by this woman, he gets annoyed, but she jokes about it, pulls his hear. So, they talk about food, but what the audience sees is ‘lovers in a tension.’ He has the power, she is trying to please him and you see all of that, but that’s not at the surface of things. “And so I try to imagine it visually, I try to figure out what the third thing is. And then it just comes to you,” explains the writer. “I don’t know how it comes to you exactly. But she is the cook this evening and it would be logical for her to make a meal, and she would like to make the best meal and he would complain about it.”

**Enhancing the language talent**

A number of my study participants expressed the view that the writer’s ability to visualize and use the language is interdependent. When talking about the screenwriter’s ability visualize and use the language Mylo said: “I think these are two different skills. Visualization is how you come up with the story. Now your ability to use words is a
concise powerful way to describe what you’re seeing. These two skills go hand in hand.

There are people who have amazing visualization skills who have not mastered the language of writing it and cannot appropriately convey what they see,’ says the writer.

Mylo strongly believes that using the language is more of a skill than an inborn talent, and that’s where there is the most opportunity for growth and the mastery. “I think as long as you have a powerful visualization, I think you can develop your language skills to write effectively to convey that.” Mylo contemplates that if she was to write in Spanish and her language was poor, there was no way without lots of work to write a powerful script because she wouldn’t know the appropriate powerful words.

**Innovation Talent**

The writers are inventors of the new stories. They have to be if they desire to see their story on a big screen. During my interviews with the writers they all emphasized that their challenge is to write something that has not been done before. The difficulty is that all the stories have been told, in one way or another, so the writers have to find fresh and innovative ways to create their stories. Creative innovation is a part of the writer’s job. The scrutinizing tests of all audiences looking at the story before its destiny is decided requires from a story a high degree of robustness, uniqueness, originality and promise for an unforgettable emotional experience. As the writers sit in front of the blank page, they know that what they are about to originate has to not only pass all the tests of the audiences and the film industry, it has to surpass their expectations, and even more importantly, their own internal test of creating the truthful, moving beautiful tales in a way that was never done before. They gather their intelligence, their creativity, and imagination to create that utterly unique and unforgettable experience. McKee (1997) writes about the importance of the originality and innovation of the story in his best-selling book: “Story urges the creation of works that will excite audiences on the six continents and live in revival for decades. No one needs yet another recipe book on how to reheat Hollywood leftovers’ (p. 3). Then the screenwriting guru continues: “Story is about originality, not duplication. Originality is the confluence of content and form – distinctive choices of subject plus a unique shaping of the telling. The story is not only what you have to say but also how you say it. If content is cliché, the telling will be
cliché. But if your vision is deep and original, your story design will be unique. Conversely, if the telling is conventional and predictable, it will demand stereotypical roles to act out well-worn behaviors. But if the story design is innovative, then settings, characters, and ideas must be equally fresh to fulfill it. We shape the telling to fit the substance, rework the substance to support the design” (p. 9).

In order for that to happen the writers have to exceed what has been done so far in film and have to invent new ways of telling inspirational stories. It often entails coming up with innovative methods and techniques of story telling, ones that the audience will recognize as new. “Story is about respect, not disdain, for the audience,’ writes Bob McKee. The audience is not only smart, it’s smarter than most films, and that fact won’t change when you move to the other side of the screen. It’s all a writer can do, using every bit of craft he’s mastered, to keep ahead of the sharp perceptions of a focused audience” (p. 7).

Every story the writer creates embraces their original view on the world, their experiences, their preferences, their grasp of the craft, and their unique talent of story telling. This combination makes the story new and fresh, whether they tell their own original stories that the world hasn’t heard before or they take an existing story and tell it from a new angle.

The writers’ original stories are often inspired by their unique experiences. Very often they represent the writers’ life long dreams, something they cherished and finally had the courage to write. Such are: “Knowledge” written by Rod Taylor, “The Statute of Limitation’ written by Mylo Carbia; “Miss Julie Montgomery” by Bob McKee; “Copying Beethoven” and “Kleopatra” written by Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson. Embracing their dreams and their long thought out ideas, the writers spread them out into the worlds of their stories that represent their original innovative visions. To implement their original visions the writers incorporate various innovative ideas into their stories such as new scientific concepts, new structural devices, designs and methods of story telling, new angles on the well known stories, new stories that have never been told before with unique ways of telling them. This segment of the chapter looks into the innovative strategies the writers apply to their story telling.
**Integrating a new scientific concept into a story**

“Knowledge” written by Rod Taylor is a story that expresses the writer’s idea about the dialectical antagonism between two types of knowledge, the intuitive and poetic and the deductive, and what happens when the deductive type of knowledge wins, the idea that has been so important to the writer for a number of years. To develop his ideas, the writer places it in an innovative setting of a genetics lab where a scientist David through genetic engineering creates a human being, his son, a concept that was still new to the world in the early 80s. “When I started this idea which was 20 years ago, people didn’t even know what DNA was all about, folks in LA, I’m not talking about scientists,” shares the writer. Having a fundamental idea about sciences helped the writer to create a new concept of parasitic life that sprung itself from the human DNA and prospered living as a part of it affecting everything an individual would do. “I started to evolve the concept that a certain parasitic life form could actually change the nature of the human beings as well as potentially if it was big enough, it could change the nature of every creature on the earth.” Rod Taylor thought about what could possibly be intimate enough with every creature to basically go unrecognized as universal parasites. And he thought about DNA. “And this was even before people discovered junk DNA. So, I thought about it as a levo - stereo - isomer, the left hand mirror image of DNA that can basically be a part of genome of every single living thing. And the origin of this could have been that in the beginning of things the man could have actually brought it into the world. So you have this perfectly scientific idea that would also be philosophically religious that it would be a contaminate from the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And at the same time it could be kind of a microprocessor, a genetic computer that overrides the potential of everything and alters its appearance and capability, its life expectancy. If there was such a thing...So, I began purely with a line that evolved into a philosophical concept and out of that came this man David and his wife Eran,” shares Rod displaying his creative, innovative thinking process. The writer then shares that when he pitched the story to the Hollywood studio producer, the story concept was so unusual and innovative that the producer didn’t know what to do with it. But following the advice of his assistant, he bought the film.
Finding a new way to tell the story about a great composer

It has been Steve Rivele’s life long dream to create a story about the person he worshiped since he was 13, the great composer, Beethoven. And although there are a number of films made about the famous composer, there is none about his late work, and especially how the Late String Quartets came into being. The writers decided to write the story about this part of Beethoven’s life that has not been dramatized about the last year and a half in the composer’s life and talk about his creating the late string quartets: “Those people talk about Beethoven up to the 9th Symphony, but Beethoven himself understood that the 9th Symphony was a turning point of his life. The real work that he had to do was the work he was going to do after that.”

The writers faced a number of challenges when creating a story that made them think of innovative solutions. One was the difficulty to tell the great composer’s story because Beethoven had been deaf for 30 years and he had virtually no friends, no relationships. He couldn’t communicate with anybody or only with great difficulty. The challenge that the writer faced was: how do you tell the story of a man in that condition? The writers had to find the way to externalize the character’s internal drama. They had to find the way into the story. The writers solved the problem by finding a new solution through creating a character of Ana. And that’s how it happened: when conducting research on Beethoven, the writers found out that Beethoven’s publisher Schlemmer had to find someone who he could train to read Beethoven’s handwriting because the great composer’s handwriting was notoriously illegible. The conservatory used to send the brightest students to help Beethoven’s publisher and they usually sent two men. And the writers thought that supposed they sent a young woman, and they decided to invent the character of Ana, a young woman – copyist who was falling in love with the great composer. The characters of Ana helped the writers to tell the story about Beethoven’s late period, because the writers needed someone to act from the audience’s point of view. “You’ve got a young woman who was falling in love with a man who was becoming God. From that point on, it was just the question of using Ana to explore Beethoven’s development of his late period. According to Steve, as a result of their idea, the story almost becomes a love story or a romantic comedy.”
Taking a new angle on the well-known story

Often during the creative process the writers face story problems that have not found solutions yet, that present questions that no one has found the answers to, and for which there is nobody and nothing that the writers can turn to that would help to find the solution except for their own minds, imagination and ability to invent. In the situations like these the writers either have to leave the existing gaps in the story and try to cover them up, running the risk of being discovered by the audience, or they have to invent the solution that has never existed before. They have to innovate. Such was the writers’ challenge when they were writing the story of Kleopatra.

When writing “Kleopatra” Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson faced a challenge of telling a well-known story of an old famous film “Cleopatra” in a new way. The “Cleopatra” story was notorious for its budget overspendings and a great spectacle and not for the quality of the story itself.

The writers decided that they wanted to create an intimate story about the Queen of Egypt, about her motherhood, her love for her son Caesareon, her struggle to preserve her son’s life at the time of danger, and her relationship with the love of her life, Marc Antony. In the description of the concept of the story, the writing partners explained: “The challenge is to tell Kleopatra’s story in a way that creates suspense and surprise (despite the fact that everyone knows how it ends), in a way that we’ve never seen it told before. Every telling of this story ends with Kleopatra’s suicide, but that is neither the end of her story nor the meaning of it. The real end of her story, as she herself understood, was the destiny of her son. From the time Antony was defeated at Actium and Egypt was invaded by Octavian, Kleopatra lived for Caesarion and she died for him. Her hope was that her son would live and rule, and establish the new world that she envisioned: the world that would unite East and West and reestablish the empire of Alexander.” Steve explained that their position from the very beginning was that Kleopatra was the story, and not the history and not the spectacle. “And unless you got to the heart of her and figured out what has made her icon in Western history and made her name a part of our language, there is no point in doing this story because nobody has ever gotten to that.”
When they submitted the story to their agency called CAA (Creative Arts Agency) and then to Warner Brothers studio, they received what they called a response was unprecedented in the writers’ experience: ‘One of the directors of the agency held it up at the morning meeting where all the agents attended and said: ‘This is why I became an agent, this is why I’m in the film business.’ The CAA director said that “Kleopatra” script set the bar for all the scripts that the agency would receive from that time on. The writers had personal letters from the agents who the writers don’t know telling us how much they admired it.

CAA for the first time in Steve’s experience expressed an interest in co-producing the film with Warner Brothers. Steve thought that it had positive consequences for him because it would mean that CAA would take a responsibility for the development process and it won’t have to go through the Warner Brother’s Development process, which, in Steven’s opinion, is the worst development process in Hollywood.

CAA directors and agents didn’t think that the writers could do anything new with the material about Kleopatra and they were quite stunned when they saw what the writers did with it.

**Inventing new insights into the story content**

Steve shared that he had an innovative insight into Kleopatra’s story content, and specifically into her relationship with her sister Arsinoe. Steve wrote a scene of Kleopatra confronting her sister in Rome where the Queen of Egypt sent her into exile after she found out about her sister’s conspiracy to kill her and her son. “And it’s a great scene and I just laid there in my bed and I watched the scene unfolding in my head when these two women confronting each other. Kleopatra would arrange for Arsinoe to be humiliated, she was put into a brothel for soldiers. And she has been living for four years as a prostitute in Rome. And she shows at her doorstep and it’s a great scene! *How come no one ever thought to write that one before?!*” rhapsodized Steve about his revelation.
Inventing a new story structure

One of the challenges the writers face every time they write a screenplay is how to present a story in an unexpected way not only through having new angles and insights on its content, but also by having a new way of designing or structuring the story.

The challenge Steve and Chris usually face with their stories was that all of them are historical epics about historical figures’ lives and they all represent a huge amount of information covering their entire life that was difficult to present in a 1.5-hour story. In order to find a way to present a story, the writers invented a non-linear story structure that consisted of 3-4 layers. Every layer was a thread of a story from a different time, representing various characters, and where all three or four layers would come together in the present time event. “You need to have some type of criterion in deciding which events you’re going to choose and which ones you’re not going to use. A non-linear approach allows you to do that,” says the writer.

In creating multiple layers in the story, one layer has to flow naturally from another. Coming back to consciousness of the character is the linkage. “And you have to follow that consciousness wherever the character wants to take you. The trick when creating a multiple story structure”, says Steven, “is that since you’re moving vertically up and down in time, rather than horizontally through time, keep the audience informed as to where you are in time and the way to do this is by creating organic linkage among the various levels of narrative so that when you move from one to the other, you don’t get lost.”

The writer’s strategy is to always bring the audience back to the present day events so that they always know where they are now. “It is like in the fugue, when you have the basic fugal theme at the bottom or in passacaglia where you have the basic petal tones in the bottom. And the material moves around and above those basic tones but you always return to them so that the audience knows where you are.”

Inventing a new dialogue technique

Mylo strongly believes that some of the things that the screenwriter does is a part of his or her talent that cannot be learned, while some other skills, of the craft can be developed. “I think that where the gift lies is that a writer may come up with their own
technique, where the gift lies is the problem solving.” The writer shares with me how she came up with the writing dialogue techniques for a number of her screenplays. When she started writing her historical epic “Amazing Grace”, a story that took place on a slave plantation 300 years ago, the writer had to understand how the slaves talked, and so she decided to read the first hand writings from that time: “That’s not anything I ever heard, that says well, when you’re writing dialogue it is not something that is really foreign, with the slaves on the plantation 300 years ago, to spend time reading first hand writings, as to how they spoke etc. This is something that I think came from my gift of problem-solving, from my Scorpio nature of being the detective of the Zodiac,” says the writer.

The writer also uses internet very actively, especially the message boards to learn how her characters might talk in a story. “Internet has changed everything. It really has, if you’re going to message boards, if you’re looking to study living characters, during this time period, you go to your message boards. If you’re a 40 year old and you’re a screenwriter and win to write a screenplay about a 15-year-old girl, I hope that you are smart enough to hang out in the message board for a while. And the beauty of the message board is that you can practice your character. And you get on there and you sign up as your 15 year old girl character, and you try to communicate with the people in the chat rooms. If they don’t buy it that you’re a 15 year-old girl, are you someone else’s dad, because you don’t sound like... If you haven’t convince them, then you haven’t developed your character. You see it written back to you and you see it written on the different posts, and it is so often to use as a reference, to understand the language,” says the writer.

**Breaking the rules on genre conventions**

A screenplay is usually written in a certain genre: it is either a thriller, or a comedy, or a historical epic. A number of my study participants acknowledged that they didn’t like to work within genre conventions because they were restricting them in their creative process. Steve Rivele admitted that he didn’t like to apply the genre conventions. He thinks that the only reason to apply it is to do something new with them. “If you can twist it, or spin it, or turn it on its head. We just finished the thriller and the genre conventions are like a straight jacket, you got to figure out some way to get out of them if it is going
to be interesting both for you and for the audience. So, my inclinations are always to take genre conventions head on and try to turn them inside out. And that way you can make them to work for the story, rather than to force yourself to work for them. You have to think about them and the more you think about them the more you realize that you’re sick and tired of them. If they are going to be of any use to you, you’ve got to do something bazaar with them. In the best pictures I’ve seen in the recent years, have been pictures that took the conventions of the genre and twisted them into new shapes that you’ve never seen before,” says the writer.

Rod Taylor doesn’t like to think in terms of genre conventions because he believes that genre is creation of the market place, and universities is another form of market place. “We have one knowledge, and the university divides the knowledge in departments. There are really no different categories of knowledge. This is something we do for our convenience.” He reluctantly acknowledges in our conversation that “The Brave One” is more of a thriller. The writer prefers to describe his stories not in terms of genre conventions but as intense character studies in which the people are put in the dilemmas out of which there is no easy way to walk.

Mylo Carbia admitted that writing a thriller requires knowledge of the genre conventions mainly because the thriller audience knows them and has certain expectations for thriller films. The writer spent an incredible amount of time mastering the genre conventions when writing her stories and studying the works of others. “I’m learning the rules in order to break them,” confessed the writer. Breaking the rules on genre conventions was something that the writer was inspired by one of her heroes in the film business, a film director Quentin Tarantino, who does it all the time. The writer believes that by inventing new things within the genre conventions will help to keep the audience engaged. “The only way to truly satisfy that crowd, you have to outthink them, because if you have a thriller fan walking out of the theater saying ‘I didn’t see that one coming’, that was good, they are talking, that’s how the work of mouth goes – that was good.” The writer talks about “The Sixth Sense” movie which ‘got’ all thriller people, “they got out of there and said: oh, he got me, I didn’t see that one coming. So, the word of mouth completely made that movie a huge success, flipper head, as they call them,” says the writer.


Challenges the screenwriters are facing today

When I asked Bob to talk about the challenges the screenwriters are facing nowadays, he said: “Well, where do you want to begin? There’s been a hundred years of cinema, and four thousand years of story and the big problem any writer faces is that it has all been done. What in hell are you going to do that after a hundred of years of film, and hundreds of years of novel and thousands of years of theater that the world has not seen before? And what insight do you have into the human nature and society that no one else ever had before? How the hell do you deal with any originality?”

There is an expression “the only thing new is the history you don’t know.” And the subjects concerning contemporary life are not that much different. The writers’ challenge is to take the old things and old ideas and make them fresh. “The formal limits have all been reached, all possible dance movements have been tried, every note, every music have been tried, every possible jumbling of time in the story have been tried, all these formalities, all these formal principles have been done.

The writers have to look for a depth of content

The problem for the modern writer is not form but content, all the formal possibilities have been explored and the unity between form and content, but there is nothing new in form. “I think that the challenge for the writers in this century is to look for depth of content, to go looking for the aspects of the human nature and aspects of society that are taboed, that are misunderstood, that are mysterious, that nobody has the guts to face. Form arises out of the content. The problem is to find a new content,” says McKee.

One of the interesting things that screenwriters are doing today is that they are beginning to look at the questions of chaos and randomness. “Run Over Run” and another film “Magnolia” looking at something that ‘scares the hell of human nature which is that we’re not in control,” continues the writer, “that we really are the unwilling victim of chance. And that coincidence and randomness is real in this life. We’ve always believed that the God was there taking care of things, and that it all has meaning and it wasn’t random, and these new age people say that there are no accidents and that everything has a purpose. Well, that is just not true,” concludes Bob. “There are accidents. You can walk out of here tonight and get hit by a taxi, there is no meaning to
it, it is just random. Some writers are looking at randomness and it is some kind of a post-modern thing.”

Bob shared that he was writing a book on writing from the dark side because he thinks that the content that has been habitually ignored, with exceptions of Shakespeare is Evil. “And nobody really wants to look at the content of the human nature and 50% of the content on the human nature is evil” says the writer. With writing his book “The Art of Darkness” Bob was going to start to talk to all writers, not just screenwriters. “And so, evil is a subject we don’t look at, randomness is a subject we don’t look at. And so what the writer really needs to do right now is to be original and bring a fresh light into the world. And the greatest of writers Chekhov, and Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky - they looked into the dark side, they looked at randomness. And they look at the relationship between the human nature and people’s side and chaos of life. And they created masterpieces. But you don’t see people picking it up as their consistent themes, there is only one moment, you know.”

“Cinema is a dying institution”

According to the screenwriting guru, the human nature is to avoid looking into those kinds of things. Bob strongly believes that if there’s going to be the revival of the story culture in the world, it will be from the writers who wanted to look into the things that people didn’t want to look at. “Or we’re just going to recycle the same shit over and over again with the slight variation. And that’s what I say in my lectures that if the writers don’t take care of their art, in 2005 the cinema will not be more important to the world than ballet is today. And it is already happening and I think what we’re looking at today is a dying institution,” concluded Bob. “And I think it was the extravagance of spectacle and bullshit and the decorative films of Europe and the special effects films of America, these are all the symptoms of the dying art.”

Bob believes that the only way to revive it is to stop dealing with the text, and start dealing with the subtext and start telling stories that will push comically and tragically into areas that human beings have avoided for 2000 years. “I think it is the writer’s job to start thinking about things you don’t want to think about and the great writers do and the commercial don’t. Commercial writers write about things that people want to think about.
Great writers think about things that people don’t want to think about,” concludes the writer.
CHAPTER 5: THE SCREENWRITERS’ CREATIVE PROCESSES

The central focus of my study is an attempt to understand how the screenwriters think through the story creation process and what constitutes their creative approaches: what rituals they follow, what mental states they experience and techniques and methods they apply within those rituals, what challenges they face, and how they resolve these challenges. This chapter will explore the phases of the creative process: reaching the desired state in the story and character development; story transformation, and writers’ transformation. Specifically, the chapter will examine the nature of two creative approaches to writing screenplays, organic and analytical, and how by using these approaches the screenwriters reach the desired states in the story development; how the screenplays get transformed as a result of screenwriters achieving the desired state of the story development, and as a result of their work with the communities of practitioners; and how the screenwriters get transformed themselves as a result of their creative processes and the influence of the community of practitioners.

The Screenwriters’ Creative Approaches

As a result of my study, I have identified two creative approaches to writing a story: organic writing and analytical writing. While the creative destination of both approaches is ‘a beautiful story well told,’ how the writers reach their destination differ sometimes in fundamental ways.

When performing my observations, I’ve noticed that what united the writers using these two creative approaches was that they all tried to achieve the desired state of story development. The desired state of story development for the writers who used the organic creative approach was when the story took a life of its own, and the story characters dictated the story to the writers. The writers who used analytical creative approach to their story development didn’t believe in the concept of the story taking a life of its own. They, however, admitted that the desired state of the story development was when the story would start developing spontaneously which was due to all the work the writers did in advance based on the application of the analytical tools such as dialectical and psychological methods of story development.

In the next section of the chapter I discuss each approach beginning with organic.
**An Organic Way of Writing**

The writers who used an organic way of story creation depended on the natural emergence of the story, growing of the story in their minds. They compared the organic growth of the story to the growth of live organisms. When talking about the writer’s psyche working on the story, Steve Rivele said: “the psyche is not a beehive that consists of little rooms with people buzzing around in them. It is much more fluid than that, organic. *It is not like the skeleton on the building, it is more like the layers of tissue in a piece of fruit or in a human body.*” Then talking about the nature of the creative process, Steve Rivele said: “it is an organic process; it is not a mechanical process. It is closer to tissue than it is to legislation; it’s got to be a living thing. I’ve never seen a piece of literature as a mechanical structure; I’ve always seen it as a living organism.”

**Achieving the desired state in story development**

Achieving the desired state in the story development is a destination in every writer’s creative journey. Once it happens, the story unfolds itself in the writer’s mind and even if the work on the story still continues, it becomes much easier for the writer to create a story: if the writer has been struggling with the issues of the characters before he reached the desired state in the story development, these struggles get resolved, the questions get answered, the importance of the story themes and the characters may change, and the writer starts seeing the entire story clearly. The moment of achieving the desired state in the story development is the moment when the writer discovers the truth and the meaning of his or her story.

A story takes a life of its own

The desired state of story development for writers who use the organic creative approach is when the story takes a life of its own, which occurs when the writer *achieves a state of saturation* with the story and the characters. This is how Stephen Rivele describes this state: “You just reach a point of saturation with the story and the character when they begin to talk back to you in their own voices. And then they are leading you along the path of the screenplay rather than you trying to drag them behind you.”

Steve knows that when he reaches a point in the screenplay when the character is doing what he or she wants and when he can’t make them do something else, then he is
on to something real. “Because characters exist like real people in your mind and they dictate the story to you. When it doesn’t happen, you’re dead. And that’s why most screenplays are dead, because the studio executives are telling you what they want these characters to do. And I just had an argument with these people in Dream Works saying that you can’t just move these people around like cardboard clowns, you can’t tell them what they have to do. Now when I think about it, I’ve had that argument virtually in every meeting I had in the last couple of years. They think I am crazy because they don’t understand what literature is. So, they were saying for example: the character can’t do this? And I say, you don’t understand he doesn’t want to do this, I can’t force him to do something else. So, they can force me to force him to do something else, and the whole thing suffers,” laments the writer.

Rod Taylor admits: “Characters are not accretions of the decision-making process, they are full blown and organic entities. And they have a life, they have a way of feeling; they have a way of talking. I see them and I hear their voices in my head. Once you have an image of the character in your mind, he is going to tell you where he is going from there, you don’t tell him where to go,’ says Rod Taylor. ‘You don’t say, okay, Trevis Beekle character, now go here, go there. You basically edit what he does and what he says because he is alive.”

The writers adhering to the organic way of writing follow the principle of respecting the characters’ integrity and the writer’s relationship to them when they develop their stories and when the characters start acting like real people in the writers’ heads. Most of my study participants shared that trying to force the piece of narrative never works for them. Steve Rivele refers to the great Russian writer Tolstoy’s experience in creating his characters: “I remember that in Tolstoy’s notebook for ‘Resurrection’ Katyusha had to marry Nekhludov, he planned that, and you see him writing in his notebooks: ‘she won’t marry him, she refuses to marry him, I can’t get her to marry him – why won’t you marry him?!’” The writers reported that if they tried to change the course of events taken by the characters or force the characters into doing certain things, the creative flow shuts down and they cannot proceed in writing the story.

“You’d be a fool to force your characters into the framework that they are not comfortable with,” says Steve. “The only time it works in literature is when you you’re
using one of the strict poetic forms, like when you try to write in haiku, then you’re forced to put your thoughts into that form. When you’re dealing with dramatic literature because you’re dealing with the characters who want to have a life of their own, you can’t do it. You can do it with abstract thoughts, you could do it with metaphors, but you can’t do it with the characters.” According to Steve, there is that critical distinction between the character that tells the writer what he or she wants to happen and the writer dictating to the character what he wants to happen. “You become secondary to the character and the character becomes the principle driving force. So, the character does what he wants and you can’t force him to do anything other than what he wants. And that’s when it really gets exciting.”

Resonating with her colleagues Mylo admits that she never had the writer’s block: “It never happened in my life, because I’m not stopping my characters and telling them what to do. If you do that, the creative force, the process, can stop. Or we can get confused. So, the whole world that I created or channeled, takes a life of its own and I can’t do anything about it.”

Getting into the parallel world of the story

Another attribute of the story taking a life of its own is that the writers get into the parallel world of the story and live there, their role becomes the observers and the scribes of the characters’ actions. “I think that all stories, all poems and all music as parallel worlds,” says Rod Taylor. “I know it sounds wacky and crazy,” says Mylo. “But I transcend into this parallel universe where my characters are alive and real and they breathe. They dictate what happens next. The characters are the ones who tell the story, I don’t tell the characters what to do,” says Mylo. “I’m not the process master; if anything, I’m the puppet. I’m the puppet, and the story and the characters are the puppet master. I become a scribe; I just write down what happens.”

“It is like being invited to a court case,” gives Mylo an analogy: “If I was asked as a reporter to come to a court case and document everything that goes on in the court case, I would sit back as a reporter and say: “the prosecutor said this, and the witness got on the stand and said this.” And I would be documenting everything that happened in that courtroom. As a writer, after I channel my story and my world takes a life of its own, all I’m doing is I’m writing down what is happening in my world. I have no influence over
it. I don’t stop the process and say: “Oh, Mister prosecutor, I’m a reporter and can you
stand in the corner over there and can you say the following words to the witness?” And
it is when we, writers start jumping in and start telling the characters what to say, is when
we hit writer’s block,” explains Mylo.

**Connecting with the divine**
All the writers who followed the organic way of writing viewed their writing as
*calling*, believed that they were chosen by the divine spirit, by the higher force to be
artists. Writing as *calling* meant that writers had no choice but follow their calling
because that’s what the writers believe they came to this earth to do.

That’s how the writers defined their understanding of being called to be an artist.

“I went to McKee’s seminar and I was moved and not only by Robert McKee
himself and what he had to say, but I felt that this is my calling,” recalls the feeling Mylo
Carbia. “It was like a spiritual move, I just so understood that beneath of what Robert
McKee was saying, was that this is how we create a story, this is how we create the great
myths that must be told to our people. I would say, that *we’re the modern day
storytellers of our tribe*. And this is how I feel as a screenwriter.”

Rod Taylor when talking about the present Hollywood culture that in his opinion
views the screenwriting profession as an execution of the craft that can be done by
anyone who can learn the screenplay writing methodology, says: “*This is not really an
institute for all, this is for those ones who were selected – spiritually, biologically, or
whatever - to do this.*”

“I don’t think that you choose to be a creative person,” says Chris Wilkinson. ‘*I
think it chooses you*, where you’re compelled to make certain choices.”

“The fundamental concept here is what we do as writers, it is not a job, it is not an
occupation, it is a vocation. It is not an avocation, it is a vocation, *it is a calling*,” says
Steve Rivele. “It is like a calling to priesthood, it is a personal obligation that you as an
individual writer have to the truth. And it is the truth to which hundreds if not thousands
of your predecessors have sacrificed themselves. I consider it to be a sacred obligation.
You may fail and you may fail miserably, and you may make a fool of yourself, but that’s
what writing is that’s what living is.” Steve claims that writing is like living; it is not like
construction. “Being a writer is more like being a priest than it is like being an architect, where you can draw plans and you can show where stress is falling, you can show all the mathematical formula that can make it work and then somehow it all fit together and you can come up with something really pretty and really stately. But it is not going to be like a living document. You experiences the sense of humility that you stand before an unutterable truth and because you have a brain and a heart and a soul you have a responsibility to try and find some form in which to utter that truth to others, that’s’ what makes you a writer, or a painter or a dancer, or a musician.”

As the writers admitted writing as their calling and being chosen by the higher force, they talked about their belief of being connected with the divine. Some of them defined their connection with the divine as the connection with god, others described it as “external force,” or “tonic cord.” All the writers admitted that this connection with the divine served them as the guiding principle in their creative processes and that this connection and their calling were not accidental and had a mysterious nature. All writers saw their role as being conduits between themselves and the god or the external force that chose them to tell the stories.

Two of my study participants, Chris Wilkinson and Mylo Carbia described the connection with the divine as connection with the energy force, tonic cord.

“At a deeper root level I believe that creativity comes from connecting to whatever that force is, whether it is composed with consciousness or whatever that is and it is for me in this incarnation is absolutely mysterious, but I believe that the two are connected,” says Chris Wilkinson. “I think that when you feel like really being creative that you connect with that oneness, that unity, that tonic cord. “I tap into an energy force that is looking to me as a storyteller to help to learn life lessons,” says Mylo.

Rod Taylor and Steve Rivele talked about the divine connection as connection with god. “I think that all wisdom comes from god and all resides with god and the truth that the men are discovering scientifically is part of general revelation of god. We’re all discovering the truth that all emanates from that, in the divine being,” says the writer.

In the mysterious moments of his creative process when the truth is revealed to Rod, he feels that he has a connection with the divine. “I don’t think that it is necessary to have what you call religious experience, but I think that every human being is a totally
unique individual. *I don’t really think that there is such a thing as an accident.* And what we are and how we perceive the world is something that pre-existed our earthly life. The poem by the great poet William Wordsworth – The ‘Ode Upon Intimation of Immortality’ and it goes like: “the star that rises with us, the life star, have had elsewhere its setting and coming from the far, not in other nakedness, not in the entire forgetfulness, they come, come from god who is our home.” Rod believes that we’re made in the image of god in our consciousness, in our souls and in our spirit.

Steve Rivele believes that it is possible for individual human souls to achieve a close relationship with the divine. And when somebody does that, he or she cannot help but talk about it, “That’s what inspiration is: *when you become possessed by that spirit and it moves you to speak about itself.*” One of the questions that interest Steve endlessly is the expression throughout the history of Western Art of that kind of communication with the divine that certain people have achieved. Beethoven and Tolstoy were two great artists who in Steve’s opinion achieved it and who the writer worships.

Steve Rivele describes the creative process as “breathing in and out of the *spirit*”. “It is an undeniable need or impulse to talk to other people about the truths that we perceive and to find the language in which to do that, whether it is music, ballet or painting or sculpture, whatever. *It is the process of inspiration and expiration to put it in the traditional terms. Inspiration means I bring in into oneself of the spirit, and the expiration means the breathing out of the spirit.* So, it is the breathing process, we breathe in the spirit and we breathe it out in the form that other people can experience. *In this way we’re very much in the mystical tradition. We’re breathing as an essential form of focusing and experiencing the religious truth.*” Steve then referred to the Folokoles, which is the great source book of spiritual reality for the Russian Orthodox church. The writer told me that it is not a coincidence that the whole first part of that book is about breathing exercises. “Because breathing by nature is spirit. I mean the spirit is breath and the breathing is the inspiration, the taking in some form of truth. *Breathing out is exhalation; it is the sharing of that truth filtered through our creative consciousness with others.* That’s the process that we’re in.”

When I asked Steve which process was easier: breathing in or breathing out, he said that they are both extremely difficult: “*Breathing in ultimately is not your choice,*
you have to be chosen and I think Beethoven felt clearly that he was chosen to his chagrin because he suffered so much. You can’t control the breathing in because you have to be chosen by the source of the truth that is expressing itself. The breathing out is difficult because you have to find the mobile language and it is a very hard work. I suppose of the two it is easier to breathe out because you’re in control.” “To be chosen by the source of the truth that is expressing itself” is the phrase that shows the artist’s compelling need to start on a journey to find the meaning of the story and to find a way to express the truth through the stories the writer creates. “You see something clearly, you finally understand something of real importance, you have to find a way to communicate it if you’re an artist of any kind. In art ultimately that’s what the artists do,” says the writer.

Searching the connection with the divine is the foundation of the organic writers’ creative processes.

The screenwriters’ rituals

The desired state of the story development for the organic group of writers is attained through establishing a connection with the divine spirit and achieving a state of saturation with the story and the characters. The screenwriters used the rituals in order to do it. For the writers who are using the organic way of writing the rituals served two goals: first, they helped the writers in establishing existential visceral connection with the divine spirit, and second, they helped the writers to expand their stories once the connection with the divine is made. It is important to note that there is no pre-determined sequence between establishing the connection with the divine and following the rituals. Sometimes the writers may follow the rituals before they establish the existential visceral connection with the divine and the rituals facilitate them in establishing that connection, and sometimes the connection with the divine spirit is already there, it overflows the writer’s being, and the characters start talking in the writers’ head right away telling the writer the story, and then the writers apply the rituals to expand and explore the story further.

All of my study participants shared that they followed some established creative rituals when writing their stories. The common steps in the rituals were: originating the
story, identifying the story essence, developing the story characters and the story structure, and ending the story.

### Originating the story

The first step in the writer’s creative process is to come up with the story idea. The writers shared that they used various ways and methods to originate their stories: sometimes they chose to write a story because it provided the answers to a set of existential questions the writers had, sometimes stories represented the writers’ life long dreams, something that they always wanted to write because the subject of the story was of an extreme importance to the writers. At other times, the writers got hired by the studios to write a screenplay, in this case all of my study participants shared that they only took the projects that interested them. Sometimes the story idea came to the writer’s mind involuntarily as an image or as an entire story.

### Identifying the story essence

All writers who followed an organic way of writing tried to define *the essence of the story* as the initial step of the creative process. In other words, they identified the story’s essential idea in a phrase or a sentence which would express what it is that they are trying to say through the story material, an idea that would represent the writers’ interests to the story and its importance to them. In “Kleopatra” the story essential idea was to show Kleopatra’s life journey from a girl to an empress to a goddess and the central focus of the story was on her motherhood. In “The Statute of Limitations” it was the idea that revenge does not have an expiration date.

### Developing the story characters

Characters are one of the main driving forces in the screenplays. The writers’ challenge is to create unforgettable multidimensional characters. Some of the strategies for character development were discussed in chapter 4, such as showing the characters’ transformation, putting the character under extreme circumstances, etc. The strategy that all writers use is portraying the characters’ conflicts, their dilemmas. Eventually the characters have to solve their contradictions, and it usually happens in the end of the story when the characters make final choices.
Developing the story structure

The structure of the story is represented by the story events and the point of view from which the story is told. Selecting the story events is one of the most important decisions the writers have to make on the project. For the writers who write historical epics, the story events help to show the character’s essence. For the writers who write thrillers the story events are of central importance because they represent action that will take the story characters to the most unexpected places.

Steve Rivele, who writes historical epics, says that selecting the story events is a primary creative decision that they make on all their projects. In order to reduce the story to a manageable proportion and find the dramatic through line that would get the writers from beginning to an end, they have to make a careful selection of events and personalities. “And it is unfortunate, but we have to leave out a large number of interesting ideas and events in order to keep the story in manageable form and to keep the story focused on the main character,” explains the writer. “The choice of the story events is always made based on the same criteria: which event would most effectively elucidate the character? Which events are the most telling in terms of their helping to complete the portrait of the character? If there is any event that doesn’t matter how interesting or compelling it might be that does not serve that purpose, it has to be sacrificed,” explains Steve.

The story events can be arranged into the story in two fundamental ways: linear fashion and non-linear fashion. In a linear fashion the story events happen chronologically from the beginning to an end with possible flashbacks and subplots. In a non-linear fashion the writers have to deconstruct the story into several layers because it is too vast, and move around in time in order to show the main character in the most effective dramatic way and create a dynamic portrait of a character. Steve and Chris admitted that they almost always use the non-linear fashion because their stories represent historical figures and cover long periods of time, like in “Kleopatra” it was impossible to tell her story chronologically because it is so vast. Therefore, the writers had to create three layers of the story time, one of which was the present time event in her life; the other layer was flashbacks to her past, and the third layer was the flashbacks
within the flashbacks. “Copying Beethoven” is an exception when the writers told his story in a linear fashion because it only covers a one-year period from his life. According to Steve and Chris’s approach, chronological approach is the worst way to tell the story because since all the facts are known, the story has no drama, it can’t move anywhere except straight forward.

What is primary: the creation of the character or the story structure?

As I was examining the organic writers’ creative processes, I inquired what the writers considered to be primary in their creative processes and what he thought was secondary: the creation of the story structure or the story characters, that represents the story substance that filled in the structure. All the writers responded that the creation of the story character was primary and the story structure depended on it. The writers could not determine the story structure before they reached the desired state of the story development and the characters of the story would start dictating the story events to the writer.

Steve Rivele said that the relationship of story structure to its creative substance is mechanical to organic and organic is always primary because the writer is trying to create a living work. For Steve the creative exploration of the character in the story is primary, and the creation of the structure is dependent on it:

If your exploration of the character and your understanding of the characters dictate the change of structure, of course you do that, you’d be a fool not to. You’d be a fool to force your characters into the framework that they are not comfortable with. The only time it works in literature is when you’re using one of the strict poetic forms, like when you try to write in haiku, then you’re forced to put your thoughts into that form. When you’re dealing with dramatic literature because you’re dealing with the characters who want to have a life of their own, you can’t do it. You can do it with abstract thoughts, you could do it with metaphors, but you can’t do it with the characters. Characters are always primary, and form has to adjust to it.”

Steve then refers to research where the scientists are taking living brain tissue and grafting it into computers. “We’re doing the opposite, in some cases, we will graft a loose structure onto what has to be essentially an organic experience. So, we do the opposite, as
if we took the little pieces of computer and grafting them onto the human brain just because we had to make certain lights light up at certain times.”

In Steve’s opinion, it is critical for the creative process to remain organic to respect the deep and the natural internal organic unity and logic of a story. “If you try to graft a heavy rigid structure on a top of it, you’re going to kill it,” says the writer, referring to the method of imposing the structure as mechanical. “The difference between the organic and mechanical writing is a difference between art and architecture, it is a difference between enlightenment and design,” says Steve.

As a rule in the creative process for Steven and Chris the meaning of the story, and the nature of the characters always precede the structure. “If you graft the meaning of the story, and we always do it, we always have to announce the meaning of the story in very simple terms what we’re trying to say through this material, what we’re trying to accomplish by writing this material,” says the writer. “That’s the meaning. And then the second thing is the truth of the characters. Who these people really are and not what has been said about them throughout history, what they want to say in present time to us, their relevance to us.”

These two aspects of story telling, the meaning and the truth, according to Steve Rivele, always precede the story structure, and if the writer understands them clearly and correctly, they will dictate the structure. In Steven’s writing practice, the structure follows the meaning, the form is always subservient to the truth of what the writers are trying to say. “Once you graft the truth of the material, the structure elucidates itself. It has to because truth has an internal logic and truth has an irresistible momentum to carry through.”

For Rod Taylor the story structure is dependent on what the story characters do. Rod believes that the creative process is about placing characters in situations and seeing how it evolves into the story structure. The writer notes that most screenwriting courses emphasize the story structure. But in Rod’s mind structure by definition is the writer making decisions about what is going to happen in the world. “That’s not what life is. I’m not saying that story is exactly the imitation of life, but there should be a kind of a harmonious recognition of the way life unfolds. The viewer, the reader has to experience
it as authentic. If you have a character, and you’re in a circumstance, you don’t know what is going to happen,” says the writer.

The organic writers do not believe in figuring out the story structure in advance in the form of the story outline, it is an impossible task for them because they believe that the character who comes to life when they achieve the state of story saturation will dictate the course of events. Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson shared that their choice is not to write outlines in advance. Instead Steven and Chris try to get into an organic natural progression of scenes. And they let the characters grow in a natural way. And the further they get into it, the easier it becomes, the more substantial the characters become, the more able they are to dictate what is going to happen.

Steven explains that another reason the writers do not write story outlines is because the fundamental issues in the screenplay are ideas and questions that are of importance to them that they think will be of importance to the audience. That’s the organic tissue that binds the story together. If the writers would have to create an outline, it would encompass the entire film and they would be in danger of stifling or suffocating those questions. “So, we want those questions to drive the story and allow the story to develop,” says Steve. “And again, I’ve never seen a piece of literature as a mechanical structure, I’ve always seen it as a living organism. So, if you knew what is going to happen to you in the next 15-20 years of your life and you knew how exactly you’re going to die, you would probably be incapable of making any decisions. Dostoevsky said that the man of total consciousness is helpless. It is the uncertainty and the opportunity for the spontaneous organic growth and learning that enables us to keep the story going forward. For me, an outline is a prison, you can’t create an organic life inside of a prison,” claims the writer.

Rod’s inspired, intuitive approach to writing his screenplays where he gets inside the story and wonders, watching the story unfold and the characters make their choices also rejects writing a story outline in advance. “I think the process of outlining a story is a way of impoverishing a movie because nothing unexpected can happen in it, nothing inspired. It is all going to happen because of the rational decision-making process. And as such it will never ever be great, it won’t fly, it will be an imitation of real drama,” explains the writer his view on outlining. “And take great plays like Shakespeare, it is
not written like it is all figured out, it has the moments of seeming digression, which are in fact not digressions because they become the point of the play. So, this is one way in which I adamantly refuse to kind of be co-opted by the process that has been apotheosized a decade or two. They want for everyone to go to a film school including the executives, and these are good rules. Well, it is a good way to train the employees, and it is not the way you make artists.”

Rod shared with me his frustration about trying to explain the anti-creative nature of outlining the story to the studio executives when they hire the writer to do the development deals, but they won’t pay attention: “You just don’t know where the story wants to go. And the characters are going to tell you when you are going to put them in the room. Why force them? Why coerce them? You might already know the story and where it is going to go and where it is going to end. You just don’t know how you are going to get there.”

Ending the Story

Some writers shared that they have a ritual for ending their stories. Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson call it “enschmerts.” “We feel that we’re getting close to the end and we become anxious because we are unsure how to end the piece.” It is the neologism that the writing partners invented, the German word for ‘fear’. It is a phenomenon that they encounter on the scripts that they work very hard and in which they ‘re deeply involved. That’s how Steve described it:

On the one hand, we become more and more anxious as we get closer to the end that we’ll be able to solve the material and resolve it in the satisfying way. On the other hand, it’s a postpartum depression phenomenon. You were so deeply involved with the material and devoted so much time and attention to it, you don’t want it to end. And frankly, when we finish a big and original screenplay, we go through a period of let down after we’re finished with it because it is like giving birth, it’s a melt down, it’s on its own. It has its own life and we can’t control it any more. So, it’s those two phenomena.

For other writers the end of the screenplay comes unexpectedly, like it does for Rod Taylor. “I find that the end of the story happens much faster than you expect. You’re sitting there and thinking: I have all of these things to do, and it will take a few more days to do, and suddenly it ends because all of those thoughts that you have that seem to
spread themselves out suddenly converge, and in one or two scenes the essence of
everything that they are is suddenly there, and it brings to conclusion the story. And once
the story is over, once you realize, well that it is. The story is over. A lot of things that
you wanted to say, you can’t say any more because the story is over. The way I write the
music and everything else, it sort of lives inside you and becomes an obsession, and it
reaches a certain place and it ends. I always thought, okay, it is Monday, and now I think
that by Friday I will finish the screenplay. But in fact you finish it by Tuesday or
Wednesday. But the moment you have that perception, you’re actually perfectly believe
in what you think. It is one of those little illusions, hallucinations that we have. You think
‘I’m going to die pretty soon’ and you die. You think that it is going to be tomorrow, but
in fact, it is today.”

Solving the story’s problems: the story transformation

As the screenwriters go through the creative process, they have a number of problems
that they need to solve in order for the story to flow. The existing story problems often
represent the dead ends that leave important questions unanswered. Often the writers
cannot proceed in writing the story if the story problems are not resolved or they work
mechanically, feeling out the story’s path as they go. Achieving the state of saturation
with the story and the characters helps the writers solve these problems.

The screenwriters are a part of the community of practitioners they work with. Often
as a part of the creative process they take input from the community of practitioners, film
producers and studio executives before they start writing a screenplay. The screenwriters
also submit screenplays for the studio executives’ review when they finish writing them.
Sometimes the community of practitioners is represented by family and friends,
especially when the writers create unsolicited by the studios screenplays, or what they
call the stories they write on spec. The writers reported that they change their
screenplays based on the feedback from the community of practitioners.

The writers’ transformation

The screenwriters transform themselves in the course of their own creative
endeavors. An on-going transformation as a result of acquisition of knowledge and skills
when writing their own stories is the phenomenon all my study participants experience.
Writing screenplays is a journey that the screenwriters take often not knowing what will happen in the end of it, what shape the story will take, what the characters will do, how the story will climax, and how the climax will be resolved. However, what the writers know for sure is that as a result of their journey they will learn new things. All my study participants shared that learning new things from writing their own stories change and transform them. However, every one of them emphasized different aspects of learning that were more important for them than others. The writers who followed the organic approach reported transformation at three levels: at the level of skills, at the level of insight, and at the level of acquisition of self-knowledge. The writers who followed the analytical way of writing talked about the transformation at the level of acquisition of self-knowledge.

**Organic Writers’ Stories**

Writing a screenplay is a unique creative endeavor. My study participants shared that how they implemented the elements of their creative approaches, the rituals in their stories differed from writer to writer. Even the same writer could implement the elements of the creative approach to a certain degree differently in each story he or she writes. Sometimes achieving the desired state of the story development and finding the divine connection would happen immediately to the writer, the minute he or she sits down to write a screenplay, like it happened to Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson when they were working on “Copying Beethoven”. At other times, it can happen to the same writers gradually, and it takes time and effort to start hearing the character’s voice telling the story, as was the case with Steve and Chris in “Kleopatra”. Sometimes the writer receives a story in a matter of an hour in one piece through the found connection with the external force that chooses the writer to be a medium for the story to be told, as it happened to Mylo Carbia with “The Statute of Limitations”. In the following sections of this chapter I’d like to illustrate how the organic writers applied the elements of their creative approaches to creating screenplays.
**Writing “Copying Beethoven”**

Story origination

Steven Rivele and Chris Wilkinson write in the genre of historical epics. Steve shared that one of the reasons he enjoys historical film so much is because it forces him to create a consciousness and project it into the past and to see that period through the eyes of the consciousness the write has created. That’s is the most satisfying writing for Steve and he believes that is the only way he can write: “That’s why we often hear the idea express that history gives you the facts, but fiction gives you the truth.” There are two other reasons the writing partners enjoy writing historical drama. First of all, they find history fascinating and secondly, because history provides a structure for their work meaning that the writers have to follow the given structure of the history, and they are not free to invent things. History provides them with an already made structure through which they have to move.

Creating a story about the great composer was Steve Rivele’s life long dream. Steve has lived with Beethoven since he was 13 years old so he’s always been a presence in the writer’s life. Steve shared that he fell in love with the music of Beethoven the first time he heard it. Steve explains why he admires the music of the great composer: “From the very first time I heard Beethoven, I knew I had a soul because that was the only part of me that could have received and could have related to what it was that I was hearing. It was his soul speaking directly to my soul. And that’s why I love his music. In the story Beethoven says: I’m not an architect, I don’t connect points in land, I’m an artist, I build bridges between souls. The minute I’ve heard his music the bridge between my soul and his opened up and it has been there for me.”

The question that interested the writers in “Copying Beethoven”

Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson only write the stories that contain the existential question to which the writers want to find an answer. Steve’s hero, the Russian classic writer Lev Tolstoy, said that all art ultimately asks questions that are characteristically religious and that’s true, in Steve’s opinion. Most of the issues that interest the writer are characteristically religious issues. They ask some form of a question about a soul of a man that he wants to answer. “That’s why I pick a project and that’s why I start a
project,” explains the writer. What interested Steve about Beethoven was the degree of spiritual insight the composer had achieved in the end of his life. So, when the writers started the creative process, the question that really interested them in the story was: how was it possible for a man to sustain that level of spiritual insight for that length of time? Steve defined spiritual insight as an understanding of life in its deepest and purest level. “I don’t think it has anything to do with religion as such. I think it has to do with the realization of the potential of the human soul in an individual,” explains the writer. And this is what the script was about. The degree of the spiritual insight that the great composer has achieved was in the center of Steve’s exploration in the story:

It was so elevated and so intense that he had to create a new language just to be able to talk about it. And that language was the language of the late String Quartets. It is in my mind the purest example of spirituality that was ever achieved in civilization. And we’re talking about a man who was spending time in that realm of spirituality that people ever achieved and trying to talk to us about what he was experiencing and creating a whole new language in which to do that, and that is of intense interest to me. Not only what it was that he was seeing, but what he was saying about it and what it means to us, his listeners.

Achieving the desired state of the story development

Steve shares that writing “Copying Beethoven” was an ideal writing experience for him, it was organic from the very beginning, he immediately found a spiritual connection with the great composer’s psyche, instantly achieving the state of saturation with the story. The reason it happened to the writer immediately was because his mind was invaded with the great composer’s music, he has lived with Beethoven since he was 13 years old so he’s always been a presence in the writer’s life. “I mean there are certain characters who have been as real to me if not more real than people that I lived with. Beethoven is as real to me as anybody who I’ve ever known, so is Tolstoy so is Hamlet. I mean I have a brother who I haven’t spoken in years, Beethoven and Tolstoy have contributed more to me than he ever did, so they are more real to me than he ever was. So, I’ve always lived with these fictional characters and these writers always had real presences in my life.”

Although Steven lived with Beethoven’s music since he was 13 years old, the writer never had to approach the great composer as a dramatic character. He never had to put words in his mouth until they started writing “Copying Beethoven”. “But by that
time, he was so completely part of my consciousness, I was if you will, so completely immersed into him, that the minute we opened the word document on a computer, it just poured out of me. So, it has always been latent in me. Tolstoy used to always talk about God-the-companion, for me, it was Beethoven – the companion. I lived with him my whole life. And when the time came to write about him, I couldn’t stop the flow of words and ideas. So, it was probably the single the most joyful experience I’ve ever had writing.”

Steve and Chris have talked and planned to write a story about Beethoven for eight years, and when they got to it, they wrote the story in about four weeks and the screenplay came out as an organic whole. “I don’t want to screw around with it; it has its own life, which ideally a screenplay or a novel should have. And even if it’s flawed, I think the flaw is a part of the story.” Steve says that when writing “Copying Beethoven,” he couldn’t wait to get in the office in the morning to get to that screenplay: “it just flowed; there was no question about what the next scene would be. The character was completely clear in my mind, and he couldn’t wait to tell his story. And also he had important and beautiful things to say, and he was talking about the things that were dear to my heart. And this is an opportunity to bring this character to life and bring him before the audience; it was just a joy.”

Finding a way to tell a story

Steve explains that once they have decided what kind of a question they want to find an answer to, they have to find some way to externalize the drama: “you have to find a form of a story structure, that’s what we call finding the way in, you have to find a way in into the story. With Beethoven that was the case and it is true with every story we write: we have to find some way in to telling the story. That means creating a relationship either between a main character and another character, or between a main character and his environment.”

The problem Steve and Chris had with “Copying Beethoven” project is that the writers were interested in telling a story about the end of the composer’s life and at that point he was very deaf and couldn’t communicate with anybody. The challenge was: how do you tell that story? How to you externalize the internal drama? And the writers came across a fact that at the time in Vienna nobody could read Beethoven’s handwriting
because it was so bad. And his publisher sent to the Academy of Music of Vienna for the brightest students they had, and he was going to teach this kid to read Beethoven’s handwriting. “And they sent to him two young men, and we realized, suppose it was a woman, a young woman, and then we had a way to tell the story. So, in Beethoven it was a young girl who was falling in love with a man who was becoming God. But usually we have to be able to reduce our dramatic device to one sentence and then we can focus the story.”

Ana was a good choice to reveal the character of Beethoven because first of all, by making her a young woman, the writers made her more sympathetic to the audience. By making her someone who comes into Beethoven’s life from outside of his life, she provided a point of entry into his life. The writers wanted to create a sympathetic character, but someone who could meet Beethoven on her own terms, that’s why they made Ana a composer. And also someone who worshiped Beethoven, and then had to come to grips with the reality of who he was. “It enabled us to get a love story into it,” explains the writer, “Beethoven had very strange relationships with women, and that was another reason we chose a woman. His relationships with women are very famous and very notorious. He was never married, he never had a long-term relationship with any woman and clearly he was desperate for a human companion. “And that’s why he attached himself so fanatically to his nephew, because he needed another human being in his life. For some reason, he was not able to find a woman. He lived an intense internal life that was difficult to share with anybody. And he was probably extremely shy around women,” says Steve.

Developing story characters

When writing “Copying Beethoven”, Steve and Chris had to show the great composer’s contradictions, his conflicts and how these conflicts find a resolution. The primary contradiction or conflict of Beethoven is the composer’s dynamic nature. This was the man who sustained a very high level of spiritual consciousness for very long periods of time and then when he withdrew from that, he withdrew into the gutter. And that’s the Beethoven the writers portrayed in several places in the screenplay.
Steven explained that Beethoven’s conflict was both external and internal at the same time. His primary conflict was with God. That’s why the writers had a speech in which he says that he and God are like two bears in one den. Then Steven referred to Gorky who said in reminiscence of Tolstoy, that his relationships with God were very strange, sometimes they reminded him of ten bears in one den. “I just gave that line to Beethoven when he talks about his relationship with God. His relationship was external because for him God was the other, and internal because God was the spirit that was inspiring him. So, his conflict is unique: it is neither external nor internal, but is it both external and internal.”

In order to show the nature of Beethoven’s main conflict, his relationship with God, and his transfiguration in becoming a God, the writers had to create an image of the great composer in the scene in the chapel that would symbolically show Beethoven’s apotheosis. In the scene, Mother Superior was talking to him and Beethoven had his back turned and couldn’t hear her. And then he turned and he saw her and he said: “I’m Ludwig Van Beethoven”. The way the writers decided to frame the shot is that Beethoven was staying in front of the stained glass window, which portrays God the Creator. “So, in fact, he is taking the place of God to create at that point and you could see the rays of creative God coming through his head.”

The writers had to show a number of conflicts Beethoven had with people in his life in the story in order to create a multifaceted portrait of the composer, and to show different sides of his character. One of the main conflicts of the story is the composer’s relationship with Ana. The climax of the story about Beethoven is the washing of the feet scene, where Beethoven challenges Ana to acknowledge that he has become God and she responds in a completely inappropriate way at that point. Ana perceives Beethoven as her mentor but in washing of the feet scene she starts thinking of him as potential lover. So, in one of the scenes she offers herself in almost religious way to him, and he rejects her almost out of hand. Beethoven was a very unattractive old man who would like to be in love with Ana, but his moves were so far beyond that that he couldn’t. In one of the romantic scenes with Ana, Beethoven said, “Do you think I was going to come down from a cross for you?”
The resolution of the story is Ana freeing herself from Beethoven, “that’s the whole point of the story is for her to free herself from him, to get out from his shadow and become her own composer, a musician. And that’s in effect what she does, when she has that encounter with him when he dies. He finally says to her that he is proud of her because she gotten out from under him, she became herself. And that’s probably what he wanted from her all along anyway. She frees herself from Beethoven, she becomes her own person because even if he lived, she would have probably done that. But it is acknowledgment that she has done it and expression of his pride of her is the point of that last scene,” explains Steve.

Organic development of the character

Steve shared that in one of the scenes about Beethoven they tried to force the great composer into what for him was an unnatural expression of his will. It is a well-known fact that Beethoven tried to make his nephew Carl, who had no gift and no interest in music, play the piano. He was trying to smother his nephew and his nephew tried to kill himself. So, the writers got to the scene where Beethoven’s music copyist, Ana and Beethoven were discussing whether or not Beethoven was going to force his nephew to do a piano recital. And the first time the writers wrote it, Ana convinced him not to. Steve and Chris tried to write that scene but they got stuck in the script and couldn’t go forward with the story. Steven shared this interesting episode that slowed down their creative process:

And we couldn’t get much further than that because there was something fundamentally wrong with that decision, the decision we felt he should make, but it wasn’t a decision that Beethoven would have made. We went back and completely reconceived the scene. And by the end of the scene it was clear that he was saying that Carl is going to do this. And that’s where that speech came from where he says ‘if we’re not artists, we are nothing, if we’re not musicians, we are nothing, and since I don’t want my nephew to be nothing, then he is going to be a musician, whether he wants it or not.’

And it wasn’t until the writers got confident with Beethoven’s wishes that they could continue with the story. Steve said that it had happened because the writers had developed enough specific gravity in a character that he forced them to reconsider the
scene and do it the way the great composer would have done which was an indication
that the character of Beethoven was developing organically.

Solving the story problems - the story transformation

The writers created two drafts of “Copying Beethoven”. This film the writers
were planning to produce independently, find the money to finance it and then find a film
director and actors. Presently the film is in production with the film director Agniezhka
Holland, Ed Harris in the role of Beethoven and Diane Krueger in the role of Ana. The
writers shared that because the film was written for their own production, it didn’t have a
lot of changes when the writers gave it for review to their family, friends and the
independent film producers. The first change that they had to make is that the girl’s
name was originally Ana Halt. And her initials in the original manuscripts were AH. And
a producer who was raising money for this picture said that AH has a specific meaning
for the Austrians and Germans: Adolf Hitler. And so the writers changed her name to
Ana Freis.

Originally the film was ending with the music composed by Ana. The producer
Michael Taylor pointed out that the last music the audience should hear in the film should
be Beethoven’s music and not her music, so the writers changed that.

The other changes the writers were going to make is that we were going to give
Ana two other scenes to resolve her character. The note that Steve and Chris got
consistently is that she is not really resolved, she is not a fully formed character. Almost
all the women who read the script, shared Steven, said that the writers didn’t resolve her
relationship with Martin. They didn’t know what happened to her relationship with her
father. So, the writers were going to make another scene with her and Martin and they
added a scene between her and her father when she goes home to see her father to give
the story and the character a full resolution.

Moving towards independent production

Steve and Chris had planned to have “Copying Beethoven” independently
produced. The writers shared that it is different for them when they try to write for
themselves. They feel free to do anything they want. “We don’t care who sees, it and we
don’t care what they think about it because we’re not being paid to write it when we write on spec. So with Beethoven, we wrote all those long speeches for Beethoven and we talked a lot about his religious sensibilities and his relationship with God. We would never do it with a studio film because they’d tell us either start all over again or you’re fired.”

Steve is convinced that the independent culture is much more trusting of writers. It is much more common in the independent film for the writers to be in control of their work. That’s why the writers were going into independent business. “Probably the next script we’re going to write after Kleopatra is going to be an independent film. It is just too frustrating to keep charting out these dramas that have meanings to us of which we would feel proud, which we feel have real integrity and have the studio system tear them apart and make them pointless. We usually reach a point when we’re writing a screenplay where we just love the material, we’re totally bound up in the material, and in the end of the process invariably we hate the material. “The Death of Conrad Shepherd” is the case in point, we just finished it half an hour ago,” explained Steven their motivation to move into independent side of the business.

In Steven’s opinion in the independent business there is more freedom because the amount of money involved is usually much lower. “When the amount being risked increases, your artistic freedom decreases in direct proportion. So, the more money there is at risk, the more you have people telling you to do things that are conventional, and that are not risky. And to do things that will appeal to the widest mass audience.” Because independent films generally speaking are done on a much lower budget, for a much smaller audience, the writers are allowed much more freedom. “Because of the budget restrictions, there is not much time for them to fool around with the script. You don’t have months and months and months of development, because you just don’t have enough money to pay the people. So, that’s why we’re moving more into independent film. I mean, we’ll keep doing the big studio pictures because it paid our salary, but we are really at the point when we are fed up with the process and we want a change.”
The writer’s transformation

Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson constantly develop their screenwriter’s skills and knowledge while writing their stories. Steve shared that he writes because he wants to learn things. For him writing to learn is not the end result, it is the motivation. “Every time I write something, I feel that I can learn something in the process. That’s why I always start with certain questions that I want to be answered. The maxim is that you should only write about what you know, to which I respond that if you write only about what you know, how are you going to learn anything? I tend to write about things that I don’t know much about because then I’m forced to do research and I’m forced to think about them and I’m forced to live them,” says the writer.

Steve shared that when writing he learns on the level of skills and on the level of insight. “On the level of skill you learn something from every screenplay you write and you become better as you go along. I mean, we are much better at doing this than we were when we started eleven years ago,” admits the writer. There used to be certain things that the writers had to experiment with to discover that they didn’t work and the writers stopped doing that. “So, we work more efficiently now,” says Steven. “One of the things that we always do now which we didn’t necessary do at the beginning is to make sure that the main character is the focus of the film. We had this terrible tendency to focus on second and third level characters, we slowly walked away from that.”

“I hope we learn from every one of the screenplays we write, I know I do,” says Steve. “My thinking changes, my interests change, my sense of value changes, and as that happens it begins reflect itself in the work.”

Lessons learned from “Copying Beethoven”

*Learning at the level of skills*

Copying Beethoven’ is a story that crosses several genres. “It is a sort of an *adventure story* for the girl who goes into the cave with this beast; it is a sort of archetypal adventure story, an initiation story. It is also a weird romantic comedy, it’s also biography, it is also a musical film.” On the level of skills, Steven and Chris were able to *create a piece that crosses several genres* and the reason the writers were able to unite all those genres is because of the compelling central character of Beethoven and his compelling relationship with Ana, his copyist.
Learning at the level of insight

At the level of insight, it was an opportunity for the writers to spend a few months totally absorbed in the character of Beethoven and his music, and in his spiritual vision. “And that changes you and I came to a much more profound understanding of who I think he was. And I got a chance to spend a lot of time with the late works at this point of my life and that just reinforced their importance for me,” contemplates Steve.

Acquiring self-knowledge

The issues of God are of extreme importance to Steven. Writing helps him to get to the essence of the issue. It is through writing that Steven’s understanding of God evolves into something that he can finally accept as truth. Every writing experience for Steve brings him closer to that truth he has been searching for all his life. The primary thing that Steve personally got from writing the story about Beethoven besides an intimate, almost a visceral experience of Beethoven, was his sense of proximity to God. “And it really started me thinking, for the first time in about 25 – 30 years of comfortably using the word God. I don’t feel like apologizing for it or modifying it. Beethoven felt the intimate living presence of God in his life. In fact, there is a chapter in one of the biographies, called “God the Companion”. It is interesting because I think I mentioned it to you earlier, Gorky said that Tolstoy considered God to be an equal. Beethoven considered God to be a companion. And what I learned form it and it really changed my way of thinking and talking is the idea that since Beethoven could see and one can see the effects of God in life, it is probably legitimate to talk about God, even though you can’t see him, or hear him, or experience him. Even if there is no such thing, it is still useful to talk about it as if it existed. So, that’s one of the ways that changed me,” says the writer.

Writing “Kleopatra”

Story origination

“Kleopatra” was a screenplay that the writers were hired to create for Warner Brothers studio in Hollywood. During my trip to Hollywood I met with the film producer Adam Shroader who purchased the rights to Karen Essex’s novel “Kleopatra’ which Steve and Chris were supposed to adapt. When I asked Adam why he hired Steve and
Chris out of many writers, he said that when the writers came to talk about the story, they had a very strong position, a very strong point of view which distinguished them from other writers.

When I asked Steve to explain what their position was, he said: “our position from the very beginning was that she was the story, and not the history and not the spectacle. And unless you got to the heart of her and figured out what has made her icon in Western history and made her name a part of our language, there is no point in doing this story because nobody has ever gotten to that. I may even have referred to what Hamlet once said, ‘would you pluck out the heart of my mystery’. That was the goal from the very beginning was to get to the heart of her mystery. Everybody has an image of her, everybody knows who she was, people use her name, but nobody really knows who she was. What was important to her, why this one woman, apart from all other women in history became a part of our consciousness and never got forgotten? Most people have no idea who Octavian was, very few people who Mark Anthony was. Most of the people cant tell you much about Julius Caesar. But most people think that they know much about Kleopatra. Why? That’s what we were trying to get at.”

Finding a story question

In “Kleopatra”, one of the first questions the writers asked was ‘who was Kleopatra?’ When the project was offered to Steve and Chris, they realized how little they knew about Kleopatra. The writers then asked themselves ‘what do we really know about her?’ Steve and Chris did some preliminary reading to find out who this woman was. And the more they read, the more they realized that they had a very little idea about who Kleopatra was, the woman who became an icon of Western civilization. So, the next question the writers asked was: “How did this woman become an icon in our civilization?” And that lead the writers into a further and further reading:

The fact of the matter is that she was the most beautiful, most intelligent and the wealthiest woman of her time and no one ever succeeded in telling her story successfully on film. And so, that’s another question: why? What is it about the story that hasn’t been made to work? And so, you see it is a series of questions: who was she, why did she become an icon, why has her story never succeeded on film? With each question, we got deeper and deeper into the material.
The writers then begin the process of research because most of the subjects of their stories are historically based or factually based. They usually spend two or three months conducting research. And the whole time they’re conducting research, they’re discussing it between themselves and trying to develop an idea. Steve calls it “the process of reduction”, where the writing partners define the essence of the idea, and then ‘an expansion’ when they begin to develop it into a story that they can tell, that will contain the essential point of interest to them or that will enable to answer the questions that the material contains that interest the writers.

Research on “Kleopatra” started for the writers with a novel that they were ‘theoretically adapting.’ “Although,” said Steve Rivele, “we are not really using the book”. There was a two volume biographical book about Kleopatra written by Karen Essex, which the studio bought. The writers read it and although they admired the research and the sheer amount of writing that Karen Essex had done, they came away from that still wondering: “what’s the story? How do we tell the story? The book is so vast and her life is so large, you’re still left with the problem – how do you tell the story in a coherent way and the way that could be done in two hours?” So, the writers then started reading other books about Kleopatra trying to get a coherent understanding of her character, her times, why she has endured in history as an iconic figure. “And we saw her life as a progression: from girl to woman, to Queen, to Empress, to Mother, to Goddess. And that’s the progression what we wanted to use as the fundamental structure for the story.”

Starting to write a story

After Steve and Chris are done with their research, they have a period of time of 4-5 days when they just talk about the work they want to accomplish and what it means, why it is important and what the writers are trying to say to the audience. They call this part of the process “Breaking the Ice”. “It is a kind of an anxiety that builds up before you start a screenplay,” explains Steve. “And then we finally realize that we’re up against the deadline, I say, come on let’s see if we can break the ice. And it usually happens in the end of the day and we usually end up writing the first paragraph and when that happens, we’re fine,” explains Steve. The first paragraph of the screenplay is usually is a
scene setting. It establishes the verbal tone for the screenplay, the level of diction, and it determines how much description and editorializing the writers are going to apply. And once they’ve done that and they’ve gotten their foot in the door, they can proceed.

Before the writers write the story first paragraph, they ask themselves a question: how does it start? The origin of this question comes from the movie called “The Dresser.” In it Albert Finney plays an aging Shakespearean actor playing King Lear on the road and although he has done King Lear three or four hundred times, he can never remember how it starts. So he stands on the wings and he is petrified with the fear because he can’t remember the first line. So, he asks his dresser: how does it start? Tom Courtney who plays his dresser, gives him the first line and the actor is fine. “So, we always ask that line from “The Dresser” – how does it start?” says Steven.

Searching for the connection with the divine

All the time while following their rituals the writers are searching for the connection with the divine. Steve Rivele searched to connect with the character’s psyche; the writer describes the experience as dying in his consciousness and reawakening in the consciousness of a character:

And until you connect with her (Kleopatra’s) psyche, you’re skating on the ice. And it’s not until the ice breaks and you fall through, and you drown in her character that you can begin to really dramatize her because that’s the only way that you can begin to really understand her. You have to drown in the character before you can begin to breathe her air. It is a very interesting process, in some sense you have to die to your own consciousness before you can reawaken to her consciousness, and this is the process all the writers go through if they are real writers.

In order to connect with the character’s psyche, the writer has to have lived with the material for sometime so that the material completely invades the writer’s consciousness. In case of the “Kleopatra” Steve read so much about the character that he accumulated a critical mass of information about her. “I was living, breathing, thinking, eating and sleeping with her in my mind, and all of that jelled or coalesced into a comprehensive understanding of who she was, and the way it manifested itself is that her voice started speaking in my head,” explains the writer the state of immersion into the character. Steve
Rivele compares the state to falling madly in love: “It is like when you’re madly in love with somebody. The minute your mind is free it strays to that person. You think about her, you hear her voice, you see the face, and you keep saying the name. So, when I’m involved with the subject and the character that happens to me. So, I’d be driving and I realize that I’m not listening to the radio, I’m trying to listen to Kleopatra in my head. When I’m asleep, I dream about her, and I wake up in the middle of the night because the ideas have reached the critical mass. It begins to take a form that can be enunciated. It is a process of immersion in the character and that character’s world.”

The writer’s ability to see the world through the character’s eyes is an important part of the process of getting connected to the character’s psyche. When the writer gets to that point, he knows that he is on the road of “doing something truthful.” Sometimes Steven can achieve this state before they begin to write a story. Sometimes, like with Kleopatra, it is a growing process: “I mean I’m slowly getting into this woman, trying to figure out who she is and how she sees the world.”

*Difficulty hearing Kleopatra’s voice*

It took Steve a couple of months to reach the state of saturation with the story and the character when writing “Kleopatra”. Normally, explained Steve, he starts hearing the character’s voice when he starts to write the story and the character’s dialogue, when the character just starts dictating to him like it happened to him when he was writing “Copying Beethoven” because the writer has lived with his music and read about the great composer since he was 13. But in the case of “Kleopatra” Steven couldn’t hear her voice. When I talked to him at the beginning of the writing process, he shared: “I haven’t gotten to that point with her yet because we’re still trying to figure out who she is.”

A part of the problem of hearing Kleopatra’s voice in Steve’s opinion was that he has done the research about her during the previous year. Perhaps the information was not fresh in his mind and he was thinking about rereading a lot of the stuff to get back into this character. “I mean she is a very elusive and mysterious person, and she was in our life time and she still is, and cracking the mystery around her is very difficult. She deliberately kept herself mysterious it was a part of her power,” Steven continued. “So,
I’m not really sure that the people who knew her knew who she really was. I’m not sure she knew who she was.” Kleopatra was very difficult for Steve to get close to also because ‘she was such a complex character, and the issues in her life were so enormous, and she was so distant in time.”

Steve shared the process of his thinking about the character of Kleopatra that eventually led him to achieving the state of saturation. One of the critical points in the initial story development was one of the initial ideas that came to Steve that Kleopatra was going insane. During one of the initial writing sessions, when the writers were trying to get closer to the character, they came up with an idea that when she is locked in her tomb in the beginning of the story with her nurse and with the woman who does her hair and her clothing, Kleopatra said: “we can’t go back to the palace.” In response to this statement one of her servants started crying saying: “what are we going to do?” “And that was the critical point in the story development,” comments Steven, “because the nurse had to tell her what her purpose in that tomb was. And we realized that she thinks that her purpose was to keep Kleopatra sane.”

Having an initial idea of what the main character of the story was experiencing helped the writer to find a story thread that eventually helped him to understand the character completely. Steve shares that the idea threw a very bright light on the character of Kleopatra for him. It started him thinking that on the one hand, this could be a woman who could be on the verge of going insane because she lost her husband, and her kingdom, she might have lost her son, and she was about to be taken prisoner by her enemy. So, she was suffering a tremendous grief and anxiety. On the other hand, this woman could be on the verge of becoming divine. “So, what I’m hearing in my head now increasingly is the woman who probably is losing her mind, but that’s because maybe she is taken over by the presence of her God. And to me, that’s an interesting character and I can hear that character.”

It was a point in the creative process when the writer started to have a comprehensive way of looking at Kleopatra, which helped him to begin hearing her voice. Before the insight about Kleopatra’s insanity occurred to the writer, he was unconsciously feeling for the main spring of her character.
Because of the initial problem and difficulties with the story hearing Kleopatra’s voice the writers were putting off working on it every day. Steve shared that they wouldn’t get down to work on the story until 1:30, 2 pm every day when their working day would usually end at 3:30 pm. “And I just said to Chris two days ago, we’re just not having fun with it and that’s why we keep putting it off, says Steven. Having found the cohesive idea about the character, the writers went back to the beginning and started it over again, and the story started flowing more naturally.

Having grasped the concept that Kleopatra was going insane, the writers started developing a parallel idea that Kleopatra is becoming divine, becoming God: “She is living her destiny as reincarnation of the Goddess Isis, which is something that has been, at least in our conception of it, a part of her character since she was a little girl. And she identified very closely with her mother - Isis was the mother of Egypt. Her mother was the Queen of Egypt, well, those two ideas fuse into her conclusion that she is Ices, apparently in the same way that Jesus came to the conclusion that he was God, the father.”

To support his idea about Kleopatra becoming insane and divine at the same time, the writer finds a parallel explanation from Mark’s Gospel where “everybody assumed that Jesus was insane, and they tried to lock him up.” The writer makes a conclusion that his idea about insanity works on the level of becoming divine and on the other level given all that Kleopatra has lost: “the death of her husband and the loss of her Kingdom, and the fact that she is coming, I mean to put it mildly, from a dysfunctional family, they all killed each other and they all were incestuous, coming from that background, she would probably fear for her sanity.”

The writer experiences a break-through

As the writers comprehended Kleopatra’s state of mind realizing that the character was becoming a God as she was going insane and having found a confirmation of their idea in the Bible, they moved closer to achieving the state of saturation with the story. It happened for Steven via a breakthrough. Once I received an email from Steven saying that he just had a breakthrough with ‘Kleopatra’, that night at 4:30 in the morning. I called him immediately and that’s what he shared with me: “Kleopatra and her story has
been constantly on my mind. So, a couple of nights ago, I went to sleep at 12, woke up at 12:30 and did not go back to sleep until 6 o’clock in the morning. I kept hearing these characters in my head and they were explaining certain things to me, which were the unsolvable problems to that point. For example, there were three fundamental problems that no one had been able to solve in the story. And I got the answers to all three of them.”

Solving the story problems - the story transformation

When writing “Kleopatra” some of the problems the writers were faced with were: the relationship between Kleopatra and Mark Antony after Kleopatra abandoned him at the battle of Actian and Kleopatra killing her eleven-year-old brother.

Steven explained the importance of solving these problems in the screenplay. He says that these three problems were real structural dramatic character problems, which presented inconsistencies or contradictions or simply dead ends and had to be dealt with sooner or later in the screenplay. Having such problems in the screenplay is unacceptable for the following reasons: the audience must empathize with the main characters of the story, and no matter what they do, their actions must be justifiable in the audience’s mind. If it doesn’t happen, they loose their admiration of the main character, their interest in the story and leave the theater unsatisfied. It is the writer’s job to find justification for the main characters’ actions, to show that what they do is just and necessary from their perspective, and the way they do it should be believable, historically accurate and convincing. That’s why the three problems Steve named had to be solved one way or another.

“Kleopatra deserting Antony at the critical moment in the screenplay and they are still lovers after that? How do you reconcile that? It is a contradiction,’ says the writer. ‘And you have Kleopatra, the main character with who we are supposed to empathize murdering her eleven-year-old brother in his sleep? How do you save her as a character under the circumstances? These are three substantial problems and suddenly I’ve reached the point of emersion into the characters when they started to tell me what the answers were.”
Problem one – Kleopatra and Marc Antony

The first problem was the question: why Kleopatra and Anthony were still in love with each other after she left him at the battle of Actian? It was a historical documented fact that Kleopatra deserted Antony at the battle of Actian. She took her ships and left. As a result of her actions Marc Antony lost the battle. And yet, they continued to be lovers after that event and nobody was able to explain why that happened. “And everybody, including Plutarch thought that she was abandoning Antony. Even Shakespeare doesn’t have the explanation of this,” says Steve. “He has her deserting Antony at Actian and the next scene they meet again on the beach and they fall into each other’s arms, but he doesn’t explain why. Why isn’t Antony totally pissed off at her and why doesn’t he feel betrayed by her?”

Karen Essex in her book that the writers were allegedly basing the screenplay on, suggested that it was all a preconceived plan to get Kleopatra’s treasure ship out of the blockage and get it back to Egypt. “It never struck me as a forceful enough reason,” says Steven. “One could buy it, but I don’t particularly like it. Then it suddenly hit me at 4 o’clock in the morning, Kleopatra already told me the answer to it, I just didn’t hear what she was saying. In an early theme when she is talking to Proculeius, the man who will eventually go and find her son for her, she refers to “any treasure of any value for me now”, she means her son, Cesareon, who is Julius Caesar’s son. And so, what she was saying to me when I couldn’t get to sleep that night was that the reason she had to get through the blockade and the reason that she left Antony was because that ship was the only treasure of any value to her. In other words, her son was on that ship. And that’s why she had to get through,” explains the writer.

As a result of understanding the essence of what Kleopatra was saying to Steve, the writers wrote a scene where her son who was fourteen at that time sneaks into their camp because he wants to be a part of the big battle, and Kleopatra realizes that she has to get him out. “She convinces Antony to let her run the blockade and take her son out. And he agrees to do it and that’s why she loves him even more after the battle than she did before. I never thought about it before,” explains the writer.

Steve says that it was a well-known fact that Kleopatra’s son was on the ship. There was a historical controversy over why Kleopatra left the battle of Actium, why she
took her ships out. “And everybody, including Plutarch thought that she was abandoning Antony,” explains Steven the challenge he had to deal with. “Shakespeare assumed that she abandoned Antony, which presented him with an enormous problem because even after the battle she is still in love with him and he is still in love with her. Why? Well, once it became clear that Cesareon is the key to everything, that’s when I came up with an idea that the reason she left Actium was that Cesareon turned up at the battle. And she couldn’t let him be killed. She put him on her ship and Antony split the Roman fleet so that she could go out through the center. And this is historically factual.”

“So, we put Cesareon on the boat and actually we just wrote that scene today”, concludes the writer. And Antony sacrificed everything to save her son because he loved her so much. “Antony knew that her son was her whole world, he was her future and that she was willing to sacrifice everything for him,” says Steve. “So, of course after the battle they were still lovers and they were still conjoined because he had done her the greatest possible service he could have done,” explains the writer.

Finding solution to the problem certainly helped the writers find answers the following question: why is it so important that Kleopatra gets through with that ship? And why by having done so, are Antony and her even more in love than they were before?

Problem two – saving the integrity of the character of Kleopatra

Another problem with the story was that Kleopatra was going to kill her youngest brother, the boy who was ten or eleven years old. It is a historical documented fact that Kleopatra murdered her brother because she was married to him. She didn’t want to do this incestuous marriage any more and she killed him because she wanted her son to inherit her throne.

Steven pointed out to everyone during the screenplay conference that was going to be a problem. Steve’s point was that if the main character, no matter who she was, was murdering her eleven year old brother, the audience was going to loose her as the hero of the film. In response to Steve’s concern producers at the conference suggested that he doesn’t deal with this issue. But in Steven’s mind it was a serious enough inconsistency and they had to address it in their story. The writer had to present a compelling reason for why Kleopatra did this so it doesn’t sacrifice her as the main character. Although it was a
complicated problem, during his breakthrough Steven did find the solution to it. The writer came up with an idea that Kleopatra’s sister Asinui was conspiring with her brother to kill Kleopatra and her son. Kleopatra warned her sister: “don’t interfere with my family, if you do, I will have you killed. So, she has both Asinui and her brother killed because, as she explained to me at 6 o’clock in the morning they were conspiring to kill her and her son. So, that saves her as a character,” explains Steve his solution to a problem.

**Re-writing the story**

After the breakthrough in “Kleopatra” Steve and Chris tried to go back every day and modify things and adjust things and bring them in line with the new conception of the story and the characters. Certain lines that were already in the screenplay became much more focused. The writers were intuitively moving toward the understanding of the character. Once an understanding became clear, then some of the lines took on a much deeper meaning and is they had to be clarified, they had to be shaped in a way that reflected that new meaning.

Some of the relationships among the characters had to be changed because when the writers understood that the fundamental dynamic of the story was Octavian and Kleopatra based on the issue of Cesareon, then the characters like Caesar, Antony, Klepatra’s siblings became less important. “It was a part of our problem”, continues Steve “we really didn’t know what the fundamental dynamic of the story was. We assumed that it was supposed to be Kleopatra’s relationship with Antony but it proved not to be the case.”

**Changing the value of the importance of characters**

In the light of the newly found truth, the writer realized that he had to change the importance of the characters and the story themes. “One of the problems you have when writing dramatic literature,” explains Steve, “is to understand what is important and what isn’t and then assign relative values to the value of importance. Caesar and Antony became far less important, Octavian’s point of view became very important because it is the fundamental antagonist in the film, and then placing Caesareon in that dramatic landscape became a very delicate proposition because he not only served a dramatic purpose but he also has to be a dramatic character. Only recently we began to understand
what his character is. He has to emerge as a character of his own right if you’re going to identify him in that role, and also if you’re going to identify with his eventual destiny,” says the writer.

Thematically, the writers started with an idea that Kleopatra was the most beautiful, intelligent, powerful woman in the world. And her story must be really interesting. And only when they were on the page 150, they realized that the essential values of love, survival and motherhood were of real interest to her. And in order to tell that story, the writers had to make a number of changes to the story, a number of shifts in focus. One of them was the importance that Proculeius was taking on as he was becoming the third most important character after Antony. The character of Proculeius actually is the character who is only briefly mentioned in Plutarch. He is the one who convinced Kleopatra to get out of her tomb. “And what we began to understand was that he needs to play a pivotal role in the attempt of Octavian to kill Cesareon and in the attempt of Kleopatra to preserve Cesareon,” reports Steven.

Kleopatra sends Proculeius to tell her son not to come back to Alexandria and to go on to India because he is not safe. At the same time Octavian sends Proculeius to kill Cesareon. So, he is caught in this tremendous dilemma – if he does not kill Cesareon, Octavian is going to kill his wife and son, and one of the real challenges of it was to develop him as a character and present him with a moral dilemma and put him into position of having to make that choice – is he going to kill the boy or not?

And it is this plot that the writer believed would tie the whole story together and would keep the audience in their seats through the two and a half hours that this movie is going to take.

Caesareon becomes the center of dialectic of the story

The fundamental problem the writers started with structurally and dramatically was that everybody knew how the story about Kleopatra ended, everybody knew that she killed herself. Therefore, the writers faced the challenge of how to make the story interesting and dramatic, and how to keep the audience involved.

To meet the challenge, Steven and Chris invented the second story, a story of Kleopatra’s son Caesareon thinking that everyone knows that Kleopatra died, but most
people don’t know if Caesareon died. And that’s how the writers were planning to keep the audience involved: the audience would be waiting to find out if the boy was going to survive.

The central idea that Steven had at the beginning of the creative process about Kleopatra trying to stay sane became less important after Steve had his break-through. The film became about a struggle between Kleopatra and Octavian over the destiny of the boy Caesarean and the conflict between two radically different world views: the secular world view and the spiritual world view, only one of which can survive and whichever survives, is going to dominate the world from now on and the fulcrum on which this debate is balanced, is the boy, Caesarean whether he lives or dies.

_The story takes a life of its own_

As a result of the break-through, all the story events tie together. “and it’s one of those rare times when I actually get excited about something,” said Steven elated by his revelation.

Steven shared that night he worked out actually every scene till the end of the film and all of other scenes fell into place. All the characters were talking and Steve reached that point when he could hear their voices in his head. “That morning when I couldn’t fall asleep I first realized that it could be a great screenplay. Up to the point I had doubts, but now it all made sense,” says the writer.

_After Steven’s tremendous breakthrough the project has taken on a life of its own._

“Now we can see clearly to the very last of the film because it has this unity now. I mean we understand completely what it is all about, or what it has to be all about and these characters are now dictating these scenes, so it is very exciting and we had this experience occasionally in the past.”

Then the writer expresses his anxiety about the studio executives who will get their filthy hands on the story and will tell the writers how it is all wrong. “And that’s when you get your heart broken and you would like to go and sell insurance,” sadly ends Steven.
The writer’s level of confidence rises

As a result of the breakthrough, the writers became much more confident about working with the material. “It is undeniable that you become more excited and optimistic. Whereas I was not looking forward to coming in the morning, I was finding excuses to come in late,” recalls Steve. “Once it happened, I couldn’t wait to work on this thing, because it was so clear to me what shape it was supposed to take, what these people were, what their issues were, and how the scenes should be laid out. And so, one of the changes that happened is we come earlier, we work longer, we stay later, we get more done, but the level of confidence rises.”

Steve compares it with the experience of struggling up at the side of the mountain, trying to understand the landscape that is surrounding the writer, “and you finally get to the top and everything falls into perspective and it becomes a joyous process rather than a laborious process,” rejoice the writer. Steve says that before the break-through happened the creative writing process was more of a mechanical process, it was more like solving a problem.

Creating the story structure and metaphorical substructure

Following their method of creating a story multi-layered structure, Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson use the strategy to always bring the audience back to the present day events so that they always know where they are now. “It is like in the fugue, when you have the basic fugal theme at the bottom or in passacaglia where you have the basic petal tones in the bottom. And the material moves around and above those basic tones but you always return to them so that the audience knows where you are.”

The present time event in “Kleopatra” is when she locks herself in her tomb with the treasure of the Royal family and threatens to destroy it and herself. And the Royal Emperor Octavian was trying to convince her to come out. “The present time event in ‘Kleopatra’ represents the polemic if you will, the dialectic between Kleopatra and Octavian that drives the story, which is the dialectic between Egypt and Rome, between the past and the future, the spiritual and the material, between religion and power or religion and politics that drives the story.” The story starts near the end and moves back
in time through three different levels of narrative to tell the story of who Kleopatra was and how she came to be in the position that she ultimately reached.

Steve Rivele naturally thinks in terms of *motifs* for the story when he writes because his primary form in which he works and thinks is novelistic. And a novel on one level can be looked upon as an extended metaphorical structure. Steve always thinks in terms of lines of metaphor that will pervade the story and unite the story. They are always in his screenplays. The writer usually starts with one, which comes out of our definition of the essential idea of the film, and by the time the writing partners are done with the story, they have usually introduced two or three more motifs.

Steven feels that metaphors or imagery that pervade the entire screenplay serve the purposes of uniting the story and giving it integrity. Otherwise the screenplay would be weak.

Steve says that usually the story dictates its motifs and metaphors. Some of them are self-evident from the very start of the creative process; others emerge in the process of writing. For instance, in the “The Death of Conrad Shepherd” the writers didn’t originally have a motif, but the further they got into the story, the more they realized what the main motif was - “gold” was the uniting factor in the story. The writers identified it by doing a search on the word ‘gold’ and found out that the word occurred more than 30 or 40 times. “That’s how we identify what had become a motif,” explains Steve, “we do searches for certain words. We’re always amazed at how many times they recur in the screenplay.”

Once the motifs and metaphors are evident, the writers try to create scenes and develop them in a way that is consistent with the theme and the story ideas and the motifs just naturally occur within them. This way it is a more organic process. “If a motif is imposed on a piece then it is artificial and it doesn’t work. It’s got to organically grow up from the material and when it does, you know, you’re on the right track.”

*Creating metaphors for the story main characters*

Steve admitted that in “Kleopatra” when creating a metaphorical structure of the story, he had to focus on a lot more on the specific choices of words: verbs, adjectives and nouns, to make sure that they support the metaphorical structure of the piece. Steven
explained that the words had to be carefully selected to meet two purposes: on the one hand, it was important to hit the level of diction that would be appropriate for the character and would not sound stilted or artificial. On the other hand, the metaphorical substructure of the screenplay was so quite complex and so specific that the slightest choice of a word, or a verb form or adjectives, summoned up at substructure. For example, the writers were consciously used a metaphor of a bull when portraying Caesar. The reason the writers used this metaphor was because Caesar inseminates Kleopatra and that’s why she had a son, who drove her through most of the story. The essence of the story can be reduced to one sentence: it is about mother trying to protect her child and Caesar generated that child. So, the writers created a scene where Kleopatra and Caesar go through the temple of Epos and that’s where Egyptians liked to get pregnant. The idea for a scene occurred to Steven and Chris when they were doing research and found out that one of the first things she did when she became a Furrow, she went to Epos to install the new sacred bull. It was a big step on Kleopatra’s part because no one has ever done that before and it was her way to say that she was going to be Egyptian, she was going to identify with the people. So, Steve and Chris combined these two events to create the metaphor of Caesar as the bull. But the writers didn’t do it until the point in the story where Caesar actually appeared.

Steven explains that one of the first lines in the movie uttered by Caesar was: “who grabbed my balls?” That’s how Caesar appears in the story where he is in the bathtub with some of his officers and they are having a contest of who hold their breath the longest. So, he is trying to set the record, and somebody tries to grab his crotch and he lets go of his breath, and so this is one of his first lines: who grabbed my balls? And then he is identified with the testicles, and generation and he is called the bull throughout the movie. When the writers first brought in Caesar in the screenplay, they realized that he had been portrayed so many times in literature, and on the stage and in movies, the writers wanted to come up with a new way to portray him to the audience in an unexpected, powerful way. When he is slaughtered, it is like the slaughtering of a bull. When he is angry, he bellows like a bull. At some point in relationship to him, the writers used the word that normally would summon up the image of a pig, they used the word
“snout’. Then they realized that it was the wrong metaphor that was confusing and they changed it in order not to cloud the existing metaphorical structure.

*Portraying Kleopatra as a snake*

The emergence of a metaphor for Kleopatra was prompted to the writers by the way she committed a suicide. She used a cobra to kill herself. “We have snakes all through the screenplay. And we use the words that describe snakes, like the procession in the beginning ‘snakes through the city’. And when they go to Alexander Tomb, there are snakes around the columns.”

The metaphor for Kleopatra was sort of self-evident, when they started with the cobra, snake was obvious because that’s what the movie ends with. Other metaphors the authors generated as they moved along. When I talked to Steve, the writers didn’t figure out what the metaphorical reference for Mark Antony would be. The writer explains that Kleopatra tried to compare him to Dionysus because he drank a lot and this is as close as the writers got. Steve said that when they figure it out, they would go back and lay it in.

Steven explained that metaphors for this story couldn’t use mechanistic and technological because they were inappropriate to the subject. “Kleopatra’s identification, and identification of the Furrows with the cobra, and identification of the Caesar with the bull, Kleopatra’s identification of Octavian as Seth who was a doglike creature, dictates the whole line of metaphors,” explains Steve, “and that’s what makes it interestingly fine, that’s what makes it art. And that’s why I do it,’ says the writer. “Metaphors is what I do for living, like statisticians work with numbers, I work with metaphors. For me metaphors emerge in a semi-conscious world, and often it is an unconscious process. People don’t realize why works of literature function properly, but it is because they are moving on the substructure of metaphors, it is buried in the text, metaphors represent the structure of language,” says the writer.

*Dealing with the community of practitioners, solving story problems*

The Hollywood studios’ development process

When the writers finish a screenplay, they submit it to the Hollywood studio that hired the writers for their review. The studio review is the initial step of the so-called
development process before the screenplay goes into production and a director is assigned to the picture, and the movie shooting starts. Usually the creative teams that consist of 12-14 studio executives who have backgrounds in business and accounting conduct the development process. During the development process the members of the creative team work with the writers to change the story by giving them feedback in the form of notes so that the story fits their notions of a successful film. The studio executives try to reach consensus on their opinions about the screenplay. From Steve’s experience, consensus is achieved by the studio executives trying to read their boss’ reaction to the screenplay and adjusting their notes according to what the boss said. The writers often feel a lot of anxiety about the meeting with the creative team, fearing that they didn’t understand the story, that they will ask the writers to change the story based on their limited understanding of the art of storytelling.

The writers’ anxieties

After Steve and Chris finished “Kleopatra”, they had to submit it to Warner Brothers for review because this was the Hollywood studio that hired the writers to write the screenplay. As the writers were getting closer to finishing “Kleopatra”, their anxieties about the studio executives’ reaction to the screenplay were rising. “So, we were talking about it: is anybody going to get this? Are they going to understand this? Is it too radical an approach to “Kleopatra”? Is it too unconventional way of telling the story? Steven and Chris didn’t think that the studio executives were going to get their story: “I think that they are going to be shocked by what we turn in, and I think they are not going to make the movie,” says Steve. “I think that we are going to have that script conference that we always dread and to which I refer to as a left-turn conference when they say to you: you know we think that we’ve taken a left turn on this project. And they give you two options: you either start all over again, or they fire you and bring in someone else. But, you know I could be wrong and if I’m wrong, I’ll be delighted,” says Steve.

As the writers were creating a metaphorical structure of the screenplay, they were also worried how the studio executive would react to their ideas. Steven shared his previous experience of such kind: “When you try to talk about it in the studio meeting,
they’ll all just stare at you. You’ll get this incredible blank stare: what the hell are you talking about?” When I asked Steven why the studio executives have such a reaction, the writer explained that they have no education in literature in general, or writing in particular. “They are not artistically sensitive people, they are not in the business because of their interest in art, and they are in the business because of their interest in business. So, you’re essentially talking to business people. These are people who have MBAs. Even worse, people who came from the agency system and who are deal makers. So, I can’t say these things to them. They will glaze over at best and at worst, they’ll just assume I’m drunk. So, what you have to do, you have to infuse the screenplay with all this stuff, and make sure it works. And the best you can hope for is that they will agree that it works, but they will never know why. That’s my job.”

I asked Steven to describe the nature of the developmental process at the Hollywood studios. This is how the writer characterized it:

The development process is the process by which all spirit, integrity, guts muscle, meaning, and feeling is taken out of the script. And it is usually done by people who have no integrity, guts, feeling, or muscle. You know there is an old joke about the writer, the director, and the producer who are lost in the desert and they are dying of thirst and finally they come across a lake and there is some water, beautiful blue water. And the writer and the director say: “Let’s jump in, let’s get it and they start running towards it. And the producer says:” hold on, let me piss in it first. That’s the development process: everybody in the studio chain wants to piss on the script. They mark it, so that it is their territory. Now, the game is, you put your notes in, you make your suggestions for changes, you tell the writer exactly why he doesn’t know what he is doing, if the movie succeeds, you got to say – it is because of my input, if the movie fails, they got to say – they didn’t take my notes. You can’t loose and that’s how you work your way gradually up the chain.

“It is a death with a thousand cuts”

When I asked Steven if he could predict how many changes to the screenplay they were expecting to make based on the executives’ notes, the writer said that it would depend on how extensive the notes were. If the notes were very extensive and fundamental, and it would be very clear to the writers that the studio executives “don’t get it”, the writers were planning to withdraw. “But it never works that way,” concluded Seven, “It’s a death with a thousand cuts. You know, they tell you to change this and to
change that and to reconsider this and reorganize that, and after you’ve gone through 8 or 10 drafts you hate it, and they hate you, and they hire somebody else.”

The creative teams

The development process on the screenplay is led by a “creative team”. “The worst thing,” explains Steven “is that the Hollywood studios in the recent years began to form what they called creative teams, as if writing a screenplay was a form of volley ball. And the creative teams are made up entirely of studio executives who have no artistic background, no creative training, and they only have their jobs because they think they know what the audience wants and half time they are wrong.”

Often, the writers’ screenplay then becomes the object of the scrutiny of the creative team and the writers complain that it is impossible to create a work of any integrity or any consistency or vision under those circumstances. ” It is as if you’re at the gallery standing over Monet or Rembrandt and saying: you can’t use that color or make the painting that size, you have to put a certain subject matter in,” comments Steve Rivele. Sometimes writers refuse to work with the creative teams, as is the case for Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson who are in a fortunate position now because they can choose to work with one or two executives that they respect, “and even then it only softens the blow, it doesn’t prevent the blow,” laments the writer.

The writers believe that what they call a creative team is an oxymoron because creativity is intensely personal and individual process: “ It is not collective; it is not the Soviet Union. You have a creative team, which is made up of the mid level, and upper mid level executives, all of who are asked to put their input into the script. These are people who rarely read a book. These are people who have degrees in business administration. These are people who never created anything in their lives except for spreadsheets and business plans. And they are asked to give their input into your work,” comments Steve Rivele. Steve laments that they put people who have no creative instincts on those teams and call them creative executives. “They give them the name, but they don’t have the spirit. You know, it is exactly like what happened to the Union Army during the Civil War when they took important politicians, governors and states congressman and senators, newspaper editors, made them cornels in the army and put
them in charge of regimens, and all the men got slaughtered. You can call them a general; it doesn’t make them a general. You can call them a creative executive, but it doesn’t make her a creative executive,” says the writer.

_Reaching consensus: reading the reaction of the boss_

Creative teams have to reach a consensus about the screenplay, that’s their way of making decisions about the quality of the stories they read. “No one on the creative team will tell you what they think about it until the head of the creative team has expressed his opinion,” says Steven, “then they fall into line with that opinion. So, that’s how the consensus gets formed.” There was one exception when the lower level executive told the writers his opinion about the screenplay before his boss did “and that guy is probably fired by now,” explains Steve the Hollywood method of judging the goodness of the script. “So, it is a phony consensus, which is shaped by the members of the team reading the reaction of their boss. It is not based on any intelligent or aesthetic analysis that I’ve ever discovered, it is based entirely on the tastes and the assumptions of the chief executive on the project.”

The creative team works in such a way that if everybody else on the creative team has read their screenplay and their boss hasn’t, they will wait to see what their bosses reaction is going to be: “And they are just waiting to find out what they are supposed to think. It is like the old Soviet Union, it is the apparatchik,” comments Steve.

Steve compares the creative team dictating to the writers what to do to Saint Hidron getting to decide what Jesus was going to say. “And it doesn’t work that way. That’s what they did in the Soviet Union where the Writer’s Union or the Musician’s Union got to censor and veto the work of an individual artist. And they used to say to Prokofiev: “either you change your ballet or we’re going to throw you out of the country and put your wife in jail.” And that’s what they did. Or they would tell to Pasternak that he’s got to change this novel because it does not conform to the corporate consensus about what is true, valuable and meaningful and good for the public. But the truth is nobody knows what is valuable, and meaningful, and true for the public except for an individual artist. And he is the one who is consistently told by a development process – you don’t know what you’re doing, you have to correct it.”
The writers reported that they hate the development process because it is not a friendly process; it is an adversarial process. The development process usually destroys the picture: “it will either kill it altogether and it will never get to the screen, or it will get to the screen in such a bastardized form that no one will want to go and see it. And then people will wonder – why don’t they make movies like they used to. Because in old days there used to be very powerful executives, who could single handedly say – this is going on the screen. Now it is all done by the committees of MBAs,” says Steve.

The writers fight for their stories

In order to survive the tough Hollywood culture the writers invent the strategies of their own survival. They fight to preserve the integrity of their stories by making changes to the story during the development process that will not ruin the essence of the story, by trying their best to pass the story to the right film director, by negotiating with their agencies their rights to participate in the selection of the film director, sometimes they come to more extreme actions by buying their stories back from the producers when they learn that the story is going to be passed to the director who ruined the writer’s previous story, by threatening to resign from the agency they belong to, or by deciding to produce their story as an independent film. It is clear that the writers have different values than studio executives. If the writers are doing their best to create a truthful meaningful story that will touch the audience’s hearts, the producers are trying to calculate the profit the film will make in the box office. ‘The junction between the culture of the writers and the culture of the studio executives’ called the nature of such collaboration Steve Rivele. This difference between the artistic values of the screenwriters’ creative approaches to the story development and commercial business values of the producers create the conflicts the solution to which often leads to the writer’s resignation from the projects. And yet, the writers who work for Hollywood studios acknowledge that they always try to maintain the professional level in these collaborations despite the nature of disagreements with the producers.
Warner Brother’s notes on “Kleopatra”

After Steve and Chris wrote “Kleopatra” they submitted the screenplay to Warner Brothers studio. The meeting with the executives took place and the writers received the notes. They were relieved that they had no large notes about the structure, or the intent of the screenplay, or the quality of the screenplay, and everybody agreed that it is a very successful and very sophisticated first draft. “You normally get the notes that you need to change the third act or you need to reconsider it, nothing like that had happened,” says Steven. ‘The notes that they gave us, some of them are doable, I don’t think that any of them were useful, but some of them are doable.”

Steven noted that the nature of the notes pointed to the junction between the culture of the writers and the culture of the studio executives. “They just don’t get what we’re trying to do. This is an attempt to drag the screenplay down to their perspective. And we’re trying to resist that.” The writer said that the perfect example of that was the note that they got from the female executive that Steve and Chris ought to be portraying Kleopatra as having a working woman’s dilemma: that she is trying to have career and a family and that she can’t have both. “This is not a junior executive at the insurance company; this is a queen of Egypt two thousand years ago. From the point of view of the female executive on the project this is the only context in which she can understand this material. So, needless to say, we’re not going to do that – we’re not going to turn Kleopatra into Meg Ryan.”

The writers’ handling of the studio executives’ feedback

Often the writers who work for Hollywood studios long enough come up with tactics that help them to avoid making drastic changes to the story and by doing so destroying its integrity. When it doesn’t work, the writers may quit their jobs or withdraw the screenplay for the studio’s development process if the screenplay was written on spec.

Steve and Chris worked out a strategy to handle the notes from the studio executives over eleven years of their tenure as Hollywood screenwriters. The writers admitted that they would do a very careful balancing act of addressing enough notes to convince the executives that they were taking them seriously, but not enough notes to damage the script. The writers were also trying to do enough notes to make sure that we
don’t get fired at that point, because the next stage was theoretically giving the script to the film director. “So, if we can get past this stage without damaging the script or getting fired, we have succeeded.”

“And that’s what this process of doing the studio notes consists of: on the one hand, avoiding doing damage to the script, and on the other hand, avoiding getting fired,” says Steven. “It is a real political exercise. So, I think we’re doing a real attempt to address their notes, and I said to Chris this morning when he said that one of the notes didn’t make sense at all, I told him that he was trying to take seriously something that was not written seriously. He was trying to take an intelligent approach to something that was written stupidly, and this is very frustrating.”

Studio executives gave a number of notes to the writers requesting changes to the story characters. One of the notes was a request to re-conceive the character of Julius Caesar, or at least how the character is introduced in the screenplay. “And their suggestions about how Julius Caesar ought to be introduced are exactly the way he was portrayed in Elizabeth Taylor film. They want him to be the Rex Harrison character in Elizabeth Taylor film - weary of the world, an urbane Englishman. And that’s exactly a stereotype we’re trying to avoid,” says Steven. “We’re trying to present him as a character who is by nature is a savage bull, but who is also a man who enjoys making rabble jokes and who enjoys coveting with his fellow-officers, but who is also extremely dangerous. And I think that it is a more interesting portrayal than the aging English sophisticate.” The writers disagreed with that note and avoided changing the character of Julius Caesar as much as possible. “They have done some adjustments to take off some of the more gaudy aspects of his dialogue that is throwing us off because of the fact that the most executives who are involved in this process are either women or gay. They are disturbed by the fact that he is making reference to testicles, for example. And they are disturbed by the fact that he is making reference to his power to cut off her breasts and hang her up on the wall. We have toned that down to a certain extent to give them an impression that we actually answered the note but we won’t do it to an extent that it violates our conception of the character,” explains Steve.

In their notes executives suggested to make Marc Antony more of an intellectual equal of Kleopatra. “This is simply nonsense because he wasn’t,” comments Steve.
“They wanted to make him a more sedate character, and that’s a mistake. They wanted to make him less virile man. They wanted to take out the references to his sexuality, to his ogling women, but he had a lot of affairs with women. They wanted to make him a more sedate character, and that’s a mistake,” says Steve. The writers decided not to make any changes to the character of Marc Antony despite all the comments they received in the notes.

Studio executives wanted to make Kleopatra’s son Caesareon a little more mature and the writers agreed with that note saying that it was correct. The only major note that they had on the character of Kleopatra was that they wanted the writers to move into the first scenes of the movie her vision for the Empire she wanted to create, so that the audience understands earlier what her goals were and the writers had done that. “It is not the note that we disagree with this, it doesn’t affect anything, we just moved some material from late in the script to early in the script. They also wanted to make clear at the beginning of the script that she is at the risk of going insane. And that was okay, we made that clear, so you know the large notes were not particularly profound or annoying, and the small notes are just hell, so we’re just trying to get through them,” concludes Steve.

There were some cases where the note had no relationship to the script. For example the story has a theme, a motif that runs through the film where Kleopatra’s mother dies, her last words to her are: “live, child, live,” explains Steven. “And that’s echoed several times in the script. And the note we got was either drop this line, or explain what her mother meant by it, or what Kleopatra thinks what her mother meant by it. Well, literally on page 147 or whatever it is, we have a speech where Kleopatra says: “son, I thought my mother meant survival, but when you were born, I’ve understood that it meant so much more, it meant loving because you’re not truly alive unless you love someone. And that’s why I’m saying it to you – ‘live, child, live and know that I love you’ – that’s the explanation. But they acted as if there is no explanation of it in the script.” Steven shares that there are at least 10 or 12 notes of this type where the executives ask the writers to do what is already addressed in the script. “We’re going to slightly rephrase the explanations that we have in the script and tell them that we’ve answered the notes and let them think
that the explanations weren’t there and that we put them as a result of their notes. There is no other way to handle this situation.”

Having expressed their bitterness about the nature of Hollywood development process, the Steve admitted that the primary reality is that they get paid by the studios to write these pieces, so they have to be cognizant of that. “We can’t just cavalierly say: they are giving us a paycheck and then the hell with them, just as an ethical matter,” says Steve Rivele. “Secondly, when you’re given a project, it is based either on a book, or an existing project or a conception that somebody has, you have a number of conversations with the studios to come to an agreement what it is that they want and you have an obligation to respect that, it is just a matter of professionalism. Then you go ahead and do the best damn job you can.”

Steve shared that earlier in their careers he and his writing partner Chris Wilkinson just went with the story flow and gave the studios the best work they thought they could do. But with the years they have learned that it is important to exercise a certain degree of restraint because otherwise “if you give it to the studio, they will say – what the hell were you thinking?”

The further the writers have gotten in their career, the better they tried to find a balance between their artistic instincts and the realities of the studio system with which they are working. “There are certain excesses to which you cannot go,” explains Steven, “There is no point to it. You’re just going to be forced to change it anyway. If you do something extraordinary or excessive in the script, it is going to be one thing that the studio executives are going to focus on, and they are going to hate the whole script because of that. So, it is a game that you play – you try to balance your instincts against their expectations. And that’s part of the prison that we’re in here,” confesses Rivele.

**Lessons learned from ‘Kleopatra’**

*Learning at the level of skill*

On the level of skill it was the first screenplay where the writers had to be very careful about the choices of words because of the story’s complicated metaphorical structure. Steve Rivele says that he naturally thinks in terms of motifs for the story when
he writes because his primary form in which he works and thinks is novelistic. And a novel on one level can be looked upon as an extended metaphorical structure.

Usually the story dictates its motifs and metaphors. Some of them are self-evident from the very start of the creative process; others emerge in the process of writing. Once the motifs and metaphors are evident, the writers try to create scenes and develop them in a way that is consistent with theme and the story ideas and the motifs just naturally occur within them. This way it is a more organic process. "If a motif is imposed on a piece then it is artificial and it doesn’t work. It’s got to organically grow up from the material and when it does, you know, you’re on the right track."

Steve admitted that in “Kleopatra” when creating a metaphorical structure of the story, he had to focus on a lot more on the specific choices of words: verbs and adjectives and nouns, to make sure that they support the metaphorical structure of the piece. Steven explained that the words had to be carefully selected to meet two purposes: on the one hand, it was important to hit the level of diction that would be appropriate for the character and would not sound stilted or artificial. On the other hand, the metaphorical substructure of the screenplay was so quite complex and so specific that the slightest choice of a word, or a verb form or adjectives, could affect the substructure.

Learning at the level of insight

The primary question the writer was struggling with in “Kleopatra” was secularism and religion in the public life. “And whereas when I was a flaming liberal, I would have supported the left wing democratic party in trying to keep religion out of the public sphere, I no longer feel that way. I think that it is important that religion be in the public sphere. On balance it is much more important that children pray in school than they’d be deprived of the opportunity to pray. I mean I’ve changed my whole opinion on that. And Kleopatra is reinforcing this whole idea. Unless God is in public life, it is not that God should rule, but unless God informs those who rule, or sense of the Divine informs those who rule, we’re probably headed toward another inhumane system,” explains the writer his revelations on the level of insight when writing Kleopatra.
Writing “The Statute of Limitations”

“The Statute of Limitations” is a thriller. It is one of Mylo Carbia’s two favorite story genres because she believes that thrillers have the greatest opportunity within the expectations of the genre to show very significant human transformation. “I like thrillers because you can delve into some really deep, dark stuff within the human soul that you couldn’t necessarily touch upon in other genres. And when you start delving into the deep dark human capacity is when the things get very interesting and there are a lot of lessons to be learned.”

Searching the spiritual connection – channeling the stories

Mylo shared that she channels her stories through finding her connection with the external force that chooses her as a medium to tell the story and when the connection happens the writer channels her story. “I do feel like I’m tapping into an energy force, and I think that this energy force influences what happens to us throughout our daily lives and we’re learning the life lessons,” says Mylo. The writer channeled “The Statute of Limitations.” That’s how the writer describes her channeling experience: “And one night, when I was about 30, I almost had a metaphysical moment, the entire movie of “Statute of Limitations” was channeled to me from start to finish in about one hour. And I immediately got up and immediately took notes of: this is how it starts, this is what it is about.” Mylo wrote down on one sheet of notebook paper the whole story: how the story starts, the middle, and how it ends. Mylo usually writes the story on the piece of paper mostly because the story is channeled to her and she should hurry and write it down.

“I once read that Mozart would be channeled an entire symphony in a matter of minutes. He spent next few months scrambling to remember every note that was shared with him. And as I write, I go through the same process.”

Identifying the story essence

As one of the initial steps in the creative process, Mylo creates a movie title and designs the movie poster. This helps the writer to understand what constitutes the story essential idea, what the story is all about. “I once read that Arnold Swarzenegger would not read the script until he saw how the movie poster would look like. And adapting this
philosophy, I won’t write a script until I see what the movie poster looks like. On the poster for “The Statute of Limitations” the writer created an image of a woman who has her head in her hand crying, with handprints all over her naked body. “It is a very dark poster,” says Mylo. When Mylo designs her movie poster she shows it to her friends and asks them to tell her what they think this movie is about and if they’d like to see this movie. “And if I could convey in a movie poster what my story is about, it is a winner,” shares the writer.

Overview of the story

The story starts off with a murder in an S&M club where a man, a client, seduces one of the patrons of the club, and takes her to a private stall. She is a sex worker, who provides an S&M sensual experience. In a private room she asks the man if he remembers her name. He doesn’t remember it and she reveals her name as Ava Desentaz, saying: “I’m sure you remember who I’m”. Ava then puts a plastic bag over the man’s head and suffocates him. The movie travels into a killed man’s eye and takes the audience into the past: the same man who is standing in the same position but ten years earlier in a college setting, looking at the bulletin board he asks: “Do you know, who the hell is Ava Desentaz?”

The college where the action of the story is taking place is a small college in the south; it is a private university, where the majority of students are very wealthy and very well bred. Ava Desentaz is a young lady from New Jersey, she comes from a blue color background, she doesn’t look like other girls from the school who look like beauty pageant contestants. Ava received the scholarship to study here; she is very smart. As a result of her high grade on the test a young man by the name Wesley Scarborough, who plays another leading part in the screenplay, starts flirting with Ava. “And Wesley is a good boy, all American, a good looking smiley guy, if you can think of Mathew McKinney or Ben Aflec, and Ava is a very strange person, you can imagine Uma Thurman or even Angelina Jollie playing her,” explains Mylo. Wesley flirts with Ava and invites her to a fraternity party. Ava is surprised and flattered because everybody treats her like an outcast. It is revealed that Wesley is flirting with her because he believes that she has copies of the test, and that her high grades are the result of the information she
has that no one else has. Ava goes to the fraternity house and starts to mingle. Wesley has two friends: Sebastian who is a man who was killed in the very first scene and David Riley. Eva and Sebastian are not getting along, their political views are completely different, and Sebastian is appalled that this poor homey woman is in this very fancy environment of this fraternity house.

Wesley takes some drugs and gets very stoned. One thing leads to another and Sebastian and David begin raping Eva. Wesley in his drugged state passes out and then wakes up and participates in the rape under the impression that he actually makes love to his girl friend. Only later he comes to realization that he is participating in a gang rape.

The next morning Wesley wakes up after being passed out on the floor. He sees Eva barely alive, completely beaten to pieces, with a pillowcase over her head. He sees that his other friends are completely passed out in another room, and the panic sets in: ‘what did we do? We’re in trouble.’ When Sebastian comes to his senses, he says: ‘let’s kill her, and get rid of this.’ David Riley is crying and saying: ‘Oh my God, what do we do?’ There is a lot of argument among the three friends. Wesley finally figures it out: ‘let’s drop her off at the hospital. I’ll call my Mom, she’ll find a solution.’ So, they take Ava to the hospital, and say that she is their classmate and that they found her that way downtown, and that they are just bringing her to the hospital.

Ava wakes up in the hospital only to find her father who came down from New Jersey, her mother passed away when Ava was little. Wesley’s mother, Merriam, is there too and she informs Ava that her son had told her what had happened and that Ava had two choices – to move forward and file charges and her husband who is a pretty well-known Judge in the community is up for re-election in two months and that Merriam would realize all her financial resources to destroy Ava’s character in court to protect her son and the reputation of her family. Another choice for Ava was to accept her offer - she would pay Ava to be quiet now, and she would pay her the other half if they agreed on the terms in ten years after the statute of limitations. A statute of limitations is a certain amount of time during which a person must file the charges or otherwise they would lose their rights. For example in civil matters, if a person would have claimed fraud against someone, he would have five years to file that charge, otherwise he’d lose his right. There is no statute of limitations on murder. However, on sexual assault it
varies from state to state. In Texas, if you don’t file the rape charge against someone within five years, you loose your right. In New York, it is about fifteen years; it varies from state to state. In this movie, which is actually based in Atlanta, it is five years.

Ava’s father being quite heart broken about what happened to his daughter, says: “You know what, life gives you a lemon and you have to make lemonade, this money could set you up for life, Ava. You either go through the process of going through the court system, and find yourself on CNN and completely destroyed because it is a very powerful family in this town, or you can take your money, be quiet and start your life all over again.” So, agreeing to the council of her father, Ava takes the money. One of the devastations of the rape for Ava is that she finds out that she cannot have children making the rape an emotional and physical scarring.

Then the movie moves back into the present, where see Wesley Scarborough 12-13 years later is a very successful public relations man whose life is wonderful. He has a beautiful wife who is pregnant. Wesley deals with the attorneys of very high-powered law firms. A strange case appears on his desk that one of his clients allegedly sexually harassing an employee, and an employee is filing charges of rape against one of his clients. So, as a result, Wesley gets on TV and does a press conference for one of his clients against the allegations of rape.

“And sure enough, who comes out of the woodwork? That’s’ Ava Desentaz. And what she does from now on in the story is crunch down and stalk each and everyone who was involved with the rape, the tree perpetrators, and Merriam Scarborough who were involved in the cover up. And she not only hunts them down and kills them as we see in the first scene, but in the process completely destroys their reputation and credibility. And it is one plot twist after another, all the way up to the end where she is in the position face-to-face with Wesley,” comments Mylo.

The writer describes Ava’s meeting with Wesley: “By that time Wesley’s wife is dead and his unborn child is missing, his mother is dead, his friends have died, an extremely emotional climax to the story. Ava looks at Wesley and they are out on the balcony on the penthouse, and she says: “all I ever wanted is my soul back, I sold you my soul, and that’s what I wanted back.” After which she takes a dive off of the balcony, which puts Wesley into an unbelievable emotional state of finally coming to terms with
the guilt of his bad intentions that led to the rape, that in turn lead to a cover up. All his actions of trying to hide his bad intentions that caused all this devastation in his life and in the lives of all of these innocent people.” The person who dives from the balcony is Ava’s friend who is a wasted heroine drug addict and who looks very much like Ava.

The police arrive and the police officer says: ‘Wesley, take responsibility for her death.’ Instead of saying: ‘Well, she committed a suicide’, Wesley responds: ‘I pushed her over the edge,’ and takes responsibility for her murder. “The person who dives from the balcony is not Ava, it is someone who is introduced as Ava’s lover, a woman who is a look alike drug addict throw away,” explains Mylo. “So, in a fabulous plot twist in the very end, we find that Ava had an accomplice during all of her destruction of all these people, and her accomplice was actually Wesley’s father, the Judge, who is a man of justice. When he found out from Ava that his wife and his son had done such a horrible thing, and tried to keep it out of the court system, he agreed to help Ava, and is really serving that justice. And the two of them run off with Wesley’s son and his grandson, (a baby boy who Ava had to save by doing a c section after his mother hit the floor with her head and died), and they live happily ever after.”

Creating the story structure

Mylo explains an unusual story structure. In the first half of the story Ava is the victim and Wesley is the perpetrator, she is a protagonist and he is an antagonist. But as the story moves, Ava becomes an antagonist and Wesley protagonist, Wesley becomes the victim and Ava is the perpetrator. Half of the story is told from Ava’s point in the first half the movie, and then the story is told from Wesley’s point of view in the second part of the movie. “Rarely do we see the story through the eyes of the perpetrator, and in this case he was not necessarily an evil man, this was a man who made some mistakes along the way with using drugs. I make it very clear that in his perception he didn’t even realize that he was participating in a rape. So, we have a little bit of sympathy for the perpetrator. And that way the audience will be watching the film and really be seeing things in two different ways,” explains the writer.
Creating story characters

All stories Mylo writes are about human transformation, about character transformation and it is either from good to evil or it is from evil to good because it is really what the writer believes on the personal level and on the spiritual level is our purpose in life. When I asked Mylo if it was challenging for her to show character transformation, she responded: “Not at all. These characters are alive and I don’t sit down and say: ‘oh, wouldn’t it be fun if these characters…’ Some writer do that: ‘if this character kind of had a funny limp or…’ certain types of characteristics that we add to the characters on paper to give them life. All these characters are actually different facets of my own soul and my own being. All very real, all very different and have all the characterization naturally. And then part of it goes back to the channeling process. I love all of my characters. And in some writings you can tell that a writer has a personal issue with the character. And what happens is that character will not blossom, you must love all of your characters,” says the writer.

Mylo says that her character introductions are almost always comic, even when she is writing a serious thriller. For example, that’s how she introduces some of her characters: ‘Wesley is a well-bred southern frat boy with a smile that could charm the pants of Janet Reno. Julie is a multi body part pierced waitress who is the epitome of the Georgian peach. Merriam is God-fearing woman who couldn’t pass a breathalyzer during Sunday Service even if her life depended on it. So, what do we know in that one statement about Merriam? That she is an alcoholic. I didn’t say: ‘she is an attractive woman in her fifties wearing high heels.’ And Eloise - she is a big black woman in her seventies who has a personality as big as her waistline. And another favorite. I have a black woman, a doctor and I said: ‘doctor Morris, is a black woman who obviously graduated from the Oprah Winfrey school of Medicine.”

Mylo comes up with a metaphor that captures the character’s personality. And this is the only way we can keep these people straight in our heads. But visually we can’t. You can’t say: red- headed person who is wearing brown pants. We just can’t capture the personality. Once we know what kind of a person this is, then all the dialogue is in the right context. I can say that Merriam is a passive loving sweet woman who bakes her cookies, and then when she says her words we get it – she is a sweet loving woman. But
if I tell that ‘Merriam is a church going woman who couldn’t get through the gates of
heaven even if she tried to bribe saint Michael.’ All of a sudden the context of her
dialogue changes, then we know that she is really an evil person behind that church going
façade. Her dialogue changes and this is one thing that I think the writers do not put
enough weight on is that that character intro sets the context for everything after it,”
explains the writer.

When creating her characters, Mylo tries to find a conflict within a character. “In
fact, Merriam Scarborough, Wesley’s mother, is a church going Baptist woman, beautiful
attorney, who believes in good for everybody, doesn’t even speak one bad word, she
didn’t even get angry in the entire script, and yet she is the most evil character of all of
them and her words are sweet as pie, her relationships in her mind are quite genuine, but
the resulted actions are so evil. Is it a conflict within the character? Absolutely, but that’s
what makes it so interesting and that’s what makes it so real,” says the writer.

Resolving the story problems – the story transformation

After the writer has finished the first draft of the screenplay, she applies different
types of mental tools to make sure the story is working. Each tool represents a mini-
analysis that the writer applies to check certain story elements, such as evaluating the
scenes to make sure they turn their values from positive to negative and from negative to
positive, evaluating the story structure to ensure it has necessary elements, and building
story progressive complications.

When Mylo was working on a re-write of “The Statute of Limitations,” she
constantly thought about how to make her story more powerful: “How can I make it
more scary? How can I build the tension and suspense without overdoing it because you
got to give your audience a break.” Mylo says that the post rape scene is probably the
most traumatic scene in the entire movie, not even the rape scene. The post rape scene
was so heavy that the writer decided to lighten the scene a bit because she had to give the
audience a break after they’ve been breathing heavily for 7-8 minutes. “It is like a roller
coaster ride. In a roller coaster you have a huge dip and then the roller coaster is kind of
going even before we do another huge dip. That’s the kind of stylization that I’m doing in
the re-write,” shares the writer.
Making the story more powerful

Mylo uses certain techniques that make a thriller more powerful. The writer admits that there is a technical art to writing thrillers. “I think that beyond the fact that the whole story is being channeled to me, there is an element of going in as a writer and tweaking twists and turns or layering clues. A scene would be shown to me during channeling but there are five to ten ways of how to write it. You can write in a clue or a set up for a later pay off. And what I like about the construction of the thriller is that it is really a puzzle in that every single piece is connected to another piece,” explains the writer.

One of the problem solving techniques the writer uses after she finishes the first draft of the story is layering the subtle clues of the story that gradually lead to a big surprise in the end. “You want to layer in certain clues but they have to be subtle enough. Where it is not screaming evident, but at the same time, in the end of the movie when you reveal your huge surprise ending, then the audience should be able to go backwards and say, oh, I get it.”

Another tool that Mylo applies when she is done with the first draft of the script is writing down on a piece of paper in a chart fashion where the conflict is for each characters. “So, I have in the beginning Wesley wants to have a good grade. And the next thing I will write Wesley’s conflict, and then ‘oh my God he raped this woman’, and the next thing he has to make a decision about whether or not he is going to defend his client who is going to be accused of rape,’ explains the writer. Mylo looks at each character’s conflict to see if the things are getting progressively worse and worse. “And I think if you do this for each character you will have an overall story that the momentum is picking up and isn’t falling flat on its face or picking up too early. You have to let it build,” explains the writer.

Mylo goes through the process of the story edition or changes to make sure that the complications are getting progressively worse, and for each character there is more and more at stake. Since the movie is about revenge, Mylo had to go character by character and ask: ‘according to what each character has done to Ava, is the degree of their punishment equal to the degree of what they did to her?’ “For example, the character Sebastian is the one who immediately has a profound clash with Ava. In every gang rape
you have a ringleader who generally hooks other people to participate. He is the ringleader and he is also the first to die in the very first scene.” Mylo wrote down what Sebastian did to Ava and what Ava’s payback was.

The third man who participated in the rape was David, he was not mean to Ava prior to it and it is established very early in the script that this guy is the follower of Sebastian and that Sebastian controls him, demoralizes him, makes fun of him and the dynamics of those two is established clearly. “When I did my analysis of Ava and what her pay back was, I noticed that it didn’t fit. So, I changed the way she murdered him, pretty much forcing him to write a suicide note, and killing him and making it look like a suicide.”

Dealing with the community of practitioners, solving the story problems

Mylo wrote her story on spec and then optioned it to an independent film production company in Miami called “Global Partners.” The writer shared that she had been very successful in being able to fight for the integrity of the story: “and maybe I’m a convincing person when it comes to these kinds of things, but it is amazing how little my story has been changed. You hear these stories and it happens all the time when you have a phenomenal script and just because a producer didn’t have an understanding of the underlying moral themes, and he or she may say: ‘well why are we setting this in Bali, why don’t we set it in New York? Or lets make the main character a man instead of a woman, not understanding that it will change the underlying forces of the moral of the story. And so far I’ve had no problem with the conflict of my story,” says Mylo.

Early on in the process Mylo found out that some producers had a hard time with her building sympathy with Wesley’s character. Some people reacted that the writer gave too much normalcy, too much sympathy for Wesley. “And even though he participated in the gang rape, and even though he has a sleazy job as a PR man, defending a sleazy guy, he was a pretty much a decent guy. And I thought that it was pretty interesting that some people could not accept that. They immediately start to classify or label people and their actions and that was very interesting to me,” shares Mylo. She says that immediately two of the producers who were working on the development with ‘Global Partners said: “Wow, we could see Wesley’s character transformation and accept whatever he did
without hating his guts one hundred percent.” And two of the other producers in the room said: “We’ve got to change it. He should be evil from the start to finish.”

The writer was able to convince the opposing producers that Wesley’s transformation was believable. She said: “how many people in the audience, how many men in the audience may think back to the time in their life when they did something a little stupid: maybe under the influence of alcohol or whatever? And today they are successful people, good fathers, good husbands, yet, there is that little incident that happened in the past. And that’s what the story is all about - the past comes to haunt some of my characters.”

Learning skills from writing “The Statute of Limitations”

Mylo acknowledges that her screenplay “The Statute of Limitations’ was so far the most instrumental for her because she has experimented with style and tried many techniques that were perfect for writing that particular script in the genre of a thriller. Writing ‘The Statute of Limitations’ helped the writer to develop her skills of creating dialogue and making the story more suspenseful that she was capable of applying to her re-write work: “I’ve been doing a re - write work on two thrillers. And I think that the skills from going in and tweaking 'The Statute of Limitations’ so many times made me just fly and say ‘oh, I know what set of tools I would apply on this one,” says the writer.

When I asked Mylo how she would compared herself with what she used to be as a screenwriter at the beginning of her screenwriting journey with what she is now, what has changed, the writer responded that she feels more confident in doing things outside of the box. “At the beginning I had all these ideas and techniques that came to me naturally, but I didn’t want to apply them until I felt like I knew what the rules were. How does it really work? I didn’t want to break the rules until I knew what they really were. And now I’m very confident and I have a really good understanding of what the boundaries are and where I can do things a little bit differently. And I think that my skills as a writer have definitely improved.”

The skill that the writer has developed was the skill to convey emotion: “And when I say emotion, I’m not limited to having the audience cry or having the audience angry. I’m talking about curiosity. I’m talking about re-arranging lines in dialogue, where I’m
adding suspense within scenes or suspense within shock.” Mylo was re-writing the scene where Ava was told in the Hospital that she couldn’t have children, after all those horrible things that were done to her during the rape. Originally Mylo had Ava crying and speaking to the doctor and then the writer decided that her character actually couldn’t speak because she had a bad concussion that hit the side of the brain that affected her ability to speak and so she could only write. Throughout the whole scene everything that Ava was responding to the audience could only see through her eyes. Mylo shared how she had re-written this scene: “The doctor asks her: ‘do you have any specific body parts that hurt?’ And she writes down: ‘head’ and the doctor says: ‘you’ve got a concussion, and the doctor says: ‘any other place?’ And Ava would look at her father very nervously and the doctor says to her father: ‘could you excuse us?’ And the father leaves and it is just the doctor and Ava. And the doctor goes into this long speech where she says that because Ava suffered very serious injuries to her cervix due to the foreign substance being introduced to her body, but the good news is that we already performed surgery to repair the tissue. And Ava writes down: ‘babies’ and a question mark. And the doctor’s whole face changes. And she says: ‘Ava, I’m so sorry…’ And that is a completely different more powerful visual way she can’t speak and so she writes: ‘babies’ instead of the way it was in the first draft where the doctor saying: ‘I’ve got bad news’. So, it’s those kinds of changes in the draft that I believe are going to make a difference of a decent movie to something really special,” says the writer.

When organic writers use ‘mechanical’ methods of solving the story problems

Although organic writers’ creative approaches are mainly based on finding the connection with the divine and achieving the story saturation when the story takes a life of its own, they admitted that sometimes they had to resort to purely problem-solving techniques that they called ‘mechanical’ way of writing. The organic writers shared that creative writing represented problem-solving activity for them when they worked on re-writing the screenplays written by other people, or when they worked within the genres that required problem solving approaches. Sometimes the writers had to apply what they called mechanical strategies when writing their own stories until the writers achieved the state of saturation with the story. The writers who followed the organic creative approach
reported that they didn’t enjoy it and tried to avoid it as much as they could. An exception was Mylo Carbia who worked with the genre of a thriller that required rigorous application of problem solving techniques after she channeled her stories.

Steve Rivele confessed that he has hard time working mechanically: “I mean I do it with the rewrites and I get paid a lot of money to do it. And it is the difference between synthesis and analysis. *And you reduce the story to the problem, and you analyze it and you solve it objectively.* I can’t work that way, except when I need a lot of money all of a sudden and I’ll take a re-write.”

The other way for Steve is an *organic process, a synthetic process of merging with the character and seeing the world from the character’s point of view, and letting that point of view drive him:* “And that’s when it is exciting, and organic, and natural, and flows and I begin to learn things,” says Steven, “you can’t learn anything from the other process except how to solve those particular kinds of problems”.

“Writing is like living; it is not like construction,” says the writer. Steve’s whole being intuitively rejects the idea of approaching the creative process as a *mechanical process*; the idea that he can lay out an arbitrary structure in advance, and then proceed from the beginning of that to the end and arrive at truth. “It just doesn’t work that way for me,” says the writer.

**Re-writing the works of others**

Steve acknowledged that the writing process never becomes organic when the writers are working on big re-writes of someone else’s work; it always stays mechanical. “When someone else has already written a screenplay and we were just asked to revise it, then it was just figuring out what went wrong in the original material and fix it. That’s very much a problem-solving process. You analyze the material, figure out where the mistakes are, figure out why they were made, and then try to fix them. And this is not *nearly as exciting as the other process,* but it can be an intellectual challenge and it pays well.”

Mylo shares similar experience. When she is re-writing another person’s script the experience is not the same as when she is writing her own stories that she channels. *The writer admits that it is a different creative process because she has to build the movie*
from the script versus the other way around when she writes her own originals. “And it is not as energetic, and it is not spiritual channeling, I’ll tell you right off the bat, I’m more of a normal writer when I’m doing re-writes,” admits Mylo. The writer admits that she also creates a parallel world where the entire story takes place, but it never feels as real as to her as in the stories that she writes. And going back to the courtroom analogy, when Mylo does a re-write, she feels like she has a remote control. She can she get the prosecutor to say what she wants them to say or to stop like she is directing a play and ask a prosecutor: “what motivated you to say that?”

Writing thrillers

In Steve’s opinion, there are certain genres that lend themselves to a more mechanical or analytical way of creating the story, like the action, the thriller or the mystery, where there is a puzzle that has to be solved. When using this approach, it is really difficult in the writer’s opinion to fuse those things with real authentic life. An analytical conscious process of writing is the least interesting part of writing for Steve. If it is an analytical challenge of a high level, the writer enjoys it, but it is not satisfying in the profound and in the intellectual sense for Steve. That’s one of the reasons Steve and his partner don’t write thrillers: “Thrillers are all about problem solving, getting all the elements of the plot to work out. Once you’ve done that, congratulations, you masturbated successfully, you solved the rubric’s cube, but how did it change you as a human being, what did it teach you, how did it deepen you? What light has it thrown on the life? None. It is fun and you can make money doing it, but I don’t find it satisfying,” reflects the writer.

Steven shares his experience of re-writing “The Death of Conrad Shepherd”, the thriller that a Hollywood studio asked them to rework. There were fundamental story problems that interfered with either the development of the character, or the development of the ideas in the story, or the plot, or the movement of the story and it was extremely frustrating for the writers as they felt they were in the business of trying to force the story forward. “When that happens, usually you’ve got to stop, and ask: What does the story demand, what do the characters want? Because otherwise, you are going to create an impossible artificial situation,” says Steven.
The actual business of writing scenes and getting from one scene to another to a great extend was a process of problem solving when the writers tried to fix them in “The Death of Conrad Shepherd.” Some problems were apparently unsolvable, and “you keep banging your head against them because you can’s make your story to come out right. So, it can be a very frustrating experience because you want to create something that flows and has integrity, but is also true to the character, and is true to what you’re trying to say. If all of those things are coming together, then it is a very enjoyable experience, as ‘Beethoven’ was,” says Steven.

As the writers progressed with the story material, they began to realize why the material didn’t work, and that there were certain fundamental flaws in it. Steven explains that the story was a straight rip off from the “Count of Monte Kristo” and the original Dumas’ book did work. It was made into a film at least twice. But the problem was that when the writers tried to transfer it into the 20th century and into the Cold war, the forces involved become global, they become so much more important.

Steven and Chris went through numerous re-writes of the story. By the end of the process they literally started hating the material: “Of course, they keep telling us to change it, and what’s wrong with it, and keep trying to tell them why we did what we did, what meaning it has, what sense it has to us, an integrity that it has. Literally, literally saying you have to take that scene out and put a gunfight in. The audience is going to want a gunfight. Take this scene out and put the gunfight in.”

An Analytical Way of Writing

Achieving the desired state in story development

The desired state of the story development in analytical creative approach is when the story starts developing spontaneously in the writer’s mind because of all the work the writer did prior to writing the story. Bob McKee who follows an analytical approach to story development didn’t believe in the concept of the story taking the life of its own when the characters start dictating the story to the writer. In his book “Story” he wrote: “Research from memory, imagination, and fact is often followed by a phenomenon that authors love to describe in mystical terms: characters suddenly spring to life and of their
own free will make choices and take actions that create turning points that twist, build, and turn again until the writer can hardly type fast enough to keep up with the outpourings.

This virgin birth is a charming self-deception writers love to indulge in, but the sudden impression that the story is writing itself simply marks the moment when a writer’s knowledge of the subject has reached the saturation point. The writer becomes the god of his little universe and is amazed by what seems to be spontaneous creation, but is in fact the reward for hard work” (p. 75). Bob McKee, a screenwriting guru designed a methodology for creating the architecture for the screenplays that is based on some rigorous principles of story telling and story analysis. In his approach to story creation, Bob promotes two fundamental ideas to writing the screenplays: the dialectical thinking about the story development and the psychological reasoning about the character’s desires, choices and actions. The writer uses these methods when he follows his established creative rituals: first writing the story outline and then based on it writing the story treatment. From the treatment the writer then proceeds to writing the first draft of the screenplay.

McKee in his dialectical method of writing denied the mystical, channeling part of the creative process calling it the writers’ “charming deception.” He attributed the state of the spontaneous story development to all the work the writer has done on the story in advance and as a result reaping the rewards in the form of a clear understanding of the story and the characters. McKee explained it by the writers’ utilization of the tools for creating the story design and partially by the work of their unconscious mind. In one of our interviews Bob said: “A talented mind already knows the story unconsciously. The problem is to get yourself in the right point of view in the character’s mind, ask the right questions and the unconscious mind delivers, because once you set the problem, it starts to work on it. It seems that when you’re in the harness and you’re working well, these solutions come very easily, surprisingly easily. And the only explanation I’ve got is that the subconscious mind already absorbed the problem and it has been turning it over 24 hours a day, so that when you sit down, it tells you what it already knows. It seems at times to come back easily and you just go, and sometimes, on the other hand, it’s really hard; it’s hard,” says the writer.
The writer’s commitment to writing: making his own destiny

In the heart of Bob’s creative approach lies the application of analytical tools and reasoning methods. Unlike the group of writers who followed the organic way of writing and believed in the spiritual connection with the divine force that was facilitating them in writing their stories, Bob McKee doesn’t really believe in connection higher force, God, or religion. He admitted in our interview that he is an atheist. In our conversations about the creative process and the stories they writers had to write, Bob expresses his philosophical views on religion. When discussing the questions of chaos and randomness that the screenwriters should start to address today, the writer referred to the film “Run Over Run” and “Magnolia” that are looking at something that ‘scares the hell of human nature which is that we’re not in control,’ that we really are the unwilling victim of chance, says the writer. ‘And that coincidence and randomness is real in this life. We’ve always believed that the God was there taking care of things, and that it all has meaning and it wasn’t random, and these new age people say that there are no accidents and that everything has a purpose. Well, that is just not true,’ concludes Bob. ‘There are accidents. You can walk out of here tonight and get hit by a taxi, there is no meaning to it; it is just random.’

The writer didn’t talk about his being a writer as being chosen or selected, as it being his calling. He did admit the inevitable nature of events that happened to him in his life, by doing it expressing his belief in the fate and destiny and his role in making his own decisions as to how his life is going to be: “Talking about the story, the beginning of the story, the audience should feel that everything is possible, that the way the story is turning, it could go to a thousand of different directions. They should feel that everything is possible in the story and who knows how the lives of the characters will be. But in the end of the story, looking back, now that you know the characters and their world, you should feel that the path they took was the only path, the choices they made and the chances they took were the only actions and choices they could have taken and this is the only way their lives could have gone,” contemplates the writer.

Looking back on his life, Bob realizes that this is the only path it could have gone. So much has seemed as an accident: him choosing his major at the university, being an actor and director was inevitable. Bob recalls that he had his scholarship as pre-law and he was
an English major and the scholarship people came to him at his sophomore year and asked him to do an extra-curricular activity to which Bob suggested to do a play. The scholarship representatives agreed. Bob auditioned for the sophomore play, a musical, where he had the only non-dancing, non-comic part, in the musical comedy. That’s how Bob recalls his experience during the first opening night: “I’m sure I was awful. But, opening night when I stepped on stage, forty years later I could go to that theater and I could find the board I was standing on. And the thought came to me: who are you kidding? This is all you wanted all your life, you just didn’t have the guts to make the thought and so you said – dentistry and law. And I never looked back. And I think that I would have found my way to the theater and to writing and to the stage one way or another. I never regretted it.”

Not viewing writing as calling, as being selected or chosen by a higher force, Bob’s creative approach doesn’t imply reaching the connection with the divine, rather it is based on utilizing more analytical, intellectual methods and tools for story development. The desired state in the story development, the achieved spontaneity is explained by all the work the writers have done in advance that brought them the results of seamless story development. The following section of the chapter examines Bob’s analytical method in two phases in achieving the desired state of the story development, when the story starts unfolding in the writer’s mind due to the methods he is applying and the research he has done, and resolving the story problems.

**The writer’s rituals**

Following the analytical approach in the story development, Bob follows the creative rituals of writing the story outlines and treatments where he applies dialectical and psychological methods of reasoning about the story and the characters. Then the writer creates the first draft of the story based on the story treatment.

**Creating a story outline**

As the first step in his creative process, McKee writes a story outline. Bob talks about the importance of writing a story outline, because according to his methodology, in the outline the writer will discover the story meaning. In his book he describes two
processes of approaching the screenplay creation. In the first approach he describes the attempts of the ‘struggling writer’ calling the process “Writing from the outside in.” In this description Bob refers to a hypothetical writer who ‘has a way of working that goes something like this: He dreams up an idea, noodles on it for a while, then rushes straight to the keyboard. He imagines and writes, writes and dreams until he reaches page 120 and stops. The he hands out Xerox copies to his friends and waits for his reaction” (p. 411). The guru goes on describing how the struggling writer’s friends find certain flaws that make the story weak, and the struggling writer tries to re-write it but has a difficult time making a screenplay better because in his re-writes: “he clings like a drowning man to his favorite scenes until a rewrite comes out the other way.” In sum, the struggling writer creates five versions of the same story where he still clings to his favorite scenes that don’t work and then finally when years are gone by and he is burnt out, he gives it to his agent who reads it without enthusiasm and hands the copies of it to Hollywood and the writer gets his sentence: the story sucks.

Bob then describes another scenario, which the successful writers follow. He calls this scenario “Writing from inside out” where he promotes the view that the successful screenwriters adhere to the following creative process: they start with writing a step-outline which is created on stacks of three-by five cards. In the step-outline the writer ‘clearly and simply describes what happens in each scene, how it builds and turns. For example: “He enters expecting to find her at home, but instead discovers her note saying she’s left for good.” Having spent the first four to six months on writing the step-outline, the successful writer then proceeds to creating a story treatment, where ‘the writer expands each scene from its one or two-sentences to a paragraph or more of double-spaced, present-tense, moment by moment description.” In the end of this effort the successful writer produces ‘sixty, eighty, ninety, or more double-spaced pages” that come out as the present tense novel” (p. 414). From this treatment the writer writes the screenplay. “Writing a screenplay from a thorough treatment is a joy and often runs at a clip of five to ten pages per day. We now convert treatment description and add dialogue,” concludes the screenwriting guru.

According to McKee, outline is not a screenplay, but it is like a present tense novel. It includes all the key events, and how they happen. The writer calls writing an
Writing a story treatment

The big step from outlining is to writing scenes in the story treatment. Writing a story treatment the guru considers as very important ‘because you need to make sure that when you’re writing you don’t make commitments too soon. If you make a commitment to write a scene a certain way, then the imagination just stops. And what happens with the screenwriters is that they fall in love with the dialog and their imagination doesn’t have a chance to think about something completely different, a whole new way of doing that, a ways that nobody else has done that before. “And you get stuck on that scene and you’re choking yourself because you wrote the dialogue. So, you don’t want to commit to a certain scene too soon, so if you don’t like the scene completely, you scratch this scene out in the treatment. And at that point you throw it out without a thought, you know, you don’t like it. So, the treatment is important because in the treatment you could explore all the events that are in the outline,” concludes the writer.

Regarding the size of the treatment, Bob explains in his book: “The forty to sixty scenes of a typical screenplay, treated to a moment by moment description of all action, underlaid with a full subtext of the conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings of all characters, will produce sixty, eighty, ninety, or more double spaced pages” (p. 415). Then the screenwriting guru continues: “We won’t change the overall design of the story because it worked every time we pitched it. But within that structure scenes may need to be cut, added, or re-ordered. We rework the treatment until every moment lives vividly, in text and subtext. That done, then and only then the writer should move to the screenplay itself.

Writing a screenplay from a thorough treatment is a joy and often runs at a clip of five to ten pages per day. We now convert treatment description and add dialogue. And
dialogue written at this point is invariably the finest dialogue we’ve ever written” (p. 416).

What is primary – creating the story structure or the story creative substance?

In the story outline and then treatment the writer pre-determines the story structure in the form of acts, scenes, and events. During his seminars and in his book Bob McKee teaches that the story structure should be thought of in advance when the writer creates the story outline. It is a fundamentally different approach from the organic writers. The reason Bob believes in creating the story structure or the story form in advance is because the screenwriting guru claims that the story structure should serve as the writer’s guiding principle in the creative process. Bob responded without hesitation that the creative process should work within the structure of the form and there is no way to avoid that. “Form and substance are two sides of the coin, two different directions to the same problem,” explained the writer. “Because you’re not writing a slice of life, you’re not writing a collage, you’re now writing a story, and story has a form, like a frame for the picture, story has a form. You have to work within that form.” Bob uses the painting metaphor to explain his belief of the relationship between the form and the substance. “If I’m a painter,” continued Bob, “I have a canvas which is rectangular and I know from the art of painting that imbalance creates a tension and that symmetry destroys it, that symmetry is pleasing and that I have to create an asymmetrical but pleasing arrangement. If it’s too symmetrical, it’s boring, if it’s chaotic, it’s confusing. So, I’ve got to create a visual experience that is asymmetrical with tensions within it, but overall somehow that tension is pleasing, right? And I went to the arts school and they teach me the difference between horizontal, vertical lines, the methods and psychology of color, I mean I understand the principles of the artwork. I could be creating the color fields or flowers, but it doesn’t matter because the subject matter that I chose has to find its way inside of the formal principles of the art form.”

According to Bob’s methodology of story writing, the formal principles of the art form are the writer’s guide. “There is a tension between the formal principles that I know that somehow I must fulfill it with the creative content,” says Bob. “The writer’s job is to make the interplay between the two really satisfying. So, the writer is not completely free, you don’t want to be free, there is an art form that you must fulfill and that art form
makes demands upon you. And one of the demands is that it’s got to make sense. It’s got to have meaning.”

Applying dialectical thinking to story development

When creating his story in the outline and treatment the writer thinks through the dialectical forces of the story development, and he applies the psychological reasoning about the characters’ desires, choices, their actions and consequences of these actions, gradually creating the interconnected world of the story. “I have a dialectical mind, because I am an old Marxist and I read his Hegel,” says the writer. “The fastest way for creativity for me is to ask: ‘what is the opposite of that?’

In the heart of the dialectical approach of writing screenplays is searching for the sources of antagonism in the story. When McKee creates his stories, he thinks dialectically in terms of what’s - ‘what’s expected and what is unexpected.’

Bob came up with the idea for his first screenplay “The Dead Files” by applying the dialectical thinking approach. At the start of the creative process the writer took two aspects into consideration: he wanted to write a story that would be commercial so that a Hollywood studio would be interested in it, and he wanted to write a thriller because he liked thrillers. One of his favorite films was “The Night Jackal” about a CIA assassin. Bob asked himself a question: ‘what’s the opposite of that?’ And came up with the answer: ‘an assassin who can’t kill.’ The writer wondered what he would do if he were an assassin who couldn’t kill for some reason. And he decided that he would go to a psychiatrist to find out what was wrong with him. And then the writer thought about what would be a psychiatrist’s reaction to someone who came into the room saying: “I’m a hired assassin, I work for CIA, and for some reason I can’t kill people”? If the psychiatrist worked for CIA, it would be his job to get this assassin to the way where he could kill. That’s how Bob’s first screenplay was originated.

Bob uses the same approach to fix uninteresting scenes in the screenplays. Often he finds that the root of the problem lies in the fact that what the character expected to happen, more or less happened. In order to make it more interesting and alive, the writer asks: “So, what’s the opposite of that? What’s unexpected, but honest? What’s the opposite from the character’s A expectation that comes from character B?” The writer
has to get into character’s A head and figure out from her point of view, what she wants, and how she is going to react to character’s B actions. That would be something that character B would never anticipate because from character’s B point of view, what character A is doing is something that character B could never expect. “And unless that happens the scene is just like ‘okay, I was right.”

In Bob’s opinion, the dialectical way of thinking moves the story fast. “Whether or not other writers put it in those words or not, by instinct or by sense of form they know that the story can’t just go flatly: “and then, and then, and then. They know that something comes from some place somewhere and suddenly the story is interesting,” says Bob. Bob is convinced that a talented writer and a storyteller has a genetically given dialectical mind. “They know by instinct that two beats, three beats in a row are not supposed to happen. You can always open the gap between the character’s expectation and the result he or she gets from his or her action, but you cannot always do it in an honest way. That’s what is hard,’ claims the screenwriting guru. “Sure, we know that the scene is going to turn from the positive to the negative value and then from the negative to the positive, we know that the characters are going to have conflict, we know – that’s the nature of the art. But how do you get it from these characters in a way that is truthful for those two characters? That’s what is hard, you know,” contemplates Bob. The following is an example of how Bob applied his dialectical and psychological way of thinking when writing one of his screenplays “Miss Julie Montgomery”.

**Writing “Miss Julie Montgomery”**

Story origination

“Miss Julie Montgomery” is not only the most recent screenplay Bob has been working on but also the second one he ever wrote. It began 40 or more years ago for Bob when he first was in a play by Augustine Stringberg called “Miss Julie”. This play was about sex battle, but also equally about a class struggle between an aristocrat and a servant. For Bob “Miss Julie Montgomery” was an opportunity to attack everything he hated about America: race, politics, religion, male, female, black – white relationships, and struggle in the southern part of the United States.
“And when I did the play in 1960s, I realized that the play has changed enormously for the audience because from the American audience point of view it’s romantic for the butler to run off with the Count’s daughter, not the social disaster it would have been in 1885, when the action took place. So, I was standing on stage, doing the play, realizing that the audience was enjoying it, that they were actually rooting for the butler to defeat the Count’s daughter. And I thought: ‘If I were black, these people would understand this play, because in the 60s it was not romantic yet for the black man to run off with the white woman, okay? So, that became the seed of it, that idea and when I came to do the screenplay many years later,” the writer explains about the story origin.

Bob decided to set up his story in Louisiana because it was the most corrupt state in the South at the beginning of the century. “And is still is today; no I mean it is a terribly corrupt city. And I decided to make the main character a Judge, he was a Count in the play and he is corrupt, bribed and wanting to be a governor. There was a political consequence that if this scandal were to get out, that his daughter slept with his servant who was the black man he would have been ruined as well as his daughter would have been ruined,” explains the writer.

Bob explains that Stringberg’s play takes place in one hour in one room in the kitchen and if it would have to be a film it would have to encompass the whole of that culture around the World War One in the American South. So, Bob’s task was to create the reality of that world in his screenplay.

The film starts with John, a black boy who is about 8 years old standing in the field near the Judge’s house, watching Julie, a girl of his age, the Judge’s daughter and her mother playing together. John is fascinated by Julie, a blond - haired beautiful girl. Julie’s mother disappears from her life when Julie turns ten. Julie has convinced herself that her father murdered her mother and dumped her body in the swamp. But the truth is that her mother ran off with another man and never told her daughter and never spoke to her since. Julie’s mother moved to New York City with another guy and abandoned her child. Julie can’t deal with that and she invented a story that her father murdered her mother, which was one of the reasons for her hatred towards her father.

Twenty years later John returned to plantation after spending years in Louisiana where he taught himself to read literature, and appreciate good music, where he became
knowledgeable about wine, and he was a wine steward in the best whorehouse in New Orleans. John comes back to plantation and gets hired by the Judge to become a head of the servants when the Judge becomes governor.

Identifying the forces of antagonism in the story

Using his dialectical approach to story, Bob creates the sources of antagonism that would move his story forward. They are huge social forces that oppose black people, the sexist, racist forces of society backed up by religion. “All these white men, they’re justifying everything they are doing because they are doing God’s will. I have this huge white male world that subjugates the black and female world on one level and then you have the dreams of desperate people. They are living the life they don’t want, and they want to escape to something better, and they dream up an impossible future and these things are utterly unrealizable,” Bob explains revealing the tragic circumstances of his characters’ lives.

But at the heart of the story is antagonism between men and women, the power of relationships. “Julie wants to control John, John wants to control Julie, and both of them are underdogs that are being controlled by the Judge. And so they turn on each other and try to have power over each other. So they are each the sources of antagonism to the other,” says Bob. “But eventually they realize at some moment that this struggle of the sexes is pointless and they get warm and affectionate,” says the author.

Creating story characters and figuring out the characters’ desires

Next the writer tries to figure out the characters desires, their choices, actions, and the consequences of their actions. Discussing the big questions of the creative process and the writer’s inner imaginings and attempts to realize them in the screenplay, Bob talks about the importance of understanding the characters’ desires, which in turn will create their final choices in order to tell the story. “To realize the characters in a moving and credible way, the question that you keep asking yourself over and over is ’what does my character want: overall, subconsciously, at this moment in the play, at this moment in the story? Because when you figure out what your character wants at this moment of the play, then you could imagine what they will do to get that,” explains Bob. Because the
writer knows his or her characters, and the world they live in, the nature of their problems, and their conflicts, he can figure out what they want at the moment and what their choices are. Taking the possible choices for character into consideration, the writer thinks what the character would choose to do, and how they will act. “But you can’t figure out what choice the character would take if you don’t know what they want,” says Bob. “And so, you’re constantly sitting out there trying to figure out their desires: what does my character want? On the other side, what’s stopping them from getting it? Given that, and the choices the character has, what actions could the character take given the forces of antagonism, given what the character wants? And the story is told,” explains Bob the flow of his dialectical thinking.

Bob explains how he tries to figure out John’s and Julie’s desires. Bob says that when figuring out John’s and Julie’s desires, he realized that Julie’s desire is clearer than John’s in his mind. “I know what Julie wants. I can figure out her choices. It is so clear. She thinks: ‘I either get out to this world with some kind of life or I’ll kill myself and that’s it.’ She is at rock bottom. John has more choices: after Julie commits suicide in the story, he can either go back to being John, the Judge’s butler, or he could run off with Riva, or he can go back to what he used to be before he started working for the Judge.”

Bob confessed that he was struggling to identify what John would ultimately choose because he found him to be a very complicated character: “he is vain, he is pretentious, he cares about his people, he is obsessive, but he is no fool. John is very dimensional complex person, full of these dynamics pushing him and pulling him constantly and therefore, he becomes like Hamlet.” In Bob’s mind, Hamlet was the greatest character ever written. He is indecisive because Hamlet doesn’t know what he wants. Hamlet can see all the sides of his choices as well as John can. He knows that there is nothing wrong about being the head of the servants at the governor’s mansion. It’s the best job for a black man in Louisiana. John could also decide that he could run away and not sell out because it’s not just that the Judge is a governor, he is a racist governor.

Bob characterizes John as a dreamer, who has intellectual pretensions of a sophisticated man of the world, and who considers himself more aristocratic than the aristocrats that he works for. “And in many ways he is more aristocratic,” says Bob.
“Because he has worked in that hotel business, his dream is to have his own hotel. He says to Julie that “the way you make money in the hotel business is that you rent the rooms by the hour,” which means it’s a hotel that can become a problem, okay? So, he has a dream about his own hotel in Haiti because Haiti is a black republic. But he also knows the reality: Haiti is poverty struck, a terrible place. But he has dreams, but I would not call those ideals, they are hopes, but not ideals. He is not a moral man.”

In figuring out the characters’ desires, Bob applies the principles of psychology. Bob’s methodology suggests that the character can have two types of desires: conscious and unconscious. Usually the character is aware of the conscious desire. His unconscious desire might not be as clear to him. But it is the character’s unconscious desire that drives his behavior and motivates it. Continuing our discussion about John’s desires, Bob contemplates that consciously John wants respect. He wants to rise up to the world where the ladder for the black men in 1910 was not that high. His conscious desire is that he wants to become a head of the servants at the governor’s mansion, when the Judge becomes a governor. His unconscious desire is to rise up into the world higher than that, and be free of the Judge, not to sell out to the racist, and to be his own man.

The characters’ desires and the realities of the world

Trying to weigh out the conscious and unconscious desires of his character, Bob attempts to understand if what John wants unconsciously can be achieved in America at the beginning of the century: “It is so difficult because the more I think about this character, the more I think: ‘is it in him to fulfill his unconscious desire, does he really have the world?’ In realistic terms is there such a thing for him? Could a black man without a formal education in 1910 rise into the world like this? At that time you could have your own little business you could build the houses, you could be a tradesman of some sort, a shoemaker, you could have a craft, trade. And his trade is he is a very sophisticated butler, he knows wines. How many jobs are there for that? You have to deal with the realities of America at the turn of the century.”

Discussing John’s desires, Bob reflects that if his character had only a conscious desire to rise up in the world and he set himself to do it; he would never get in bed with Julie because it is absolutely high risk for him, and John can get killed for that because
the other side of the story is the politics. Bob explains the political views on the relationship between a black and a white woman at the beginning of the century were such that the black man would have been accused of a rape for sure, and that’s how the white woman would get off if she could. In case there were witnesses saying that this black man lived with the white woman for two years, this is not rape, then he would be able to get off the hook.

In Bob’s mind, Julie is as important a character in the story as John; they are story dual protagonists. Bob explains that Julie’s dilemma is the dilemma of sex because she is a woman. “She is a rebellious woman turning 30. The Judge probably tried to marry her off again and again. She got rid of all fiancés one after another. She is 30, and she is still a virgin. And the truth of the matter is she hates men, and she hates her father. Her mother ran off when she was ten. I don’t want to make it specific if the Judge ever had his daughter, if there was incest, but there was some sexual tension between them.”

The Judge wants Julie to marry, and be respectable, and make a good show for him. “She got rid of the last suitor and the Judge makes it clear to her, since she doesn’t have a formal education, if he doesn’t pay the bills and he doesn’t take care of her, if he throws her out, what will she be: a waitress or a whore? These are her choices. She is hurting his career. She has to straighten out and if she doesn’t he is going to throw her out. And if he does, there is no life for her anyway. A 30 year old woman, in the south, without formal education, unmarried, she would do the manual labor or be a whore, that’s it, and Julie understands this, without her father’s money she has no future,” explains Bob considering Julie’s dilemma and choices.

In Bob’s view, Julie is a very self-destructive person. “I think that unconsciously she is going to escape from her father, one way or another, and one possible way is to run off with John to Haiti, but that is so utterly unrealistic, and so what’s left for her? A suicide. And so what she is doing she is pushing herself to a suicide. And her inter-dynamics is clear – she wants out: it’s either run off or die. And so she is totally self-absorbed. A suicide is a person in the lesser of two evils dilemma: ‘there is life, which I hate and it’s so painful I can’t stand it, and there is death, which is frightening.’ And they make the lesser of two evils choice, and at some point death is an easy way out. It is
cowardly because they don’t have the courage to face a more difficult choice, which is life. And death looks attractive and that’s the choice they will make.”

*The dialectics of the story development - finding the story contradictions*

The writer talks about the story contradictions and how they move the story forward. “The whole dynamics of the story is based upon contradictions. And this is the nature of story, the dialectic of life, it is what story is about, and it had been long before there was Marx or Hegel.” Bob gives an example of Oedipus who wants to find out why the city of thieves is suffering this plague, and searching for the criminal only to discover that the criminal is him. “And it’s a contradiction, ok? He thinks he is innocent and is looking for criminal and he discovers that he is the criminal. It’s a living contradiction.”

When he wrote a scene where the Judge is dragging Julie to the speech she doesn’t want to go to because she realizes that her appearance in public will give the Judge more opportunities to get her married, Bob thought: What’s the opposite of that? And he decided that the opposite of that is Julie figuring out the way to trick the Judge so that she can stay home and send him to the speech, not to deal with all of this. “She is a white woman with the black man in the situation like this: he is the servant, she is the master, she is white, he is black - these are the contradictions, they are not supposed to sleep together. But are they going to, so the slave becomes the master and the master becomes the slave. They are constantly turning it upside down at every moment, and every line,’ explains Bob the opposing points of the story. ‘The Judge says to Julie: ‘kiss me, give me a nice peck on a cheek,’ to show they are good father and daughter. And she throws her hands around him and gives him a big kiss on the mouth and that’s a contradiction. That’s’ not what he wanted that’s the opposite of what he wanted. It’s thesis, anti thesis, synthesis. And so, in big ways and little ways at every moment, contradiction is the life and blood of the story, it is its life,” concludes Bob.

**Creating the story structure**

Bob explains that his story has a four-act structure. The story has an *inciting incident, an event that sets the story characters’ lives out of balance*, when Julie says: ‘we’ll go out to the picnic.” Until then everything is in balance, although there is tension between them and flirtation, interest, but up to that moment they are behaving exactly as
Elaborating on the story structure, Bob explains: “The story has an introduction, a subplot of John and Julie as children, and then there is some dramatized exposition of the Judge, and Julie and John, and Ronny. And then the story starts. There is a subplot on how Julie gets John. You can call that entire sequence Act 1. So the inciting incident - she takes him out on the picnic is the climax, then that act builds up to love making, and that’s the Act 2 climax where the life is really upside down. Then Act 3 builds up to when John decides to send her on her own and says that he will catch up with her later. And then Act 4 builds up to Julie’s suicide.”

The story resolution is when John crosses the fields to the horse, when he throws his uniform, his livery and the audience knows he is not coming back. “The climax of the story is made out of three events: Julie commits suicide; it looks like it solved the disaster for the Judge. The judge and his cronies have turned it into political asset. While they are doing that, John is almost losing his mind and is ready to shoot them and William and Jefferson talk him out of it. So, when he doesn’t shoot the judge when he decides to save the people, it builds up to the climax. So, the climax is built out of three events: Julie commits a suicide, judge turns it to political advantage, John decides not to shoot the Judge because William convinces him not to for the sake of the people. Now it’s all climax,” explains the writer the story structure.

Solving the story problems - the story transformation

Bob McKee emphasizes the importance of other people’s reaction to the story as critical because the writer cannot be just sitting in his closet, writing for his own purposes. Bob says that at some point of the creative process the writer has to be aware of the effect he or she is trying to create in the audience, and he needs to make sure that he doesn’t achieve the opposite effect. But the writer can’t be certain that he created the
right effect until the audience reacts to the story event, and even then there always be some exceptions that just won’t get it. In Bob’s experience it happened to him many times when he wrote something that he thought was perfectly clear. But when it went on television he realized that it was not what he wrote. “They didn’t get it, production didn’t get it, the director didn’t get it, actors didn’t get it. As it went on it was okay, but it wasn’t what I wrote. That’s why being an actor-director is so valuable is because you finally have something you can direct. I think from the writer to the director to the actors a lot of misunderstanding is happening.”

In his analytical writing approach McKee considers the formal requirements of the story and creates the story according to these requirements. When the formal requirements are not met it causes a problem. “You’re not writing a slice of life, you’re not writing a collage, you’re now writing a story, and story has a form, like a frame for the picture, story has a form. You have to work within that form,” says Bob.

Bob shares how he found a problem in his screenplay “Miss Julie Montgomery” because he realized that the love triangle in his story was weak. “A weak love triangle is a formal problem and I’ve got to find a solution to it,” says the writer. “When I finished the first draft I showed it to people and in particular I had black women read it, and they were not happy, and I realized that what I have done was of course I insulted the black women. By having this black man so obsessed with this beautiful white woman I was perpetrating a myth of the white princess for a black man and insulting black women by making this character very country, not well educated, so I was inadvertently putting down the black women and I didn’t want to do that,” comments the writer. “So, I had to rewrite the story. I also realized that by doing that the story was weaker than I wanted it to be because Stringberg, the original author of the play, never tried to create a love triangle between two women and a man. When I started work, I realized that it should be a genuine triangle. That choice for John Julie or Reva should be a real choice and Reva should be Julie’s equal, in many ways her superior. I wanted to make Reva into a superior woman: sane, loving, intelligent, realistic, and not neurotic. And Julie is all of those things, neurotic and unrealistic, and suicidal and so I began a re-write and taking a lot of notes to re-write it so that the triangle is much stronger and John has a real choice and
that he is an idiot, the audience would immediately feel, not to see that Reva is a much
better choice. So, he will see that,” shares the writer.

Bob says that in every story the writer has to solve a creative problem. Solving a
formal problem, according to McKee, is not like solving a puzzle because the formal
problem leads the writer to investigate an aspect of a story, which then opens up a door to
the truth. A screenwriter has to work within the form of the story like a painter is
working within the frame of the picture. “And this form has far more influence, far more
power because it is the final arbiter of ‘works doesn’t work’. And within that is
everything you know about life, right?” Bob explains that the problem of the weak love
triangle in “Miss Julie Montgomery” was a formal story problem and he had to find a
solution to it by enhancing the black female character of Riva to make her co-equal of
Julie. The formal understanding let the writer pursue the truth and hold the direction.
“The truth I would have never pursued if I didn’t understand that formally my love
triangle was weak,” says the writer.

Bob McKee does a lot of work as a “Script Doctor” when he reads the
screenplays written by others and fixes them. Bob admits that when he works on the
screenplays written by other people it is like solving a puzzle for him because the writer
tries to figure out why it works and why it doesn’t work. “So, I have to solve the puzzle.
It is a lot of fun. Solving puzzles is always fun and you have this moment of discovery:
‘oh, that’s how the puzzle works! You never have those moments when writing fiction
because the moment you write something that is really good in writing fiction, you
immediately have doubts – is it really good? But when you solve the puzzle you know
that the puzzle is solved.”

When Bob analyzes someone else’s work, he tries to understand why it doesn’t
work, it is a very complex process because it involves looking at various parts of the
story structure and the character. “Most of it is just working on the character, moment by
moment sub - textual investigation of what the character is really thinking and feeling
beat by-beat, it is very psychological. And at the same time as you work on the
psychology and experience of the characters, you always think: ‘and how does it affect
the audience? So, you think from both ends – from inner life of the scene and the affect
on the audience.”
The writer’s transformation

Acquiring self-knowledge

“The most important knowledge is self-knowledge,” claims McKee. “What a human being experiences is pretty generic. You examine your own experience, and you gain a sensitivity of knowledge of yourself as a human being that other people don’t cover. By coming to understand your own humanity, you as the writer come to understand other people’s humanity,” concludes Bob. Personal experiences of writers, their observations of life, their writing and their reflections upon them create self-knowledge. “For most writers the knowledge they gain from reading and study equals or outweighs experience, especially if experience goes unexamined. Self-knowledge is the key – life plus deep reflection on our reactions to life,” says Bob McKee. To prove his point, Bob compares two great writers: Henry James and Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway led a great life in the wars, safari, he had an amazing life experience, while Henry James hardly ever left his dining room, he went to parties and talked to people. Henry James, in Bob’s opinion, as easily is as great a writer as Hemingway. “He is a magnificent writer and in many ways superior than Hemingway, psychologically, clearly superior to Hemingway. His understanding of human interactions, the games that people play between themselves in relationships, family and what not, is much superior to Hemingway’s who understood things on a much grander, bigger scale of life and death. Henry James was interested in little deaths that people cause each other every day,” says Bob. Both being great writers, Henry James, had a tremendous self-knowledge. “I don’t think Hemingway had that depth of self-knowledge otherwise he wouldn’t have committed a suicide,” contemplates Bob.

Acquisition of self-knowledge is of key importance to Bob. When writing his story “Miss Julie Montgomery” for example, the writer has learned that he has the capacity to empathize with people that other people cannot empathize with. Bob writes dark stories and he writes about people who are not necessarily nice and good. Characters in his stories make moral decisions and they make bad decisions. “But I can empathize with those people and then I show it to people and they say – oh, she is awful.” Other people’s negative judgments of the story character and the writer’s empathy for the character, his understanding of her actions makes him think of the ways to re-write the
character to meet people’s expectations: “And then I think, well, there’s got to be a way to have my cake and eat it too.”
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter will discuss relevant findings of my study, draw conclusions from the participant’s stories, discuss the implications of my findings on practice and make recommendations for further study. The following sections will discuss the specific contributions my research study to the field of activity theory, creative thinking, screenwriting, and implications for practitioners.

Relevant Findings

In chapter two my research focused on exploring the framework of the activity theory, its system and the elements of it, its main assumptions, and the areas of research that have prevailed in the domains of activity theory. Despite the fact that activity theory has gained a lot of popularity in the last several years among researchers and practitioners in a number of areas, it still has some aspects of it that are underdeveloped and require further research.

Engerstrom (1999) identified six areas that require further development in order to bring activity theory to the next level. One of such areas is externalization or creation of artifacts. Emphasizing the importance of further understanding the process of externalization, the author wrote: “Concrete research and experimentation inspired by activity theory have been strongly dominated by the paradigm of internalization. There has been very little research on creation of artifacts, production of novel social patterns, and expansive transformation of activity contexts. Vera John-Steiner’s (1985) work on creativity and the developmental work research approach organized in Finland may be mentioned as openings in this direction” (see chapter 2).

Indeed, Vera John-Steiner’s research is an interesting, valuable, and unique study that looks into the nature of thinking of creative individuals. As a result of exploring the nature of creative thinking of several groups of creative individuals such as writers, scientists, painters, and choreographers the researcher has identified modes of thinking that her study participants resorted to while creating artifacts. She also called these modes of thinking ‘the languages of the mind’. They are: visual, verbal, emotional, and scientific thinking. The writer traces the origins of these modes of thinking into the
creative individuals’ childhood and adolescent experiences, and examines how the individuals use these modes of thinking in their creative activities. However, the study doesn’t provide an account of the creative individuals’ activities as continuous efforts showing what creative individuals performing activity actually do and experience during activity: how they proceed in their creative process, how their mental states alter, which methods and techniques the creative individuals use while they are involved in a creative activity, etc.

My research adds to the study mentioned above by providing a thick description of the creative processes of the screenwriters, examining their activities of writing a screenplay as a continuous experience. It examines the screenwriters’ goals, their conscious and unconscious mental states, the techniques and tools they apply, the challenges they face and how they solve them while they are writing a screenplay. It looks into how the initial ideas and questions the writers have about their stories grow and merge into a complex tapestry of stories, how the writers achieve the desirable states in the story development, and how they transform themselves and their stories, and how the community of practitioners influences the writers and the stories they write.

As a result of examination of the creative activities of screenwriters two major themes have emerged. The first theme is the screenwriters’ talents. What aspects of talent and craft do the screenwriters consider as being of extreme importance in order to be successful and satisfied in their profession? How do they sustain and develop their craft and their talent? The second theme is understanding the screenwriters’ creative processes. What are the important components of the creative process? What types of creative approaches do the screenwriters apply when creating their stories? What types of transformation happen as a result of the creative process?

**The Screenwriters’ Talents**

As I was examining the constituent parts of the talent and craft that the screenwriters viewed as important to writing their stories, I discovered a wealth of knowledge and wisdom the writers were eager to share based on their experiences. Although cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) does consider the subject to be important; CHAT has not paid a lot of attention to characteristics of the subject. My
research is helping to fill that gap by giving due consideration to the subject’s talents and skills.

The activity theory framework shows that *tools, community rules, and division of labor* influence the process of activity in considerable ways. The examination of the application of tools and methods by screenwriters in my study was directly connected to their talents and skills. The screenwriters’ ability to apply or invent tools and methods was dependent upon the screenwriters’ expertise that had an important mediating role on their activity and its outcomes. For instance, the results of my study show that the screenwriter’s applying a tool of *getting immersed into character’s consciousness* is a part of his *storytelling talent*.

As a result of my study, I identified the following talents that the screenwriters named as important to have in order to be able to write stories and be successful: *a storytelling talent, a visualization talent, a language talent, and an innovation talent*. Literature on screenwriting does not provide a full account of talents and skills necessary to be a successful screenwriter, an account that is based on the experiences of practitioners in the field. In his book “Story” McKee (1987) talks about the importance of *storytelling talent and literary talent*. “Good story means something worth telling that the world wants to hear. Finding this is your lonely task. *It begins with talent*. You must be born *with the creative power* to put things together in a way no one has ever dreamed” (McKee, 1997, p. 21). “Last, not only are sensory and imaginative powers prerequisite to creativity, writing also demands two singular and essential talents. These talents, however, have no necessary connection. A mountain of one does not mean a grain of the other. The first is *literary talent* – the creative conversion of ordinary language into a higher, more expressive form, vividly describing the world and capturing its human voices. Literary talent is however, common. The second is *story talent* – the creative conversion of life itself to a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. It seeks out the inscape of our days and reshapes it into a telling that enriches life. Pure story talent is rare. Master storytellers know how to squeeze life out of the least things, while poor storytellers reduce the profound to the banal” (McKee, 1997, p.28).

My study not only lists the key screenwriting talents, but also provides an analysis of *their constituent aspects* and the *strategies* the screenwriters use in order to incorporate
these aspects of the talent into their stories. It also looks into how the screenwriters sustain their talents and develop their skills in order to stay on the top of their profession. For instance, my study participants believed that an important part of the story telling talent is an ability to live the lives other than their own, the lives of their characters, the talent to take on a character’s personality. ‘You become that person and then you begin to see the world through that person’s eyes,’ explains Steven Rivele. In order to do that, Steve Rivele creates a consciousness and projects it in time into the past in order to see that period through the eyes of the characters he has created. Other writers employ different techniques when they try to live the lives of their characters. Bob McKee, for instance, uses psychological reasoning. The writer gets into the character’s head figuring out the characters’ desires, actions and the consequences of their actions.

The aspects of visualization talent that I identified as a part of my study are: the writers’ ability to live in the visual story world, the writers’ ability to get into the story visual world in order to fix the story problems, and their ability to visualize the story from audience’s point of view. I found no literature on screenwriting that talks about the importance of visualization talent, the aspects of it and the strategies that the writers imbed in their creative writing. However, John Fabian’s (1990) research in creativity that will be discussed later in this chapter indicates, “the art of creative invention involves great skills in visualization” (p. 47).

For the language talent, ability to write with ease, ability to effectively use the language to express the story truth despite its limitations, having rich vocabulary, writing good dialogue are constituents that are of key importance. Breaking the genre conventions, inventing new story structures, having new insights into the story content, finding new angles of telling the well-known stories are the aspects that are important for the talent of innovation. For instance, utilizing her innovation talent, Mylo Carbia invents the tool of writing a dialogue by examining how teenagers talk on the internet messaging boards. She then applies this tool to writing a teenage dialogue in her screenplays. Steve Rivele and Chris Wilkinson create a new story structure writing “Nixon” that they then use and perfect in other stories they wrote.
Developing talents and skills using learning resources

My study participants shared that they spend tremendous efforts on nourishing their talents and developing their craft. Starting from early childhood well into their adulthood, the writers constantly learn and apply what they’ve learned to their stories. As a result of my study, I have identified the learning resources the writers use to do so. To sustain the storytelling talent, the screenwriters used the following learning resources: classic literature, film, music, their own life experiences, and screenwriting methodology.

Vera John-Steiner cites the great French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson in her study, who writes: “The potential of every human being of becoming an artist remains unfulfilled without the individual’s acquaintance and immersion into the artistic traditions of the past, and the distinctiveness of his culture. The depths of experience represented by the collective past of a civilization must first be refined through the disciplines of human knowledge and then slowly internalized by the creative individuals” (p. 45). The participants of my study closely studied the traditions of the past and the present, learned from them and applied what they’ve learned in the stories they write.

As a part of the classic literature learning resource, the screenwriters studied the stories from the Bible, Greek mythology, and Aesop’s fables. They also mentioned the importance that the classical writers such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy and a contemporary writer Ann Rice played in their formation as screenwriters. When talking about learning from film, the writers mentioned learning from favorite film directors, films that made an emotional impact on writers, and from films that worked and didn’t work. Music served as a learning resource as well. When playing music or listening to music, the writers learned the discipline of approaching the craft and the insights into storytelling.

The role of life experiences was extremely important for the formation of the screenwriters’ talents and skills. It is from their life experiences that the writers formed their mental reservoirs of memories of what they personally experienced: every film they watched, every story they wrote, every conversation they had. When writing their stories they often used knowledge about themselves, integrating personal traits into their characters.

All writers used research as a learning resource when they were working on creating a specific screenplay. The writers shared that research helped them to validate
their ideas, learn more about the story subject matter, and avoid creating stereotypical stories, but invent the specific story world.

Literature on screenwriting does not point to the wide array of influences on the screenwriters. The majority of books on screenwriting have instructional style – teaching the methodology of screenwriting. (Field, 1994, 1997; Cowgill, 1999) A number of best sellers on screenwriting provide analyses of the produced films and screenplays they were based on. Syd Field in his book “Four Screenplays” (1994) analyzes “Thelma and Louise,” “Terminator 2,” “The Silence of the Lambs,” and “Dances with Wolves ” from the point of view of these stories’ structural elements, thus focusing on teaching the methodology of screenwriting rather than providing accounts of how the professional screenwriters learn.

McKee in his book ”Story” emphasizes research as a tool that helps the writers avoid the writer’s block, as a cure the writer suggests a trip to a library. “You’re blocked because you have nothing to say. Your talent didn’t abandon you. If you had something to say, you couldn’t stop yourself from writing. You can’t kill your talent, but you can starve it into a coma through ignorance. For no matter how talented, the ignorant cannot write. Talent must be stimulated by facts and ideas. Do research. Feed your talent” (p. 74). But the screenwriting guru does not provide any information on how exactly the screenwriters may use research to their advantage. My study, on the other hand examines commonalities and differences of how and why the screenwriters use research as a tool for writing their stories.

Vera John-Steiner in her research on the lives of creative individuals identified a number of ways they developed and sustained their talents. She particularly examined the role the young individuals’ families, teachers and mentors played in development of their talents. The researcher also studied the life-long learning nature of the creative individuals’ paths in art, the tremendous efforts they applied to learn their craft and influences that a number of famous painters, writers, scientists, role models, had on their works of. For instance, Diego Rivera, a famous painter who in his autobiography realizes, as do many others who write about their life in their maturity, that intellectual and artistic development is slow, and that it does not take place as a straight and continuous process.
The famous painter confessed: “Finding myself in art was to be a long and painful process” (p. 51).

Vera John-Steiner claims that in art as well as science, learning that leads to creative work requires an individual to work at it. “Creativity lies in the capacity to see more sharply and with a greater insight that which one already knows or that which is buried at the margin of one’s awareness” (p. 77). John-Steiner cites Howard Gruber (1974) who described the creative individual’s life as a ‘self-regenerating system’: “A creative moment is part of a longer creative process, which in its turn is part of a creative life. Such an individual must be a self-generating system. The system regulates the activity and the creative acts regenerate the system. The creative life happens in a being who can continue to work” (p. 78).

The results of my study confirm this statement. My study shows that the dialectical center of the screenwriters’ creativity lies in their ability to regenerate their imagination by applying their creative talents and skills that sustain their work and find new avenues for writing their stories.

All my study participants expressed strong opinions in the fact that a screenwriter has to have innate talents as a foundation for writing stories, that developing the craft only enhances the talent, it doesn’t substitute it. Even McKee, who teaches the craft part of screenwriting, emphasized the importance of having talent. In the article about McKee entitled “Life and Letters, The Real McKee,” published in New Yorker’s Hollywood issue of 2004 the author Ian Parker who attended McKee’s seminar on story writes about the lunch break during which a number of seminar participants joined Bob for lunch. “One worked in health insurance, and said that in ten years as “an aspiring screenwriter” he had not managed to finish a single screenplay. He had taken McKee’s course three times, and he had read McKee’s book many more times. “I’m starting to wonder if I have the patience for the whole process,” he said. McKee looked at him. “Well, you might also wonder if you have the talent,” he said. McKee who used to be an actor, rarely speaks a sentence that doesn’t call for a word so stressed that he bares his teeth” (p. 82).

My study participants acknowledged that the four talents, story telling, literary, visualization, and innovation is something the writer should be born with. There was some variation among the writers in considering which of the talents could be enhanced
through learning the craft, and which ones are impossible to develop. For instance, Mylo thought that developing the language skills in literary talent is a possibility for the writers, while visualization talent is something that is impossible to develop if you don’t have it. But Steve Rivele doesn’t seem to agree with such a perspective: “But if I hadn’t been born with a natural ability for languages, no matter how much I read, I would have never succeeded,” says the writer.

Although my participants talk about talent as an innate ability, their stories about tremendous efforts that they spent to develop, nourish, and sustain their talents and skills during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood proves the fact that these factors in addition to the inborn talent play the key role in the success of an individual in the selected profession. Elman in his work on innateness (1996), and Bloom (1985) in his book “Developing Talent in Young People” support this notion. Bloom and a team of research workers under his direction at the University of Chicago have been engaged in a study of the development of talent in children. They have examined the process by which individuals who have reached the highest level of accomplishment in selected fields have been helped to develop their capabilities so fully. The subject of the study included concert pianists, sculptors, research mathematicians, research neurologists, Olympic swimmers, and tennis champions. The study has provided strong evidence that no matter what the initial characteristics (or gifts) of the individuals, unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training, the individuals will not attain extreme levels of capability in these particular fields. The research has raised questions about earlier views on special gifts and innate aptitudes as necessary prerequisites of talent development (Bloom, 1985).

Vera John - Steiner in her work on creative individuals, poses a question: “Is creative thinking indistinguishable from ordinary thought? And are creative individuals bestowed with hereditary gifts or are they but more effective practitioners of ordinary human gifts formed by all of us?” (p. 218). Then the researcher presents two lines of views on the nature of creative thinking: one, represented by behavioral psychologist, D. E. Berlyne, A Canadian student of behavior who argued that “creative thinking often receives special treatment as a phenomenon apart, but this practice seems unjustified”(p. 219). Representatives of the other line of thought view creativity as talents determined by
heredity. Among representatives of this line of thought are Sir Francis Galton whose work *Hereditary Genius* (1869) served as a starting point of this tradition. Galton argued that one individual out of 4,000 is likely to become an ‘eminent’ member of his society, and that eminent men were related to each other within a particular field” (p. 219).

In the pursuit of understanding what constitutes the roots of creativity, Vera John-Steiner mentions the works of Freudian psychologists on creativity who emphasize the role of motivation, childhood experiences, and the role of sexual fantasies. Sigmund Freud himself believed that creativity consisted of the sublimation of instinctual energy, and that creative individuals’ unfulfilled sexual curiosities were the basis of their drives to acquire knowledge. “The implication of this argument was that creative individuals while similar to neurotics are able to link their intellect powers with their emotions.” John-Steiner states that this argument was not supported by most research. She notes, however, that personality traits may play an important role in the formation of creative individuals. “The personality traits that have been found to be characteristic of a large number of creative individuals, such as perseverance, independence, nonconformity, and flexibility, are not traits that denote neurosis. But certain intensity exists among the individuals who are committed to a creative life that is central to their being. Whether this is part of a hereditary endowment or the consequence of early stimulation, I do not know,” admits John-Steiner. She then cites the psychiatrist author of “Creativity: The Magic Synthesis”, Sylvano Arieti, who suggests that:

Another motivation of the creative person may stem from the fact that he is endowed with a very active or intense imagination on account of biological or other as yet undetermined reasons. Whereas the average person very early in life learns to check his imagination and to pay more attention to the requirements of reality than to his inner experience, the creative person follows a different course. He feels himself in a state of turmoil, restlessness, deprivation, emptiness, and unbearable frustration unless he expresses his inner life in one or another creative way (p. 220).

Vera John-Steiner then goes on to mention that some of the aspects of creative individuals such as *creative intensity and continuity* of the creative individuals’ mental life play an important role in the ability of the talented individuals to be creative.

Although there was not much discussion on the subject of innate versus acquired talent in the literature on screenwriting or activity theory, and perhaps to represent this
issues in a fair light would require further research, I personally believe that an ability to
tell beautiful stories for the big screen requires certain innate talents. I’m not opposed to
the view that individuals who are less talented or not talented, but understand the craft
and methodology can write successful interesting stories, but there is something
extraordinary and very different when you read a screenplay written by a talented writer
versus just a screenplay that is just interesting. And this is definitely a difference when
you see a talented story made into incredible film versus when you see a mediocre
screenplay made into a so-so film.

One of the most controversial issues in my study was the discussion of learning or
teaching the screenwriting methodology, which presently represents a very popular trend
not only in Hollywood, and not only in America, but in other countries. My study
participants split into two camps in their opinions regarding this issue. My study showed
a trend that successful, established screenwriters in my study, whose multiple screenplays
were made into films didn’t believe in learning or teaching the screenwriting
methodology. Among the reasons successful practitioners didn’t believe that learning
screenwriting methodology is the way to enter profession was because they believed in
writing as calling, as being selected by a higher force to be artists and that a writer is an
individual who has to have certain talents. These writers strongly believed that learning
methodology was not going to make a person a writer, an artist, it could only help them
to become a better craftsman. “I’m talking about dying and reawakening in the
character’s consciousness and McKee is talking about the screenplay architecture,’
captures the difference between the two approaches according to Rivele. “Writing is like
living, it is not like construction,” adds the writer.

When I was comparing the rituals Bob described in his book and teaches in his
seminar of outlining the story in advance and writing the story treatment, to the rituals of
what I called ‘organic’ writers, what struck me was what the screenwriting guru
described as a successful writer’s methodology in his book, an approach he called
‘writing inside out,” when the screenwriter creates a step-outline on the stacks of three-by
five cards, spending on this task four to six months of his time, and then creating a story
treatment, which can reach up to 60 to 90 double spaced pages, was in fact an approach
that all the study participants opposed. What McKee described as a ‘struggling writer’s’
routine, calling it ‘writing outside in’, was more reminiscent of what the screenwriters in my study used as their approaches: writing a screenplay in the form of the screenplay rather than following all the pre-steps to doing it, like writing outlines and treatments. This made me think that perhaps there is a difference between what the theorist can come up with and what the practitioners actually do leading me to believe that my study will provide a more truthful picture of how the practitioners create screenplays, acknowledging the gap between theory and practice. Or perhaps some screenwriters do write like Bob described it, but they were not participants in my study.

The opposing views on the subject of the learning and teaching methodology are not presented in literature I read on screenwriting. I didn’t know about its existence until I started talking to the screenwriters who have years of experience working for Hollywood. I got a sense that it is a frequent topic of discussion among them. When my acquaintance who writes screenplays for Hollywood said that there was a discussion in one of the meetings of Screenwriters’ Guild about the harm that the screenwriting courses have done to profession, it made me believe that it might more of an insiders’ issue, and not something that is discussed in literature and media. I believe that it is important to create an awareness that this type of issue exists, and what some experienced screenwriters think about methodology and the reasons they think it because this phenomenon is a part of the screenwriting culture, and it represents one of the major trends in the profession. Further research in this area would shed more light on this issue.

Despite the fact that some of my study participants found teaching methodology to be detrimental to the creative process, Bob’s seminars were attended by well-known screenwriters. Among them are Akiva Goldsman, the author of “The Beautiful Mind,” Lawrence Kasdan who wrote “The Raiders of the Lost Ark, William Goldsman, and many other successful screenwriters and actors. And although McKee does not take direct credit for the success of their stories, the guru ‘estimated that his alumni’s films have earned more than a billion dollars at the box office in the past year or so’ (Parker, 2004, p. 84).

Although some of McKee’s alumni write highly profitable screenplays, Bob’s book and the seminar do not have the goal of teaching how to write stories that gain commercial success. On the opposite, I witnessed a number of occasions how during his
seminars the guru got angry when the participants asked questions leading to the
discussion of stories commercial values. During our interview Bob described himself as a
non commercial writer, as he put it ‘suicidally non commercial.’ Ian Parker, a journalist
who attended “The Story” seminar very accurately described a scene that took place
during McKee’s seminar, occurrence of which I would say runs as a rule rather than an
exception “After McKee repeatedly heaped scorn on the indulgence of “The English
Patient” and the clichés and vacant spectacle of “Titanic,” a student who was a generation
older than the others interrupted. “But they made money,” he said, not out of love of
these movies (he later told me in an e-mail) but to find out how McKee made sense of
their success: are some resonant stories not metaphors for life? He was hoping that
McKee would discuss the power of commerce. Instead, McKee roared, “Do not interrupt
me!” The student, an academic with twenty-five years of teaching experience, was struck
silent. “I kept my eyes on the stage and said nothing,” he recalled. “My stomach was
churning, I was overcome with embarrassment and fear.” McKee cried, “If you think
that this course is about making money, there’s the door!” He pointed an Old Testament
finger, and seemed to be enjoying himself” (p. 93).

When looking into differences of opinions among the writers on teaching
methodology, I thought that the reason that the three established screenwriters were
against it could also be explained by the fact that courses on methodology contribute to
establishing a certain culture in Hollywood studios. As a part of their working
environment the screenwriters have to deal with the Hollywood studio executives who
have no creative backgrounds and who dictate to the writers how to change their stories.
Often these executives learn what to say to the screenwriter from the methodology
classes, methodology that the screenwriters don’t believe in. This causes a conflict
between the writers and executives the nature of which is quite antagonistic. After all,
Bob’s seminar is extremely popular among film producers. Parker in his article gives
some examples of popularity of McKee’s seminar among film production companies:
“Pixar sends ten people to every McKee seminar in San Francisco; Marimex sent five to
six in New York in 2001. Antonia Ellis, a producer of “Sex and the City,” lists McKee’s
course as “additional post graduate work” on her HBO biography” (p. 85).
That Bob’s seminars are extremely popular with the novice ‘aspiring’ screenwriters who want to find their ways into the screenwriting profession is a fact. Parker in his article calls screenwriting instruction a ‘transformative business’ where the students have to learn about the way the protagonist undergoes a change in two hours of a movie. “And students may also get a sense of the change to come in their lives when word reaches one of them that the studio chief was charmed by his unsolicited script, and would like him immediately to bring to a close his life in, say high-school history teaching and start a career focused on ambling around a Malibu mansion wearing expensive track pants while balls of scrunched up yellow legal paper drift across the patio in a warm breeze” (p. 84).

It is true that McKee’s seminars give a relatively quick entry into the world of screenwriting that gives great insights about the different sides of the art and the craft that would probably take a long time for a person to acquire on his or her own if he or she doesn’t have year of writing experience. I can judge it by my own experience of taking Bob’s classes which was quite overwhelming. I learned so much about the subject matter I hardly knew anything about in three days, it was hard to believe was possible.

Parker in his articles shares how one of the novice screenwriters got sick after attending Bob’s class: “McKee, who is sixty two, and likes to wear dark shirts with two buttons undone at the neck, suggesting a career in extortion, lit a cigarette, then walked down the street while listening to an agitated young man say that the last time he had heard McKee speak the effect had been so overwhelming that he had fallen ill. “All the stuff you don’t want to face, which is to say emotional truth, the stuff of good story telling, it was coming out!” the young man said very fast. “It was coming out in such a way that it caused this pain in my back, because subconscious growth is such a painful process” (p. 82).

McKee’s methodology is a phenomenon that has different angles. My present understanding of it is based on my own experience and the findings of my study is that his methodology is opposed by the experienced screenwriters based on two reasons: one, is that the organic writers in my study believe that an individual should be born as a writer, an artist, which actually doesn’t contradict the guru’s belief. Another is that the organic writers’ approaches are different from what Bob teaches in his class mainly
because of the presence of the spiritual element in the creative process in which Bob doesn’t believe partly because he is an atheist. The fact that Bob doesn’t practice the screenwriting profession puts him in the category of an analyst and theoretician rather than practitioner. Bob’s methodology may contribute to establishing a ‘producers’ culture in Hollywood because studio executives use his and others’ methodologies to judge the screenwriters’ work lacking the creative background themselves. And McKee’s class has a tremendous popularity and influence on the new writers who have aspirations to become professional screenwriters. I have no knowledge as to how other established writers who may use analytical tools for writing regard Bob’s methodology and whether or not it helped them to create their stories. The lack of research and literature on these subjects make me leave this issue at this point of understanding, only suggesting that further research can help to gain more insights into this issue.

**Implications for screenwriters**

I believe that identification of the four screenwriters’ talents, their aspects, and the skills the screenwriters need the learning resources the screenwriters use in order to sustain these talents and skills have the following implications for practitioners in screenwriting profession:

For the beginning screenwriters the description of talents, skills and the learning resources will create knowledge they can use in thinking about their own abilities and skills, whether to measure themselves against it or to tune in and create an awareness of what established and successful screenwriters consider to be important. The provision of learning resources will give them an opportunity to understand how expert screenwriters learn and what means they use in order to do it. They can use this knowledge base to go to the same resources and try to learn from them, or it may help them generate their own ideas about resources they can apply to polish their skills and develop their talents. Discussion in my study of specific strategies on how the expert screenwriters incorporate them into their creative processes or how they think through creating these strategies may help the beginning screenwriters try to think as experts do, learn the exact strategies, and hopefully, transfer that knowledge into creating their own. It opens up the mysterious ‘box’ of the mental tools the experts apply, provides a window into understanding their internal world and fascinating ways they use to create their stories.
I’d also like to dispel a myth that I believe exists nowadays: if only you learn the screenwriting methodology, you will be able to write a beautiful screenplay that will most likely sell to Hollywood. My purpose is not to stop individuals who want to learn how to write stories for the big screen from trying, I want to create an awareness that there is much more to it than just learning the methodology, it is not one time training event on how to become a screenwriter, it is an endeavor that takes a lifetime to develop and sustain, given that you have certain talents.

For expert screenwriters this discussion can also have some advantages. It may serve as an exchange of best practices. “I’d love to read how others do it,” said Mylo in one of our interviews when we were talking about the screenwriter’s creative processes. The section on screenwriters’ expertise will provide expert screenwriters with the insights into what their colleagues consider to be important in order to write screenplays, how they use the works of others to inspire them and learn from them, how they invent and what aspects of their live, their experiences, and existing masterpieces they take into consideration and why. I had an impression that some screenwriters are introverted people who pretty much stick to their own world when the matters touch creation. “I don’t associate with the screenwriters. I don’t know any and I don’t like them. They are boring and pretentious. I mean, I am. Yeah, most of my life, most of my friends have been musicians,’ honestly acknowledged Steve Rivele. The lessons learned from the successful representatives of the profession may be a source the screenwriters can look into if they want to know how others do it.

**The Screenwriters’ Creative Processes**

The second theme that emerged in my study is understanding of the nature of the screenwriters’ creative processes: the important components of the creative process, the types of *creative approaches* the screenwriters applied when creating their stories, and the types of *transformation* that happen as a result of the creative process.

One of the contributions of my study is identification of three phases of the screenwriters’ creative process and the nature of the creative approaches the screenwriters apply in order to reach these phases. The three phases of the creative process are:  phase 1: achieving the desired state of the story development; phase 2:
solving story problems or story transformation; and phase 3: the screenwriters’ transformation. Once a desired state of the story development is achieved (phase 1), the story gets transformed (phase 2), as a result of which the writers experience significant transformation as well (phase 3).

I identified two creative approaches that the screenwriters use in order to achieve the desired state of the story development: **organic writing and analytical writing**. For the organic creative approach the desired state of story development is when *the story takes a life of its own* and the writer gets transcended into the story *parallel world*, the state which happens as a result of the writers getting saturated with the story and the characters and through establishing the spiritual connection with the divine force. For the analytical creative approach the desired state of the story development is when the story starts developing *spontaneously*, which happens as a result of all the work the writer does by applying the analytical reasoning tools.

**Organic writing**

The writers who follow the organic creative approach believe that they have been chosen by the external force, or by God to be artists, they believe that writing is their calling. Based on this predisposition, the writers believe that they are already chosen by the higher force and have the divine connection with it. This connection enables them to reach the desired state in the story development. The nature of this spiritual connection differs for writers: for some, it is connecting with the character’s psyche; for others it is connecting with the external force, and yet for others it is connecting with the pre-existing in the universe story. When the writers achieve this divine connection, they reach the state of saturation when the story takes a life of its own and the writers dwell in the parallel world of the story. In search for this connection the writers apply rituals that consist of methods and techniques that help them to achieve a state of saturation and expand their stories.

**Analytical writing**

The writers who use analytical writing approach do not believe in the concept of being called to write and attribute becoming a writer to their own choices of actions in
making their own destiny. They also do not believe in the concept of the story taking life of its own as the desired state of the story development. They call it the writers’ “charming self-deception.” For them, the desired state is when the story reaches the spontaneous development due to all the work the writers have done in advance by following the rituals and applying analytical tools, such as dialectical reasoning, psychological approach to figuring out the characters’ desires, actions, and consequences. Analytical writers also apply the rituals in order to reach the desired state in the story development. Their rituals aim at creating the story structure and story characters in the forms of outlines and story treatments that are written before the screenplay.

The discovery of the two creative approaches, the organic and analytical represents one of the most significant contributions of my study to both activity theory and screenwriting profession. These approaches are derived from the work of screenwriters who are active practitioners in the screenwriting field – they write screenplays on a daily basis working for major Hollywood studios. Literature on activity theory doesn’t have a lot of research done in the area of creative writing or creativity in general. As it was mentioned earlier, the major study has been conducted by Vera John-Steiner whose research focus was different. Literature on the screenwriting profession does not offer accounts of any creative approaches, rather it abounds in extensive instructions on how to create a screenplay from the perspectives of analysts and gurus who studied the process of screenwriting but never really practiced writing screenplays to an extent my study participants did. I believe that organic and analytical creative approaches represent two camps in the screenwriting profession: one camp of people practice the craft, and the other analyzes and teaches it. A further study of the screenwriting creative processes might give an insight if this view is true.

The identification of the two approaches opens a door to the discovery of more creative ways of screenwriting that could represent either a completely new philosophy of writing or could be a combination of the ones that I’ve described in my study. My study shows that there is a relationship between the writers’ philosophical and spiritual positions and the creative approaches they invent: writers who believe in writing as calling, as being selected by the divine force, the organic writers, determine their approaches to writing as dependent on searching that divine connection in order to write a
story, although the nature of this spiritual connection differs among the organic writers. Writers who don’t believe in the divine connection, analytical writers, base their creative approaches on applying analytical methods of thinking through the story such as understanding the story dialectics and applying psychological analyses of the story characters.

Literature on screenwriting does not mention the spiritual aspect of the creative writing, it does not point to the phase in the writing process when the writer reaches the state in the story development when the story takes a life of its own, rather it discusses the phases of construction of the story structure and characters through creating the screenplays’ three acts, their conflicts and resolutions.

When conducting research on screenwriting, I came across a book “On Writing” written by a famous best selling writer Stephen King. What Stephen King (2000) describes in his book as his creative process and beliefs is very similar to the organic writers’ views in my study. The famous author shares his insights on what in his view writing is: “What is writing? Telepathy, of course. It’s amusing when you stop to think about it – for years people have argued whether or not such thing exists, folks like J.B Rhine have busted their brains trying to create a valid testing process to isolate it, and all the time it’s been right there lying in the open like Mr. Poe’s Purloined letter. All the arts depend on telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation” (p. 103). Here King refers to the attempts of the scientists to single out the mental processes that are engaged in writing using scientific testing methods that in his opinion didn’t uncover the mystery of the creative process. For Stephen King stories are relics from the pre-existing world and the writer’s job is, like an archeologist, to go and uncover them and bring them back into this world: “Stories aren’t souvenir tee-shirts or GameBoys. Stories are relics, part of the undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each of one out of the ground intact as possible. Sometimes the fossil you uncover is small; a seashell. Sometimes it is enormous, a Tyrannosaurus Rex with all those gigantic ribs and grinning teeth. Either way, short story or thousand-page whopper of a novel, the techniques of excavation remain basically the same. No matter how good you are, no matter how much experience you have, it’s probably impossible to get the entire fossil out of the ground without a few
breaks and losses. To get even most of it, the shovel must give way to more delicate tools: air hose, palm-pick, perhaps even a toothbrush (p. 164).”

King’s description of the role of the writer in uncovering the stories that pre-exist in the world reminded me of Rod Taylor’s view of how he understood the writer’s role: “The writer’s job is to wander around in the wilderness, and bring back interesting things, incredible things: whether it is a head of the dragon or a beautiful rock that you found, entangled with the roots of the tree or strange and exotic animal. Wilderness is all around you. Sometimes it surfaces up just when you wake up in the morning and that’s from your unconsciousness or when you fall asleep or from a dream. Sometimes it is a piece of pain or human condition. Sometimes it can be induced by a piece of music, or being in love. Those are all kinds of the things that convey you there, transport you there. And that’s where you find your riches and that’s where the treasure is coming from and then the Hollywood is a marketplace.”

Writing as telepathy describes King the nature of the creative process. Webster’s dictionary defines telepathy as ‘communication between minds by some means other than sensory perception.” Perhaps King implies that creative writing process involves communicating with the spirits of the stories that await to be found by the writer like ancient relics await to be found by the archeologist. And once the story is found, the writer streams it via his mind. This description assumes the existence of the telepathic communication between the writer and the story. This view on the nature of the creative process is very similar with the views of the organic writers in my study who base their creative processes on finding the connection with the divine force.

Some literature on creativity, and specifically, John Fabian (1990) admits the existence of what he calls the planetary forces that the creative individuals can tap into to create their works. Fabian refers to the individual’s consciousness as one of the important components in the creative thinking processes. He defines consciousness as “what we really pay attention to” and claims that it consists of three elements: inner world, which contains sensations, thoughts, images, memories, emotions, and mechanisms for creating options; outer world, which contains people, activities, work, events, and environmental influences; and the planetary world, which contains, metaphorically and dynamically broader connections with Mother Earth, ancient patterns,
all living creatures, and a collective unconscious. “Our planet,” claims Fabian, “to the theories and studies of a growing number, is more than rocks, water, gases, and growing things large and small. We may take planet life and matter so much for granted that we are oblivious to unobvious forces and forms” (p. 30).

The researcher notes that famous scientists in various fields admitted the extraordinary sources of energy. “Nobel laureate Prigogine looked deeper into the planet. He saw structures invisible to the naked eye, forms exchanging energy, causing instability and creating new patterns. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung noticed recurring themes in the dream expressions of people in urban Europe, the jungles of Africa, and India. To him, people were connected by the collective unconscious. Rupert Sheldrake, a biologist, posed a controversial but beguiling theory. He suggested and tested the idea that there are invisible structures that communicate information across time and space – in plants, people, animals” (p. 30).

John Fabian notes that a growing number of theorists and experimental data point to possible interconnections of energy and information on this planet. “We tend to discount the unseen and uncounted for – just as former generations couldn’t comprehend microscopic worlds that the electron microscope has delivered to us. The truly creative can tune their mental equipment to levels of consciousness oblivious to others” (p. 30).

The author on creativity acknowledges the existence of energy and information sources that could inhabit or trespass our planet that the ordinary eye couldn’t see, but the creative and the talented use it as a source for their works. Although Fabian doesn’t mention the spiritual connection with the divine as one of such sources, he enlists the mysterious phenomena as an important outlet for creativity. “The planetary arena can tantalize and push the boundaries of your thinking. While you hike through the woods, for example, your thoughts about walking on the crust of the earth could begin to broaden the horizons of your thinking. You might feel connected with that which surrounds you – majestic trees, a cascading stream, microcosm underfoot, animals in the forest, stars and planets hidden by a blue sky. Critics might call that mystical. Some might say that’s worship. Others might insist you’ve broadened and enriched your ability to observe, to be alert, to search for novel combinations” (p. 31).
One of the factors that creates the difference between the organic and analytical writers in my study might be the difference in the ways their “mental instrument” or brain works, the difference between the analytical way of thinking, which is based on analyses of the screenwriters’ works and a more creative way of thinking that the practicing screenwriters apply when writing their stories. John Fabian addresses the difference between the two types of thinking in his book “Creative Thinking and Problem Solving.” He calls the two approaches “rational” and “arational”.

“The brain reasoning activities can be split into two distinct modes: the rational and the arational. In actual working, however, there is much interaction, much blending between these modes. If your rational mode is predominant, you try to reduce or squeeze data down to their essential elements. You sift through a variety of information in a step-by-step fashion, looking for logical connections. Through analysis of the data you arrive at a conclusion. Your primary vehicle of analysis and expression is verbal – using known symbols of language and mathematical and scientific equations that are familiar to you and to others with whom you want to communicate.

To the arational thinker, however, this rational approach often seems confining, slow, narrow, detailed, unnecessary, or too linear. Emotionally and mentally the arational reasoner would feel bound in – not as imaginative or productive as the person would like to be, not as able to arrive at breakthrough thinking.

If your arational mode is on the center stage, different mental functions stand out. You allow the data to grow, to expand into whatever patterns emerge. You take in information from a variety of sources or directions simultaneously, using a soft rather than hard, rational focus. Intuition is the key mechanism that helps you see the bigger picture from pieces of information, from clues and cues that give you an image, impression, or sense of the answer or direction to be taken. Conclusions may come in the form of images, sounds, or feelings in your body.

In the arational style, you want variety rather than correctness, approximation, rather than precision. Getting close allows you to have the opportunity to shape ideas to requirements, rather than insisting that a thought or idea be perfect on the first try. The arational style requires you to let go of your need to massage and control the data to fit a fixed template, to let go of a favorite idea or of a stereotype, to release a mindset.

Rational thinkers often feel the arational approach is chaotic, diverting, scary, obscure, untested, or too random or risky. Both the rational and the arational styles are crucial for clear thinking, with the arational style being critical for creative thinking. Our current educational system doesn’t accentuate the dual modes. Arational thinking is often stunted through lack of attention and expression” (p. 40).
The researcher on creativity defines ‘arational’ style as a higher power creative thinking strategy format and rational thinking as a lower power format. What John Fabian describes as “arational” thinking style seems to fit more the creative thinking processes of the organic writers. For instance, Rod Taylor when talking about his creative process, writing poetry and screenplays shared: “It happened in all kinds of ways to me. And it could happen to you more and more. If you could be disciplined about song writing and you open yourself to you and you get a line, or you find an image, and you set it down many times and not every time, it will happen that the poem will just emerge. And what you need to do is to make sure that your rationality does not get in the way.”

Fabian remarks that our educational system doesn’t favor the “arational” thinking so necessary for creative mode. The writer devotes his entire book to “arational” creative ways of reasoning.

Vera John-Steiner shares how practitioners in some very “rational” occupations such as physics use “arational” methods as modes of discovery. When making his discoveries, Albert Einstein didn’t think in physical formulas or even in language. She quotes Einstein: “The words or the language, as they are written or spoken, do nor seem to play any role in my mechanisms of thought. The physical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntary reproduced or combined” (p. 4). Rather the genius physicist applied imagery when making some of his important discoveries in the area of relativity. Einstein imagined himself riding through the space, astride a light wave, and looking behind him at the next wave. In this way he constructed a visual-kinesthetic image of some principles of relativity. Vera John-Steiner comments that the famous physicist liked to re-experience space the way children do, and from such a vantage point, examine physical phenomena as being “sympathetically in touch with experience.”

Although analytical writers’ approach allows for some “arationality” such as using imagery, imagination, creativity, etc. it seems that their approach to story writing applies more rational thinking modes, while the organic writers’ approach applies more of arational modes of creativity, perhaps indicating the difference between the thinking mode of an analyst, a theoretician, and a screenwriting practitioner.
The writers’ rituals

All my study participants established some writing rituals that helped them to reach the desired state of the story development. The organic writers’ rituals served them two purposes: first, they facilitated the writers in finding the connection with the divine, and second, they helped them to expand the screenplay once the connection was found. The rituals consisted of functions, such as identifying the essence of the story, finding the way into telling the story, developing the story characters and the structure, etc. and strategies, such as questioning, conducting research, seeing and interpreting imagery. Following the rituals allowed the organic writers to start hearing the characters’ voices in their heads, and experience the visceral connection with the story characters. The analytical writers’ rituals also involved the development of the elements of the character and the story structure, but the analytical writers did it in the form of the story outlines and then story treatments where they tried to figure out the characters’ desires, their actions and consequences of their actions, and identify the story plot in advance, before writing a screenplay, a method that the organic writers do not accept and consider anti-creative. Organic writers believe that the story has to take a life of its own and unfold itself in front of the writer and the characters have to dictate the story. “And if we learn certain things in the process, we have to make the adjustments, and learning things in the process that’s why we do this,” explains Steven Rivele. For the same reason the organic writers do not plot the story out. They have a general idea of what the values and essential issues of the story are, and where they want the story to go, and what they wanted to say, but they don’t want to plot it out.

The analytical writers’ method uses plotting of the story as one of the initial and most important steps in the creative process. That’s how McKee expresses his view on plotting the story in his book “Story”: “In some literary circles ‘plot’ has become a dirty word, tarred with connotation of hack commercialism. The loss is ours, for plot is an accurate term that names the consistent, interrelated pattern of events that move through time to shape and design a story. While no fine film was ever written without flashes of fortuitous inspiration, a screenplay is not an accident. Material that pops up willy-nilly cannot remain willy-nilly. The writer redrafts again and again, making it look as if an instinctive spontaneity created the film, yet knowing how much effort and unnaturalness
went into making it look natural and effortless” (p. 43). Then the screenwriting guru elaborates on his ideas about plotting the story: “Plot, therefore doesn’t mean ham-handed twists and turns, or high-pressure suspense and shocking surprise. Rather events must be selected and their patterning displayed through time. In this sense composition or design, all stories are plotted” (p. 44).

Stephen King does not believe in plotting his stories: “You may wonder where plot is in all this. The answer – my answer, anyway – is nowhere. I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, I believe plotting and spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible. I want you to understand that my basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them the place to grow (and to transcribe them of course) (p. 163).

Stephen King’s creative approach is based on putting a character in a situation and seeing what happens, he describes his approach more as ‘intuitive’: “Plot is a far bigger tool, the writer’s jackhammer. You can liberate fossil from hard ground with a jackhammer, no argument there, but you know as well as I do that the jackhammer is going to harm almost as much stuff as it liberates. It’s clumsy, mechanical, anti creative. Plot I think is the good writer’s last resort and the dullard’s first choice. The story that results from it is apt to feel artificial and labored. I lean more heavily on intuition, and have been able to do that because my books tend to be based on situation rather than story. Some of the ideas which have produced those books are more complex than others, but the majority start out with the stark simplicity of a department store window display or a waxwork tableau. I want to put a group of characters in some kind of predicament and then watch them try to work themselves free. My job is not to help them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety – those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot – but to watch what happens and then write it down.”

Another reason King does not like to plot his stories is because he believes that character-driven stories are more interesting than event-driven stories: “For me, what happens to characters as a story progresses depends solely on what I discover about them as I go along – how they grow, in other words. Sometimes they grow a little. If they grow a lot, they begin to influence the course of the story instead of the other way around. I
almost always start with something that is situational. I think the best stories always end up being about the people rather than the events, which is to say character-driven.” Just like organic writers in my study, the best selling author does not believe in forcing his characters to do what they don’t want to do. “The situation comes first. The characters – always flat and unfeatured, to begin with – come next. Once these things are fixed in my mind, I begin to narrate. I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but I never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things their way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however it’s something I never expected” (p. 164).

The organic writers call the outlining of the story mechanical process of writing; they call an outline a prison where no life can be created. John Dewey in his book ‘Art As Experience’ expresses his views on what he calls pre-determined concept of creation of an art product. He notes that ‘a rigid predetermination of an end product whether by artist or beholder leads to the turning out of a mechanical or academic product. A statement that an artist does not care how his work eventuates would not be literally true. But it is true that he cares about the end result as a completion of what goes on before and not because of its conformity with a ready-made antecedent scheme. He is willing to leave the outcome to the adequacy of the means from which it issues and which it sums up. Like the scientific inquirer, he permits the subject matter of his perception in connection with the problem it presents to determine the issue, instead of insisting upon its agreement with a conclusion decided upon in advance“(p. 139). Then Dewey goes on contemplating about the unpredictable, unanticipated nature of the creative experience. “The consummatory phase of experience – which is inventing as well as final – always presents something new. Admiration always includes an element of wonder. As a Renaissance writer said: “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness of proportion.” The unexpected turn, something that the artist himself does not definitely foresee, is a condition of a felicitous quality of a work of art; it saves it from being mechanical. It gives the spontaneity of the unpremeditated to what would be otherwise a fruit of calculation. The painter and poet like the scientific inquirer know the delights of discovery. Those who carry on their work as a demonstration of a preconceived thesis may have the joys of egotistic success but not that of fulfillment of an experience for its
own sake. In the latter they learn by their work, as they proceed, to see and feel what had not been part of their original plan and purpose” (p. 139). Dewey’s ideas about the ‘unpremeditated, unforeseen’ nature of creative process based on discovery rather than pre-calculated mechanical scheme coincides with how the organic writers in my study view the creative process.

**The story transformation**

The second phase of the creative process in my study is the phase of the story transformation. Transformation is an important aspect of activity theory. According to activity theory, the subject of the activity works on the object of the activity in order to achieve a result, and during this process of implementing activity both the subject and the object of the activity get transformed. Activity theorists emphasize a close binding between knowing and doing and refer to doing as transformation of some object, with the focus on contextualized activity of the entire system – not an isolated activity (Engestrom, 1987; 1993; Kuutti, 1996). The results of my study confirmed the assumption of the activity theory about transformative nature of the activity. In addition, my study illuminates the types of transformation both the subject and the object of the activity undergo.

During the creative process the story undergoes transformation which is mainly caused by two factors: first, the writers’ own insights as a result of achieving the desired state of the story development, and the writers’ better understanding of the story, its problems, and characters; and second, as a result of getting feedback from the community of practitioners, film producers, and studio executives.

The first type of story transformation when the writer reaches a new level of understanding of the story as a result of achieving the desired state of the story development confirms Vygotsky’s assumption about the key mediating role that methods and tools play in the activity. It is due to mediation of methods and tools that the writers apply in order to reach the desired state of the story development, that the story gets transformed. Story transformation involves solving the story problems and changing the story in accordance with its new vision. In the center of Vygotsky’s developmental method is understanding of the causal dynamics of development of the higher
psychological functions where mediation by tools plays an important role. According to Vygotsky, mental processes can be understood only if we understand the tools and the signs that mediate them (Wertsch, 1995). By mediation, Vygotsky meant that ‘in higher forms of human behavior, the individual actively modifies the stimulus situation as a part of the process of responding to it.” The modification of stimulus is accomplished through a link – a tool, or ‘sign’ as Vygotsky terms it (Driscoll, 2000, p. 242). In the case of the screenwriters’ activities the stimulus situation is the story at hand, its scope, original ideas, questions the writers ask at the beginning of the creative process. The writer advances the story from its initial state of development into its next state, the state that I called “the desired state of the story development” by applying the creative approaches that represent the writers’ tools. It is through the meditative use of tools that the writer achieves a qualitatively different phase in the story development, when the story unfolds in front of him or her and propels the writer to the next phase: story transformation. As a result of reaching this phase in the creative process, the writer is capable of solving the story problems.

Types of problems the screenwriters face

Although analysis of the types of problems the writers face was not an initial focus of this study, as I was getting further into my study, I came to realization that solving the problems by the writers was an integral part of their creative processes. As McKee put it, ‘every writer has a creative problem to solve.’ I will present the types of problems my writers reported they faced as a part of their creative processes and the ways they tried to solve them.

Understanding the nature of the problems the screenwriters face and the methods they apply to solve them could present one of the further areas of research of the activities of the screenwriters.

Both groups of writers, organic and analytical, reported that they came across problems that they had to solve in order to make their stories truthful and meaningful. Some problems that the writers reported they had to solve were related to inconsistencies in the story main characters’ actions that would cause the audience’s empathy, or they were historical controversial issues that left the story’s questions open-ended; sometimes
the characters’ relationships were left obscure or unresolved, or the writers found that they underrepresented and humiliated some of the story characters, thus potentially causing the audience’s dissatisfaction, untruthful depiction of the story that would distort the story meaning. At other times, the writers tried to make their story more powerful by creating more mystery and more suspense and by layering in more clues that later led to the story big revelation. These issues are of extreme importance to the writers and they strive to resolve them in order to create an authentic truthful story.

All writers agreed that when they achieve the desired state of the story development, they start better understanding the meaning of the story, or the truth of the story, they may go back and re-write the story in the light of the newly found truth, they reconsider the importance of certain characters and themes, and align the story with its new vision. Truth serves as a compass that helps the writers to orient themselves in finding the right direction in their stories. Stephen King wrote about the importance of truth and honesty in the creative writing process: “As with other aspects of fiction, the key to writing good dialogue is honesty. And if you are honest about the words coming out of your character’s mouths, you’ll find that you’ve let yourself in for a fair amount of criticism. If you substitute “Oh sugar” for “Oh shit” because you’re thinking about the Legion of Decency, you are breaking the unspoken contract that exists between writer and reader – your promise to express the truth of how people act and talk through the medium of made-up story” (p. 185). King emphasizes that being truthful in the story telling is one of the most important reasons of why the writer should solve the story problems.

As I was examining the ways the two groups of writers, organic, and analytical were solving the creative story problems, I found their methods were fundamentally different. The organic writers solved their problems after they achieved the desired state of the story development, the saturation with the story and the character when the story characters would come alive and would help the writers to solve the story problems. “I kept hearing these characters in my head and they were explaining certain things to me, which were the unsolvable problems to that point. For example, there were three fundamental problems that no one had been able to solve in the story. And I got the answers to all three of them,” says Steven Rivele.
Finding the spiritual connection with the divine is a prerequisite for the writers’ achievement of the desired state of the story development. I found that there was a relationship between the types of stories the writers were creating, the phase of the creative process they were in and the types of methods they applied in order to solve the story problems. When organic writers created their own stories, their approaches to solving problems were based on finding the connection with the divine, and achieving the state of saturation. The organic writers reported that they used a combination of more intellectual tools such as questioning, conducting research with more organic tools such as interpreting imagery, understanding the story rhythm that brought them to the state of saturation with the story and the characters. The two types of tools serve different functions. As a gardener would use the fence and support to direct the growth of the winding vine, the organic writers use the intellectual tools such as questioning to systematize the creative process, to aim it so that it follows a certain direction, and maintain the story scope and the boundaries. And as a gardener would use fertilizers and water to capacitate the vine to its full growth potential, the writers use the organic tools to fill the story with life, to intuitively feel the essence of the story, to allow it to grow naturally, to expand and explore the story in unexpected ways. As Steve Rivele describes it, “it is a part of the organic process, a synthetic process of merging with the character and seeing the world from the character’s point of view, and letting that point of view drive him: and that’s when it is exciting, and organic, and natural, and flows and I begin to learn things.”

In the cases when organic writers had to re-write the stories written by other writers, or when they wrote in the genre that required application of some analytical tools, like thrillers, they had to use ‘mechanical’ tools or the analytical tools to solve the story problems. Organic writers reported that they didn’t enjoy solving the story problems analytically, they called the process ‘mechanical’ and ‘deductive’: “I mean I do it with the rewrites and I get paid a lot of money to do it. And it is the difference between synthesis and analysis. And you reduce the story to: here’s the problem, and you analyze them and you solve them objectively. I can’t work that way, except when I need a lot of money all of a sudden and I’ll take a re-write,’ admitted Steve Rivele.
Mylo uses some analytical tools to make her thrillers more powerful. “Layering the clues’ is one of the tools the writer applies after she writes the first draft of the story. Since her stories are murder mysteries, written in the genre of thrillers, she needs to make sure that she embeds clues and hints in her story that will keep her audience’s interest, keeps them wondering while the story is still unfolding.

Analytical writers reported two approaches to solving the story problems: one when they were writing their own stories and based their analyses of the story problems on understanding the story’s structural or formal requirements. The analytical writers would figure out what represented the story’s form weak links in order to understand what they should change in the story characters and the story structure. The story form served as a guiding principle for the analytical writers. McKee makes an analogy that the story form for the writer is like a picture frame for the artist, it is inside of the picture frame that the artist has to work to create his art. The story form sets its boundaries for the writer. “Because you’re not writing a slice of life, you’re not writing a collage, you’re now writing a story, and story has a form, like a frame for the picture, story has a form. You have to work within that form.” When writing “Miss Julie Montgomery” Bob found the formal story problem: “A weak love triangle is a formal problem and I’ve got to find a solution to it,” says the writer. “And this form has far more influence, far more power because it is the final arbiter of ‘works doesn’t work’. And within that is everything you know about life.”

To the second types of problems that had to be solved in the process of reviewing the works of others, analytical writers referred to as puzzles. Analytical writers claim that there is a difference between this type of problem solving and the first type of problem-solving: solving a formal problem, according to McKee, is not like solving a puzzle because the formal problem leads the writer to investigate an aspect of a story, which then opens up a door to the truth, while the second type of problem solving is based on purely identifying the aspects of the problem and applying analytical tools to solve it.

Additional research of comparing the types of problems that screenwriters faced and solutions they applied in this study to the problem solving techniques used in instructional design or learning sciences area may shed a light of whether new insights can be found on problem solving techniques drawn from this study. Such an analysis was
not a subject of this study. Literature on instructional design doesn’t mention the mystical, the mysterious, the spiritual, or the invisible sources of energy as an element of and source for creativity. I believe that a lot of problem solving methods are founded on the pure analytical, rational approaches to thinking by this limiting the possibilities for applying creative strategies for developing instruction.

Dealing with the community of practitioners

The emphasis on the cultural context of an individual in action became important with the advance of theories that looked into the situated nature of cognition, such as situated learning, distributed cognition, and the activity theory. According to Nardi (1999), who writes the situated action approach, “The insistence on the exigencies of particular situation and the emergent, contingent character of action is a reaction to years of influential work in artificial intelligence and cognitive sciences in which problem solving was seen as a series of objective, rational pre-specified means to ends and work that overemphasized the importance of plans in shaping behavior. Such work failed to recognize the opportunistic, flexible way that people engage in real activity. It failed to treat the environment as an important shaper of activity, concentrating almost exclusively on representations in the head – usually rigid, planful ones – as the object of study” (p. 73).

Following the activity theory framework, my study examines the cultural context of the filmmaking community of practitioners who work closely with the screenwriters. According to activity theory, activity is distributed across subjects and the tools they use, all of which occurs as a part of the community context (Barab, Plucker, 2002). My study looks into how the community context in which the screenwriters work influences the screenwriters’ creative processes and the object they are working on, the story. The studio executives and film directors represent the community of practitioners that the writers have to deal with as a part of the creative process of story development. Once the screenwriters finish a screenplay, they have to send it to the studio executives for their reviews if they work for hire.

My study participants reported that they are treated by the existing studio system disrespectfully, an attitude that resulted from the corporatization of the Hollywood studio
system that occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s. The creative teams that consist of the young people who have MBA and accounting degrees but no creative backgrounds became the mechanism by which all major studio review the screenplays to make decisions on what will sell, a well known ‘profit dictates everything’ motto of Hollywood studios. From this forecast usually come the dictates to the screenwriters as to what should be changed in the stories, that starts the painful development process, that the writers described as ‘a death with a thousand cuts.” Before such a system was instilled, it was different for the screenwriters. During the Golden Age of film in Hollywood, which stared in the late 1960s and continued into the early 1980s when the new and young film directors such as Francis Coppola, Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg came to Hollywood, they were given a chance to explore the new ventures in the filmmaking and invent their own directing styles. As the documentary ‘Easy Riders, Raging Bulls’ features it, during that time auteur film directors were given a total freedom to chose the movies they wanted to make and decide how much they were going to cost pushing to the background the role of the studios. By the end of 1970s things started changing. With the commercial success of George Lucas’ ‘Star Wars’ the era of the film directors was over. ‘The Star Wars’ has become the biggest box office success in the history of motion picture which ended the era of director - driven movies and began a new era of the big budget ‘B’ movie, a film that the studios could show anywhere in the nation - wide campaigns and fast play-offs, when it almost didn’t matter if the movie was good or not just as long as it made a great trail.

It took a little over decade for the studios to regain their dominance through finding new audience for slick effect-driven sci-fi and horror films. The studios started figuring out the mechanism of making money, and taking the control over decision-making. The directors couldn’t any longer come to the studios and dictate what film they wanted to make because it would make money because in the ten year period of time the studios figured out what films were making the most profit and they started dictating film directors what to make.

For about a decade the system allowed the auteur directors to freely create, and finally, when the international conglomerates took over the system, everything changed. As Joan Tewkesbury, a writer and a film director says in the documentary “Easy Riders,
Raging Bulls’ about the change in Hollywood culture: ‘the thing that ultimately killed for me movies was the event of ‘Entertainment Tonight’ when they started doing the box office scores like they were doing the football scores. And I remember saying the first time they did it, when they were saying this film is first and this film is second, and I remember looking at that screen and saying “We’re over.”

The beginning of the corporate commercial Hollywood era changed the types of people who started running the film studios. “Years ago the studios used to be self-contained, self-financed entities run by film makers. Now, all the studios are owned by multinational international corporations that are no longer self-contained entities,’ explains Steve Rivele. “They borrow money, they funnel money from one division to another. So, the studios are now being run by people who have accounting degrees rather by people who have creative backgrounds. There used to be powerful producers in Hollywood who used to make decisions on the spot to buy a screenplay. Those producers had the power because they founded the studios or their families owned the studios,’ continues Steve. ‘Now the whole process has to go through the corporate entities of Hollywood culture.”

According to Steve, some of the powerful producers were able to recognize the quality material, some of them weren’t and there were powerful producers who made bad films. But the difference was that they respected the writers who would present them with the coherent quality of the material and they would protect it. “They were willing to take the risk in their own hands. This doesn’t happen any more. Those people are dead now and the culture has changed, and partly because studios almost all of them had been bought by much larger corporations, by international conglomerates.”

The change in culture changed the attitude towards the screenwriters. The studio executives started looking at screenwriters as ‘the necessary evil’ in the process of filmmaking, someone who does not obediently listen to their dictates in changing their stories and, therefore, need to be replaced as soon as possible. In order to avoid the major changes to the story and to be able to stay on the project until the film director comes, the screenwriters invent the strategies of how to handle the studio executives’ notes. The writers do a very careful balancing act of addressing enough notes to convince the executives that they were taking them seriously, but not enough notes to damage the
script. “And that’s what this process of doing the studio notes consists of: on the one hand, avoiding doing damage to the script, and on the other hand, avoiding getting fired,” says Steven. “It is a real political exercise.”

As ‘horrendously unfair’ practice describe the Hollywood screenwriters the process of replacing the original screenwriter by the studio executives. They call it the screenwriters’ “psychological destruction,” “a form of humiliation and degradation.” “The war between truths and lies, between the beauty and chaos” call the organic screenwriters the battle between the studio executives and the screenwriters. “There is a spiritual warfare that is going in Hollywood for the hearts and minds of the audience. And at that level, you have a battle between good and evil,” claims Rod Taylor. When I asked my study participants if it is possible to change the studio executives’ attitudes towards screenwriter, they were hopeless: ‘you have to take money out of the process, “ said Rivele, and then he added: “it would be the same as trying to change the Soviet system, it is impossible.”

“People who depict themselves as artists, they think that they are free, that they don’t have these restrictions that Hollywood makes on people, but this is naïve and this is really naïve. The restrictions that the culture puts on your writing are severe. And they are going to bend you one way or another,” said Bob McKee during our interview. And although the guru didn’t present any pictures of battles, any stories of him ever been ‘bent’ by the system, perhaps because for years he didn’t have to deal with the studios as a screenwriter, Bob did talk during his seminars about the Hollywood impotence to create good stories. Parker (2004) in his article “Life and Letters, The Real McKee” states Bob’s concern on the matter: “The next morning, in a lecture room at the Institution of Electrical Engineers, McKee took the stage without introduction or fanfare. Like a wise political candidate, he presented himself as the reluctant outsider who had accepted the task of cleaning up a mess left by corrupt predecessors. “Hollywood makes five hundred films a year, and the large percentage is perfect shit,” McKee said, from a script that barely changes a word from one performance to another. In its search for material, Hollywood sets aside seven hundred and fifty million dollars a year in development budgets; most of this goes to writers. “And look what you get.” McKee raised his eyebrows and took a stagy sip of coffee. “Look. What. You. Get.” Since the end of its
Golden Age – since about the time McKee began teaching – Hollywood has been so hungry for spectacle that it has come to neglect the fundamentals of story telling, he said. B movies have become the new A movies. Those in his class who rediscovered the structure of stories, and understood that they are “metaphors for life,” might enrich both themselves and the culture around them. “You must have real insight into human nature and society…You must have idea…You must have talent” (p. 91).

McKee’s frustration and disappointment with the work that Hollywood does on producing good film unites him with the organic writers who have to fight for it in the trenches. During our interview Rod Taylor as if echoing Bob’s concern, said that he just had a friend who called him and said that they had difficult time finding good films to nominate for the academy awards that year. “There are only 4-5 good films produced in the entire year. Because the manufacturing method, and I don’t mean the craftsmanship, I mean it is an all time key. I mean movies are bad. Because they are phony, they are not true. They don’t actually describe or express the human condition. If somebody intellectually says it is music, but it is not, if it doesn’t do anything to you, it is because the organ of your perception has not been sufficiently stimulated by something that pre-existed their assertions, meaning that when you really hear music, there is a certain symmetry to it, whether it is abstract or fundamental. The same is with the movies. Just because they say it is a movie, it doesn’t mean that it is going to do anything to your heart.”

This issue of the cultural clash between the Hollywood screenwriters and the studio executives is not discussed in the screenwriting journals, or books about Hollywood. In fact, I was quite surprised, if not to say, shocked to find out the real state of affairs when I started talking to the screenwriters. My acquaintance who writes for Hollywood but was not a participant in this study shared with me that he has in mind to write a truthful book of how the meetings between the studio executives and the screenwriters take place but he would have to change the names so that people don’t sue him. He said there is nothing of the kind written about the relationships between the screenwriters and studio executives. I think that this is true, because as much as I tried to find anything of a kind, I couldn’t, which made it challenging for me to present various perspectives on the matter except for the perspectives of my study participants. I think it would be a good subject for
further research to explore the nature of the conflict between studio executives and screenplay writers, examining the views of both sides on the creative process and the goals of making a film.

According to Vygotsky, individuals act in collective practices, communities, and institutions and ‘individual development cannot be understood without reference to the social milieu…’ in which an individual is embedded. For Vygotsky, development ‘does not proceed toward socialization”; it is’ the conversion of social relations into mental functions” (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 165).

The results of my study show that the culture that presides in Hollywood, the social relations between the studio executives and screenwriters negatively affect the screenwriters’ mental functions and psychological states, and as the screenwriters strongly believe, studio executives’ interference often ruin their stories. Steven Rivele confessed that writing for Hollywood is ruining him as a writer. The writer desperately wanted to write a book about the subject that interested him the most –molestation of children by catholic priests, “and I just can’t force myself to do because I don’t have that confidence any more. You have to have a tremendous arrogance to write a book, a novel,” explains Steven. And a studio system has sort of taken it out of me: When you’re constantly told – this is wrong, it doesn’t work, you should do it another way, you lose your sense of confidence,” explains Steven. “I was just saying it to Chris the other day: ‘what enables you to write books and plays and the poetry is your confidence that the voices that you hear in your head are telling you the truth.’ Year after year after year of being told by people whom you don’t respect, and people who are younger than you and don’t have much less experience living in the world than you these people are telling you: ‘no, the voices in your head are wrong, this has to be redone, this has to be rewritten, you lose the confidence that the voices in the head are telling you the truth. And then you’re finished as a writer.” “The writers are the most oppressed people in Hollywood for sure,” confesses Rod. “I think that the actresses have the worst lot in life. They have such a brief time to exploit their talents and then they are cast aside. But writers are definitely are the most exploited and pissed off.”
In order to change this practice, Steve and Chris are presently producing their screenplay “Copying Beethoven” independently where they wouldn’t have to deal with the oppressing culture of Hollywood studios.

Engestrom (1999), when examining cultural-contextual theories draws attentions to the situated learning, or legitimate peripheral participation, approach of Lave and Wenger (1991), where the central concept and the unit of analysis is the community of practice. This unit is decidedly broader than individual action. The author states that one could say that community of practice is socio-spatially a wider and more encompassing unit of analysis than mediated action. The problem here is in the temporal dimension. The theory of legitimate peripheral participation depicts learning and development primarily as a one-way movement from the periphery, occupied by novices, to the center, inhabited by experienced masters of the given practice. What seems to be missing is the movement outward and in unexpected directions: questioning of authority, criticism, innovation, and initiation of change. Instability and inner contradictions of practice are all but missing” (p. 29).

In my view, my study overcomes the weaknesses of the portrayal of the community of practice depicted in the situated learning theory of legitimate peripheral participation which belongs to the same family of the theories that study situated action within the cultural context of the community of practice as the activity theory does. My research represents a compelling picture of how the screenwriters survive in the community of practice, how they question and criticize authorities, how they innovate and initiate change. It portrays a picture of contradictions between the two sides of the filmmaking community and shows how the screenwriters overcome these contradictions and stay successful in the challenging for them cultural environment.

**Implications for Instructional Designers**

In this section of the chapter I would like to present my thoughts on implications that my study can have for practitioners, and specifically, implications for instructional designers.
Teaching ‘arational’ creative thinking strategies

How can we as learning specialists apply the lessons learned from the writing creative experiences to designing learning experiences? In my view, the organic way of writing is similar to constructivist paradigm of learning where the writer is proceeding in the creative process by organically growing the story based on what the character would do in the situation, the conditions of the situation, the individuality of a character, the mix that determines where the story will go next. As real people would make their decisions in certain life situations, so do the characters makes their choices in the stories, it is all situational, contextual, specific. The learners in the constructivist learning environment construct their knowledge based on the sources, tools, the conditions of the learning situation and the learners’ individual goals.

How can we make learning experiences even more organic for our learners? What should be the dialectical center of the organic learning process? Well, the lessons learned from the organic writing process teach us that the achievement of the state of saturation with the story is necessary in order for the process to become organic, a point when the story takes a life of its own. Finding the connection with the divine facilitates the achievement of the state of saturation. Application of certain rituals that represent the steps and the strategies can take you there. Can we as instructional designers create the experiences for our learners that will allow them to get immersed into a subject matter as completely as the writers get immersed into the subject matter of their stories? One strategy is to create compelling enough cases that will get our learners into compelling enough states of their minds that will drive them dynamically towards finding the answers to the important for them questions, constantly trying to build links and connections among the concepts and hypothesis in the world of their learning.

We, as instructional designers, should probably let go of preconceived schemes of learning and instead create open-ended experiences full of wonder of learning, encourage in our learners ‘arational’ modes for thinking, providing a variety of sources as intake of information and directions simultaneously, using a soft rather than hard, rational focus. We should encourage our learners to adopt intuitive approaches to discovery and learning as an alternative to or in combination with rational and scientific methods as the key mechanism that will help them to see the bigger picture.
Encouraging our learners to try and let go of only rational modes of thinking, to try and tap into some unusual outlets may help them unleash their creativity, listen to their inner voices, look for clues and cues, to be open and attentive to the images, sounds, and feelings that will give them an answer or some sense of direction to be taken in the course of learning. In other words, what John Fabian describes as ‘releasing a mindset,’ allowing the variety and approximation to grow knowledge as a part of organic learning experiences.

Suggestions from John Fabian’s research on creative thinking provide some great methods and techniques for fostering the ‘arational’ creative modes of thinking in individuals. In his analysis of the processing and expressing creative thought Fabian states that rational thought is presented by language and the use of well-known symbols to convey reasoning verbally, while arational thinking has a wider array of processes and media. *Intuition and the preconscious* are arational processes. *Vision, audition, and the kinesthetic sense* are arational media. Linked together, language, as the rational medium, and sight, sound, and touch or movement, as arational media, provide powerhouse vehicles for expressing innovative thought.

Fabian states that mechanisms responsible for arational processes are *intuition and the preconscious*. The researcher defines *intuition* as ‘the central process for producing imagination, is a mechanism of direct knowing’ (p. 42) The intuitive mode seems to have a kinship with sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, emotion, experience, memories, various levels of consciousness, and the processing of information that often captures the whole picture. “Or it seizes the essence of something and often delivers it to the conscious mind in images, fragments, or sensory awareness” (p. 43). Fabian notes that many people cover up their intuitive thoughts by denial or by logical reasoning, while other individuals are very receptive to intuitive processes and experience. A growing number of people in the business and scientific world are exploring potential of intuition for providing innovative ideas and for making decisions.

When exploring the media of arational expression, the writer emphasizes the importance of the *visual medium*, which he defines as “a combination of the visual sense, the system it represents, and the image-making capabilities of the mind, with exterior and interior dimensions.” One of the marks of creative people is a capacity to create vivid
For many years, the ability to think visually was felt to be insignificant to psychologists, who thought only external behavior was valuable. But research and new applications have brought a resurgence of the powers of image making. The ability to visualize is seen as an ability to: create specific new combinations and mental manipulations; tap intuitive and preconscious thought; extract essence and the big picture; draw on memories and emotions; rehearse and produce successful performance, improve memory, alter bodily responses; reduce fear. The art of invention involves great skills in visualization” (p. 47).

John Fabian offers an exercise that will help to develop the visual abilities. “Use your internal camera. Create scenes on your mental screen. Let mind movies reconstruct experiences from your memory bank. Or construct an invention. Turn it around. View it from different directions. Cut away what you don’t like. Expand or alter what you do like. Mental simulation is very cost effective.

Track your mental camera when you are very relaxed or asleep. Intuitive, preconscious processes are more active then. Observe the imagery just as you are ready to fall asleep or as you wake up. Note your dreams. You may even become expert at altering the plot or images.

Create external visual. Keep a pad by your bedside. Carry a journal in your attache case. Have it handy at your desk. The draw. Sculpt. Develop a prototype” (p. 48).

For enhancing auditory senses, Fabian suggests to use sound to create a mood that brings relaxation and stimulates intuitive processes. “Music that is slow baroque, approximately sixty beats a minute, seems best for producing relaxed concentration” (p. 49).

Fabian defines preconscious as “a level of consciousness just out of reach of your waking, hard-focusing awareness. It is an arena in which more primitive processes wrestle with and resolve problems. The preconscious comes into play when you aren’t fully awake or when you’re actually asleep” (p. 44). The researcher provides examples of how some scientists came with some of their great discoveries in their dream state. For instance, August Kekule saw in his dream an image of a snake holding its own tail which
helped the scientists build a hypothesis that the benzene molecule had a structure like a ring (p 44).

Fabian suggests three strategies that will help to access the preconscious mind – storm, calm, and access. Storm is about “provoking wild, unpredictable storm of ideas,” calm is about inducing relaxation. “A mind that is relaxed and approving sees possibilities in ideas that are fragmentary, a bit crazy, or off-the-wall. This state of mind is curious, positive, and confident” (p. 120). Access is about “tapping intuitive and preconscious thought. This strategy gets us in touch with potent creative problems solving that takes place out of our normal awareness,” suggests the researcher. This is how he recommends using the access strategies to its fullest potential: “Link calm and access. Use the quieting of the mind to allow the intuitive to be heard. Deliberately use the periods of meditation, dream sleep, and that floating time between being awake and being asleep as an opportunity for imaginative thought generation” (p. 120).

John Fabian emphasizes two breakthrough qualities that are important for creative innovative thinking: the soft mind focus and childlikeness. One of the strategies for creating the soft focus is thinking outrageously by exceeding the limits of what is usual. This can be achieved by trying to “blur the barriers, looking right past constraints, seeing ways to go under, over, or around boundaries” (p 57). What can stop an individual to think outrageously is the repetition, the following of the pattern what becomes habitual, the illusional mind-sets of the constraints that a person perceives exist, when they don’t. “Many people build a box around themselves and set up boundaries that appear to be real. The hoax is usually self- imposed, however. Numerous innovations have been made to the incredulity of colleagues who believed a positive solution was impossible. A hard focus locks us in. A soft focus gives us a key for exploring creative possibilities” (p. 59).

As a part of being childlike, the researcher suggests to cultivate the creative child within, and encourage application of the five vital characteristics that tap the creative imagination. They are: (1) having the beginners’ mind – “a toleration of nonsense is essential to imagination. It was Einstein’s confidence in nonsense that produced the theory of relativity and netted him the Noble Prize”. (2) Playfulness – playing as a way of learning, finding new connections and patterns, laughing, having fun and using humor.
(3) Exploration – taking a discovery journey, experimenting, probing for insights with curiosity, (4) Fantasy – daydreaming and entering the world of make-believe.
(5) Emotional coloring – ‘feelings help fire up imagination. Emotions trigger memories and associations that tap your past and form connections between experiences and solutions. Feelings enrich fantasies, color dreams, excite play, arouse interest, enliven energy, and focus direction’ (p. 66).

Drawing from Fabian’s research, some of the ways we as instructional designers can encourage our learners to be more creative is by integrating into our instruction the active use of visualization, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies. As Fabian suggests, to tap into an individual’s visualization abilities, we can ask the learners create mental simulations, draw models, get inside of the content matter visually and wonder around it, trying to visualize different aspects of it. In my opinion, the concrete visualization strategies would mainly depend on the subject matter of the material under study. For example, my study participants created their own visualization strategies for screenwriting such as playing the movie scenes in their mind, trying to visualize the film from the perspective of the audience, getting into the story world visually in order to identify and fix the problems. Personally, when I write my stories I actively use visualization techniques as well. What really helps me to get visually going in my story is to ‘cast’ it with the actors I’d like to see playing my characters. That helps to see the character’s personality, put a life into a character. Depending on the story setting, when I see the story scenes unfolding, I often see the familiar to me images, if I have difficulty visualizing things it may be because the story visual is unfamiliar to me, like the life in the desert mountains, for instance. I will still see an obscure picture, but to make it clearer, I may watch movies and see photographs to familiarize myself with the new concept visually.

Thus, in addition to using our own imagination and knowledge of the visualization techniques, we as instructional designers, could also ask our learners to come up with their individual visualization techniques that will help them to think creatively. We could use similar ideas to work with the auditory and kinesthetic creative expression strategies.
I provided a discussion of some of the strategies for creative thinking from John Fabian’s research and my study not with the purpose to exhaust what can be done to encourage creativity in learning, but to give some ideas that could be successfully integrated into designing learning experiences, be it classroom or technology based. Some of the conclusions from my study and Fabian’s research suggest designing learning environments with the approximate versus exact learning goals, with the boundaries that can be expanded based on the individual learner’s experiences and intentions, with enough scaffolding in order for the learner not to get lost, but not too “hard” to pre-determine the learning path and stifle the wonder of learning. As a part of openness of the design could offer our learners opportunities for creating their own learning rituals embedding visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies, encourage them to use storm, calm, and access techniques to tap into their preconscious mystical states that will help to develop and sustain creative thinking modes and achieve new planes of learning that surpass the mechanical boundaries set in a lesson plan.

We could encourage our learners to create soft mind focus that may expand depending on their findings, and feel like children, to use fantasy, exploration, openness to strange ideas that may seem silly, allowing our learners to wonder inside of their learning experiences, bringing back the discovered treasures and relics that they found during their learning expeditions. In other words, to design learning experiences that will “broaden and enrich the learners’ ability to observe, to be alert, to search for novel combinations” (Fabian, 1990, p. 33).

I believe that utilization of ‘arational,’ creative strategies for learning in the classroom ones as well as in technology-based environment in combination with the rational ones would be an excellent and exciting topic for further research.

**Implications for developing creativity in children**

Although my study participants strongly believe that talent is something a person should be born with, they shared how much effort they spent on nurturing and developing their talents starting from the very early childhood. Mylo Carbia and Steve Rivele started writing when they were very young, Bob McKee as a boy was actively involved with the theater and was a fan of film, Chris Wilkinson was a young musician, and Rod Taylor
was a young filmmaker. All the study participants acknowledged that these early efforts played an important role in the later development of their screenwriting talent. These early beginnings might have some implications for children. My study participants followed their early creative interests, be it theater, writing stories, making film, or playing music, they have applied what they have learned from these areas to screenwriting later on in their lives, their initial creative endeavors served as initial creative impulses that sustained their creative curiosity. From life examples of my study participants encouraging children’s early creative inclinations and developing them is of central importance in nurturing children’s talents. In the case of my study participants when their creative performance was noticed either by school teachers or parents served as an important point in their artistic lives, the point when their talents were acknowledged by others, which brought an awareness to them that this is something that they are really good at, which in its turn, made them pursue their creative interests further in their lives eventually bringing them to writing careers. Paying attention to what a child is good at an early age and encouraging him or her do things in that area, providing opportunities for developing talent might be an important point in the child’s early development that should not be missed by parents and school.

My study participants were also involved in studying the classic traditions, be it literature, music or theater, and some of them tried to apply them in their own creative endeavors. Mylo was trying to apply the principles of Greek mythology in her early story telling efforts, Bob McKee was interpreting the morals of Aesop’s fables, which later on helped him in writing analyses of screenplays, being a screenwriting guru. Chris Wilkinson acknowledged that playing music from the early childhood helped him to master the discipline of screenwriting. This example indicates that teaching classical traditions to children, such as Greek myths, stories from Bibles, classic literature such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, etc. and any literary resources that represent the genre that the child is interested in would help him or her to understand the best traditions and great masterpieces of that genre. The same pertains to theater, music, and film.

One of the characteristics that my study participants exhibited was their consistent desire to pursue their creative interests throughout their lives and develop them into something bigger. The presence of the creative desire or impulse and persistence in
following it seems to be one of the most important personal characteristics that allowed my study participants achieve their successes in the screenwriting profession. Uniqueness, originality, a gift to innovate is one of the most important talents that my study participants reported as necessary in order to create original unique stories. It is important because their story has to stand out among other stories, other made films. Asking children to come up with ideas that are different from anyone else’, that have never been done before, encouraging the spark of originality to light up will promote children’s creative thinking.

When a famous Russian ballet dancer Irina Volchkova was asked during an interview for “Izvestiya” newspaper (May, 2005) if she had the talent, the dancer responded that she had a tremendous desire to be in ballet but her physical abilities were not the best. It was due to her tremendous will to be the best, and her hard work she achieved brilliant results and became one of the best dancers in the Bolshoi Theater. She said that her advice to the young artists was to never give up their dream and desire and work hard in achieving it, try to be different and original and their dream will come true.

So, in addition to talent and abilities, the desire to be the best in the selected field, hard work, and originality were emphasized as extremely important by my study participants as well as other researchers and creative individuals.

**Expanding the instructional designer’s toolkit**

Working with activity theory throughout this study, I saw a number of ways of how some of the aspect of this fairly new framework can be adopted to practices of instructional design. My twelve years of experience in the field of learning design and technologies in a variety of roles and positions allowed me to see the insights in this study, which otherwise I wouldn’t have seen. My twelve years of experience working in the field of learning design and technologies included: working as an instructional designer for such organizations as US Air Force Academy, Aetna Life and Casualty, and Andersen Consulting Education responsible for designing a wide range of technology-based learning and performance support programs; working as a manager for learning and performance technologies at General Electric Company’s Corporate University, where my responsibilities included a wide array of things starting from conducting front-
end analysis to designing complex multilingual simulations with the elements of artificial intelligence in them. I thought I pretty much have done it all. However, conducting my dissertation research taught me things that I haven’t experience in my corporate and academic tenure. I’ve learned lessons that I saw could be directly applicable to learning design and technologies.

**Lesson 1. Use activity theory framework to extract experts’ mental models**

During my study I worked with experts in screenwriting just as instructional designers do when they try to extract experts’ knowledge for designing learning programs. Based on my study experience, every expert has a mental model as to how he or she approaches performing tasks in the areas of their expertise. Before this study, for years, when designing learning practices, I focused on the question: what do the experts know and how do I extract that knowledge out of their heads and then replicate it in the learning system? The insights I have taken from my research when using activity theory framework allowed me to shift my focus from the individual expert’s cognition to the ensemble of elements that surround an expert, and ask the question, “How do experts operate within an activity context using tools and interactions with other people, in environments that are colored by certain cultural norms and beliefs? How do all these elements of the activity system influence one another and interact with one another within the context of the activity when creating a product? This angle of looking at things and understanding the nature of practice provided me with a more flexible interpretation of realities than the deterministic approach of finding one right way by analyzing the expert’s cognitive processes and procedures. I found a framework of activity theory to be a useful ensemble of interacting elements, which I suggest that instructional designers try and adapt as a part of their working toolkit. The focus of activity theory on practice is very much in line with the nature of instructional design which focuses on teaching skills, knowledge or attitudes to the learners who should be able to apply it in practice.
Lesson 2. Account for the mediating role of tools

In the center of activity theory lies a close focus on understanding the nature of the activity and the interrelationship among the elements of activity: the subject of the activity working on the object producing results, while applying activity tools, and resulting from it transformation of the subject and the object. This simple framework on the one hand, assures the focus on the central relationship of the activity subject and object, and, on the other hand, it offers to expand the view on this relationship to include other important activity elements, such as tools, culture of the community of practitioners, norms, rules and division of labor.

Following the order of importance of the elements of the activity as they are presented in the activity theory can provide a useful reference, a framework for an instructional designer when he or she starts to work on the course analysis, content development, and design.

First, the instructional designer can look into the nature of the activity at hand and ask the questions: What is the essence of the activity? What does the expert do in the activity? What is his or her main object? What results are they trying to achieve? What are the processes, phases, steps do they follow in order to implement the activity?

In my research the subject’s main activity was the screenwriters creating a beautiful screenplay. I’ve discovered that the screenwriters had to go through three phases of the creative process in order to do it: achieving the desired state of the story development; story transformation and the screenwriters’ transformation. I’ve also discovered that the writers specific creative approaches: organic or analytical when going through the three phases of the story creation.

Embedding the mediating role of tools into the working framework, the instructional designer can ask: What tools does the expert use in order to implement the activity? In what ways does the application of the tools help the experts to carry out an activity and get closer to realization of its object?

In my study the main tools the writers applied were their creative approaches to writing the story, the psychological states they experienced in the process of creation, the traditions from the great literature, film, music and theater they have adopted, and the expertise they have developed. When bringing their stories to life, the writers used the
screenwriting software. “Final Draft” program was mentioned most of all. “Final Draft not only helps the writers type the screenplay in the appropriate format, it also allows to view the screenplay scene by the scenes, to see the list of all characters, which makes the writers’ job much easier.

Activity consists of *actions and operations*. In my opinion, this hierarchy resembles the hierarchical task analysis that an instructional designer uses in order to analyze how to teach intellectual skills representing a simplified version of it. Using this approach, the instructional designer can break the activity down into the major actions, and then each action, into operations or conditions under which these actions are implemented. An instructional designer can also determine which specific tools the practitioner applies at the levels of actions and operations.

An instructional designer may ask the following questions: What are the most important actions an expert or a practitioner needs to complete in order to implement the activity? What are the necessary operations or conditions for completing these actions? How do operations help to implement the actions? What are the tools the expert uses at each of the levels of actions and operations? How do these tools help to carry out the operations in order to fulfill the actions and the activity in general?

For example, achieving the desired state of the story development is an action that the screenwriter has to implement in order to carry out an activity of writing a screenplay. Conducting a ritual of creating the character represents an operation. The writer uses the methods or tools of looking at the world through the character’s eyes, getting immersed into the character’s psyche in order to complete these operations.

*Lesson 3. Include the analysis of transformation into your instructional designer’s toolkit.*

As instructional designers, we usually try to understand what the experts do and how they do it, often loosing the sight of what is happening to the object, how it changes or transforms as a result of an expert’s actions. Understanding the nature of the object transformation is a part of the activity theory framework.

I believe that showing the transformation of the object is important because working with the object represents the main goal of the activity that is directly connected
to achieving the result. Understanding the milestones of how this goal is getting attained by the expert not only from the point of view of what the expert does but also from the perspective of the cycle of development of the object is an important aspect of representing activity. For instance, just showing what the screenwriters do when trying to reach a desired state of the story development is helpful and instructional. But understanding how the screenwriters’ application of methods and tools changes the substance and the form of the screenplay and how the screenplay changes as a result of the screenwriters’ insights in the process of creation of the story, and as a result of the feedback from the community of film makers is even more instructional because creation of the screenplay is the goal of the activity. We can leave our learners oblivious as to what transformations the object of the activity goes through, but by doing that we would miss some valuable insights into the learning about activity.

The activity theory framework also looks into the nature of the subject’s transformation. This aspect of the activity theory reminds me of reflection activities in instructional design when we ask our learners what they have learned as a result of what they read, the course they took, etc. In my designing and teaching experience, I’ve always used the reflection activities encouraging the learners to reflect before, during the learning experience and after it. For me, the subject transformation aspect of the activity framework only reconfirms the importance of reflection in learning that aims to understand how the learner changed. However, as a result of my study, I’ve learned some insights on gradation in the subjects’ transformation: that the transformation or learning can occur at three levels – the level of skills, the level of personal insight, and the level of self-knowledge. I plan to include these new insights into the structure of the reflection activities in the future.

Trying to understand the nature of the subject and object transformation, the instructional designer should ask the following questions: What types of changes or transformations does the object undergo during the activity? What causes these transformations? How do the practitioners’ actions and the tools he or she applies change the nature of the object of the activity?

Understanding the range of transformations the object and the subject undergo and the factors that influence it can be an interesting research study.
Lesson 4. Include the analysis of the community of practice into your instructional
designers’ toolkit

As instructional designers, when conducting front-end analysis we look for the
causes of the existing problems. Among such causes can be the lack of knowledge or
skills, or environmental problems. If the problems are connected to the lack of skills, we
recommend training or learning interventions, if the problems are in the environment, we
can make recommendation about making changes in the environment.

Rarely, almost never in my experience, do we analyze how the cultural
environment of the community of practitioners influences the expert and the product he
or she creates. Because cognition is situated, the analysis of the culture can provide
valuable insights into how environment affects the expert’s cognition, how and why they
do things differently because of the environment, how they adjust themselves and the
object they are working on to fit the cultural norms, or how the experts in their turn, may
influence the creation of a certain culture.

As a result of adopting the activity theory framework in my study, I had to look
into the culture of the community of practitioners of filmmakers as a part of
understanding the nature of the screenwriters’ activities. I found it to be useful to talk to
the representatives of the other sides of the community of practitioners and find out what
they think about the important aspects of the activity, their perspectives on the activity
subjects and the objects. The results of my study show that there was a very strong
influence of the community of executives on the writers’ creative processes, their
professional identity, and the object of their activity, the screenplay. The analysis of the
community of practitioners revealed that the screenwriters had quite different values from
those of studio executives, which created tension and conflicts in their collaborations.
The screenwriters invented strategies and tactics in order to make these frictions less
evident, to preserve the integrity of the story, and secure their place on the project.

How to use the analysis of this aspect of the activity theory will probably depend
on the learning situation. For instance, it may be necessary to introduce the learners to the
cultural environment of community of practitioners and show how various experts view
this cultural environment, it may be useful to share with the learners the strategies that
experts invent to fit into the culture or to survive the culture, or to show how the culture influences the changes that happen to the object of the activity.

The following questions will help the designer to understand the culture of the community of practitioners: What constitutes the community of practitioners where your expert performs his activity? How does the expert describe this culture? How do other members of the community of practitioners affect what the experts do: their cognitive processes, the nature of the product they create? How do the experts change as a result of the influence of the community of practitioners: what methods they use to adjust to the culture? How does the product change as a result of the influence of the community of practitioners? How do experts contribute to the formation of the working culture? Are there any conflicts or contradictions among the members of the community of practitioners? How do these conflicts get resolved?

Lesson 5. Compare and contrast experts’ approaches when creating models

Conducting qualitative research taught me another invaluable lesson: to compare and contrast the aspects of the phenomena under the study. In order to present my study findings, I had to compare the elements of the screenwriters’ creative processes and their expertise. Such comparative analysis allowed me to generate attributes that constituted commonalities and differences of the phenomenon under the study and present it from a variety of angles. I believe that this skill is very important for the instructional designers when they are working on creating instruction. It can be very helpful in assembling the models of expert approaches. When I began this study I was under impression that I will come up with some kind of monolithic way the screenwriters do their craft. And as I was proceeding with my study it became clear that there are different angles and alternatives of how the creative processes could be implemented, that there are similarities and as well as important differences in the way the screenwriters do their craft. In similar ways, we as instructional designers have a tendency to generate models sometimes without recognition that there are several ways of looking at the same phenomenon. When it comes to developing and using models, there is a tendency to forget these different angles and perspectives being completely focused on the application itself.
Lesson 6. Run a reality check of theory versus practice

One of the lessons I’ve learned from my study is that theory often clashes with practice, and that sometimes we try to apply theory to do something practical and it doesn’t work. The experience with my study made me realize that it is useful to run a healthy reality check of applications of theory in practice: talking to practitioners and looking for cases of its application, seeing if there is any significant contradictions between what the theory teaches and how practitioners do it are some of the ways to do it. In the case of my study I found that what the screenwriting methodology was teaching contradicted with how the majority of my study participants did it in reality. As instructional designers we often have to work with pre-packaged content given to us in the form of theoretical assumptions. Even in my corporate experience I found that every time we presented theory as a part of the course, there would be some practitioners who would fundamentally disagree with it, often calling it ‘an academic approach’. Given that I love theory, a number of times I thought that it was presumptuous of them to disregard theory, and think that they know it better. Now, after conducting my study and based on my own experience, I can relate much better to where they were coming from.

I believe it is a good idea for an instructional designer to run a healthy reality check with the practitioners in the field, see how they do tasks and what they think about theory, and then present perspectives of practitioners on the theory as a part of a learning experience.

Suggestions for teaching screenplay writing

As I was thinking about the implications of my study for instructional design, I almost involuntarily thought about the way I would approach teaching how to write screenplays, the learning designer was talking in me. Rather than presenting the general methodology on how to write scripts in a form of a lecture, I’d design it as technology-based case-based learning because, in my view, the unique and original nature of creative screenwriting calls for it. The two creative approaches: organic and analytical writing would be the selection points from the program main menu. Once the learner chose the creative approach he or she would like to explore, they’d get to the menu of the common for creative process phases such as ‘achieving the desired state of the story development’,
‘the writers’ rituals’, ‘solving the story problems,’ “and resolving issues with the community of practitioners”. Once the learners selected one of the options, I’d give them a chance to select a screenplay or a writer in each phase of the creative process. For instance, if the learner chose “solving the story problem’ option and then “Writing Kleopatra” by Stephen Rivele and Chris Wilkinson, they’d have a chance to hear the writers’ stories in the form of video clips with them talking about their challenges of hearing Kleopatra’s voice, and then experiencing a breakthrough and the way the writers solved the story problems after the breakthrough occurred. It would be feasible to provide the initial copy of the screenplay and the copy of it once the break-through occurred when the writers re-wrote the story. If there were a film made based on the screenplay, there would be an option to watch segments from the movie the way the scenes ended up created in the film. If there were changes to the scene made by the film director, the program would discuss what changes happened and why. A learner could compare this particular case of resolving story problems with the case of an analytical writer resolving the story problems and compare and contrast the two approaches, reflecting about the differences. In the section “Resolving issues with the community of practitioners” it would be appropriate to present some views of the studio executives on the screenplay, to show the notes the writers received and discuss the implication of these notes for the changes in the screenplay and the writers’ views on these changes. It would be interesting to trace which changes made it to the final draft, and if they made it to the film because the writers mentioned that sometimes they would re-introduce the changes made by the studio executives to the film director and the film director might bring the original ideas back into the movie.

A program like this would introduce the learners to the variety of ways and creative approaches providing some delineation among them, but not imposing one single view on how screenplay writing should be done. It would also introduce them to how experts in the field think and create.

Conclusion

I believe that in some way what the screenwriters do when they write their stories and what we as instructional designers do when we work on designing content is very
similar. As screenwriters work with different types of stories every time they write, so do we as instructional designers work with different types of content every time we do design work. As screenwriters study traditions that a certain story brings with it and what other writers have done with it in the past, they invent their own methods of story telling that represents synthesis of their knowledge of what has been done before, their unique outlook on the world, and their original creative approach. We, as instructional designers, also study the traditions of learning and every time we design a program, we face a new problem solution to which represents synthesis of what we know, what we have experienced before, and our decisions on how we are going to handle it this time – what strategies, approaches and tactics we are going to use.

One important insight I took out of my study experience is that screenwriters when working with the content of the story work very hard to get to understanding the essence of it. Just as the winemaker grows the grapes, tends to them for a long time, and then when the time comes presses them to produce wonderful wine, so are the screenwriters work hard and immerse themselves completely into the story and its subject matter: crisscross it from different angles, turn inside out, look at it form different points of view, study its traditions, connect with its spirit, live, breath and sleep with it, and then the miracle happens – they know how to tell the story because the story tells itself. They get the essence of it just as the winemakers get the essence of the grape. What can we learn from this, how can we become artists of our designs?

I believe that if we, as instructional designers, work to immerse ourselves into the subject matter we are working with completely: study it, understand it, look into its history, talk to practitioners, use what we know about design, but not concentrate on it too much, allowing the aspects of the content talk for itself in us, we can start hearing its original voice in our heads. And hopefully the miracle will happen: the elegant learning design will emerge and organically present itself to us, just like beautiful stories well told present themselves to the screenwriters.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Distributed Cognition in the Activities of Film Producers and Screenplay Writers (IRB# 15813)

Principal Investigator: Marina Samouilova
Other Investigator(s): Dr. Ian Baptiste and Dr. Kyle Peck

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this qualitative research is to understand the producers’ and screenplay writers’ experiences when creating a screenplay and producing a film. The researcher will look at these experiences to understand the interactions of the cognitive, social, and environmental, and creative elements within the activities of community of practice producers and writers as a part of, and the effect of these interactions on creation of the final product, a screenplay and a film, as well as the producers’ and writers’ learning.

2. Procedures to be followed: Participation in this research will include completion of interviews and observations of producers’ and writers’ activities.

3. Discomforts and Risks: There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. If some questions will cause discomfort, they will be omitted.

4. Benefits:
   a. The benefits to participants include:
      • The present research study may provide some practical guidelines for the practitioners and educators of the communities of producers and writers for improving the existing methods and providing learning opportunities for the newcomers.
      • The researcher may help the participants find best practices in the areas of screenplay writing and movie production and apply them to what they do.

   b. The benefits to society include:
      • This research may provide a better understanding of the interactions of the creative, cognitive, and social processes producers and writers perform. As a result, the study may contribute to the expansion of the activity theory, which currently represents an important framework that emphasizes naturalistic study, culture and history in the areas of psychology, cognitive and constructivist learning, and anthropology.

5. Duration/Time: The initial interview might take 1-2 hours. An additional 1-2 hours of a follow-up interview will be requested. Duration of observations will depend on the type of the activities the study participants will allow the principle investigator to observe. The duration of the activities may last from 1 week to 1 month.
6. Statement of Confidentiality: Only the principal investigator will know your identity unless you choose to be known in the study.

7. Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. The principal investigator will answer your questions. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact Penn State’s Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

Contact Marina Samouilova at (917) 304-1139 with any questions. Her address is: 132 E. 45 Street, Apt. 11 D, New York, NY 10017. Marina’s email address: mas299@psu.edu.

Research study advisors’ contact information:
Dr. Kyle Peck: Office: 411D Keller Building; University Park, PA 16802. Phone number: 814-863-4316; email address: kpeck@psu.edu
Dr. Ian Baptiste: Office: 306 Keller Building, University Park, PA 16802. Phone number: 814-865-1958; email address: ieb1@psu.edu.

8. Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the principal investigator. Participants can decline to answer specific questions.

9. The audiotapes with the recorded interviews will be stored at the main residence of the principal investigator, Marina Samouilova and will be electronically destroyed in April 2005, a year later after the dissertation research is completed. Only the principal investigator Marina Samouilova and the faculty advisors, Kyle Peck and Ian Baptiste will have access to the tapes.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

The principal investigator would like to have the option of quoting and/or identifying participants in the analysis of her research. Please indicate below whether or not you would agree to be quoted and/or identified in the analysis of this research study.

_____ I give permission to be quoted and/or identified in the analysis of this research project.
I DO NOT give permission to be quoted and/or identified in the analysis of this research project. I understand that only the principal investigator and her advisors will have access to my identity.

Participant Signature __________________________ Date __________________________

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature __________________________ Date __________________________
APPENDIX B

Initial Interview Protocol
Debriefing Statement

Thank you very much for agreeing to be a participant in this study. The purpose of this study is to find out how experienced screenplay writers and movie producers describe their activities of creating a script or producing a film, and the meaning they attach to these activities. Specifically, I’d like to talk about the components of the activities and how they interact with one another when you write a screenplay or produce a film—and which of these components you consider to be the most important. I would like you to talk (for approximately one hour and a half) about your experiences as a writer/producer. Before we begin, I would like for you to read the informed consent form and have you sign it. (Research gives copy of consent form to participant and reads it aloud). Do you have any questions? (Research responds to participant’s questions). If you are satisfied, will you please sign the form? (Participant signs form). Thanks for signing the form, now let’s get to the real stuff—your writing/producing experiences (smile).

Interview Protocol: Screenplay writing

1. Tell me about yourself that would give me a sense of how and why you became a screenplay writer:
   - Education
   - How many years of experience as a screenplay writer/producer
   - Tell me about how you grew up, experiences that shaped you becoming a screenplay writer
   - Describe your first experiences that influenced you becoming a screenplay writer
   - Tell me things about yourself as a screenplay writer: what brought you here, what concrete experiences?

2. From these experiences are there any characteristics that you formed that have influenced you as a writer?

3. Why have you become a movie writer, not novelist or other type of a writer?

4. Talk about the screenplay/film you’ve created:
   a. Describe the story, think about the first story you wrote and describe it for me
   b. What triggered the creation of the story?
   c. Prompts about activity theory—concrete information, processes, activities, tools, who else did you write the story with? First you want the experiences and then reflections and reconstructions.
   d. Want to talk about the film and the process (activity theory) — most instrumental in developing the expertise, first, recent

5. How do you write a script? Talk about the processes, flow, and methodologies you used when writing a screenplay:
6. Talk about the structure of the story
   - Type of the design: archplot, miniplot, antiplot
   - Acts structure: Inciting incident, acts climaxes and resolutions, major reversals, subplots
   - Scene design – turning of value, setups/payoffs, text and subtext
   - Placement of the crisis and design of the crisis, resolution
   - Forces of antagonism
   - How following the process you described influenced the final story? How, for instance, did the placement of the inciting incident influence the act design?

7. Talk about creating a Protagonist/ Antagonist. What elements did you use in character creation:
   a. character arc
   b. choices under pressure
   c. character vs. characterization
   d. character in the climax of the story
   e. levels of conflict (inner, personal, extra-personal)

8. What’s usually coming through your mind when you’re writing?
9. How does thinking about the character creatively interplay with the fact that you needed to apply certain structural elements of the form in order to create the character (character arc, etc.)?
10. How does creating a character following the elements of the form influenced the overall story structure? Did the elements of the structure influence the character? How? What did you learn from it?
11. In your opinion, are there any parts of the process that you used are more important than others? Why?
12. How does creative process of coming up with an original story interplay with the necessity of using a structure or a form? How do these two processes influence each other? Which one is more important?
13. What is the secret of coming up with an original story? How do you do it?
14. What is important in a good story? What do you call a good story?
15. What’s more important in the process of creating a story?
   - Creativity
   - Following the structure
   - Creating emotional experiences

16. What are the sources of creativity for you when you wrote this story?
   - Research
   - Imagination
   - Memory

17. What film genre was your story written in? Why this genre?
18. As we just talked about, when you wrote your story, you followed a method to structure or design your story, you applied creativity, you interacted with other people, you work in a specific culture. Which of these elements and their interactions do you consider most important ones for creating a script? Why?

19. Can you talk about the script you wrote that played the most instrumental role in the development of you as a writer? Why was the experience so important?

20. What was done differently when writing that story from your first script?
   - Structure
   - Characters
   - Creativity
   - Genre

21. The method you used for creating your story that you described to me, would you say it follows the Hollywood culture or an independent film culture?

22. a. Is there a distinction as an Independent writing vs Hollywood writing?
   - Methods
   - Approaches/tools
   - Culture
   - Expectations

23. b. Can you talk about any other aspects of the Hollywood/Independent film culture that affect what you write?

24. Describe the range or diversity of writers

25. What type of writer do you consider yourself to be? (independent screenplay writer or a Hollywood writer; or other)

26. Can you talk about your identity as a writer and what influences and forms it?
   - Types of stories you write
   - Organizations/communities you belong to
   - Social connections, interchanges with other writers

27. Have you ever worked on the team with other writers? How was that experience?
   - How did you divide the tasks and responsibilities?
   - Negotiation of rules/norms
   - What lessons have you learned (what was good and not so good) from this experience?

28. Do you prefer to work alone or with someone when writing a story? Why?

29. What aspects of the screenplay writing experience are the most rewarding, and the least rewarding to you?

30. Describe the most interesting project experiences/the least interesting experiences

31. Lessons learned from screenplay writing experiences

32. If you thought about an ideal experience of writing a script, what would it be like, taking into account the process and tools and interactions with other people?

33. What else would you like to share about you writing experiences that we didn’t discuss today?
APPENDIX C

Evolved Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol

The Screenwriter’s Background

• Tell me about yourself that would give me a sense of how and why you became a screenplay writer:
  • Education
    • How many years of experience as a screenplay writer
    • Tell me about how you grew up, experiences that shaped you becoming a screenplay writer
    • Describe your first experiences that influenced you becoming a screenplay writer
    • Tell me things about yourself as a screenplay writer: what brought you here, what concrete experiences?
  • What screenplays have you created?
  • When did you move to Hollywood? How did it happen?

The Creative Process

Story Origination

• Talk about the last screenplay/film you’ve created:
  a. Describe the story
  b. What triggered the creation of the story?
  c. Is it an adaptation or an original story?
  d. What genre is the story written in? Why this genre. Do you like working in this genre?
  e. Can you talk about story characters. How did you think about creating these characters? What contradictions do they have to face? What choices do they need to make?

• Did you plot the story in advance?
• Do you outline the story, do you write detailed treatments?

Processes, Rituals:

• What process do you usually follow when creating a story starting from coming up with a story idea, and then putting the idea into realization in the form of the story?
• Do you follow any special rituals during your creative approach?
• How did you start the story?
• How did you decide on the story setting? (period, duration, location, level of conflict)
• How do you think through the story events?
• How did you think about creating a story structure?
• If you thought about an ideal experience of writing a script, what would it be like, taking into account the process and tools and interactions with other people?
Creativity

- Creativity seems to be important to people in this field, talk about the creative part of you. Tell me about what creativity means to you and how it is manifested in this particular work?
- What were the sources of creativity for you when you wrote this story?
  - Research
  - Imagination
  - Memory
- Are there elements of your work that are equally important but not creative? Could you talk about them?
  - some people talk about form, models, approaches
- So, how do these elements interplay with one another in the process of story creation? What is primary and what is secondary?
  - Structure
  - Creative substance of the story
- In your opinion, are there any parts of the process that you used are more important than others? Why?
- What is the difference in terms of creating a story in the projects that you worked on?
- Why do you write?
- What aspects of the screenplay writing experience are the most rewarding, and the least rewarding to you?

Creating Dialogue

- Can you talk about how you write dialogue?

Attributes of A Good Story

- What do you consider important in a good story? What do you call a good story?
- Can you talk about the differences of writing an original story vs. adaptation. Differences between work for hire and writing on spec?

Mental States

- Describe your mental and emotional states when you write.
- Do you need to reach a certain mental or emotional state in order for the story to flow faster?
- When do the stories that you write come to you more easily and when does it happen with more difficulty?
- How do you know that the creative process if going well?
The Story Transformation:

- What usually triggers the re-writing of the story?
- Could you talk about major changes you made from your original script to the final version?
  a. Changes in character
  b. Changes in story structure
  c. Any other changes
- Why did you make these changes? What caused them?
- How many drafts of the story have you created? Which draft was the hardest to write? Why?
- What was the major difference between the first and the final draft?

The Screenwriters’ Transformation:

- What do you know and what can you do better now as a result of writing this particular story? Are the things that you learn every time you write a story different? Why? Can you talk about it.
- From these experiences are there any characteristics that you formed that have influenced you as a writer?
- What screenplay that you wrote played the most instrumental role in the development of you as a writer? Why was the experience so important?
- Compare your responses about this screenplay to the person that you were in the beginning of your writing journey? What has changed?

Culture

- Can you talk about writing for Hollywood/ independent film. What is it like? What do you like about it and not so much?
- What are the most challenging things when you write for this culture?
- When creating your stories, do you follow any methods or approaches that are influenced by the culture you are working in?
- In your opinion, is there a distinction in writing for an Independent writing vs. writing for Hollywood?
  - Methods
  - Approaches/tools
  - Culture
  - Expectations

- Can you talk about your meetings with studios when you pitch or review your scripts?
Collaborations/Community of Practitioners

- What types of collaborations play an important role in your writing? Can you talk about them.
- Have you had any experiences writing with another person?
- What lessons have you learned from your collaborative experience: what was good and not so good?
- Do you prefer to work alone or with someone when writing a story? Why?
- Do you use any tools when you write? How does it help? Why do you use them?

The Screenwriter’s Identity

- Describe the range or diversity of screenwriters that in your opinion exist out there
- What type of a screenwriter do you consider yourself to be?
- Can you talk about your identity as a screenwriter and what influences and forms it?
  - Types of stories you write
  - Organizations/communities you belong to
  - Social connections, interchanges with other writers

- What else would you like to share about your writing experiences that we didn’t discuss today?
Vita

Born and raised in Moscow, Russia. Marina Samouilova has earned her BS in philology, English and German. She worked as an interpreter and an organizer of the advanced courses for foreign languages for children at the Academy of Sciences of the former USSR. After she earned her MS degree from Bloomsburg University, PA, Ms. Samouilova worked at the US Air Force Academy, where she was a technology and language consultant producing multimedia courses teaching Russian to the US Air Force Academy cadets and Peace Corps. Members. She also served as a learning designer working for such companies as Andersen Consulting and Aetna Life and Casualty. The last six years of her corporate career, she worked as a manager for learning technologies at the General Electric Capital Corporation producing cutting edge technology products and implementing them around the world. Having finished her PH. D. at The Pennsylvania State University, Ms. Samouilova accepted a position of an assistant professor at the New York Institute of Technology.