

TeaTime journalist, Charlotte Mountford, had the opportunity to meet with the famous scriptwriting instructor Robert McKee during his recent visit to Santiago, Chile. Read about their lively interaction and McKee's perspective on the art of film writing.

By Charlotte Mountford

I was nervous about meeting the great creative writing instructor Robert McKee. He has a reputation for shouting on stage and spewing profanities. After waiting my turn among the other journalists, I stepped up to take my seat next to the serious looking lecturer, now in his seventies. Only a few minutes into my interview, all of my fears were confirmed. "You have no idea what you are talking about," he growled at me, leaning in after I asked my first question.

McKee's creative writing seminars are world famous. He travels to many countries giving lectures based on his best-selling book, *Story*, in which he analyses narrative structure as well as the elements that make a narrative compelling. The Story Seminar has been called 'the world's ultimate writing class' and has served over 50,000 screenwriters, filmmakers, TV writers, novelists, industry executives, actors, producers, directors and playwrights over the past 25 years. His 'Genre' seminars have also been widely acclaimed: the script guru teaches the masses how to bend big genres like Comedy or Horror to their own advantage and make them more marketable.

McKee's work, however, is not without controversy. He is criticized both for 'teaching the very obvious' when it comes to story-telling and structure and for never having had one of his own screenplays made into a movie – his response to which has always been "those who can't do, teach."

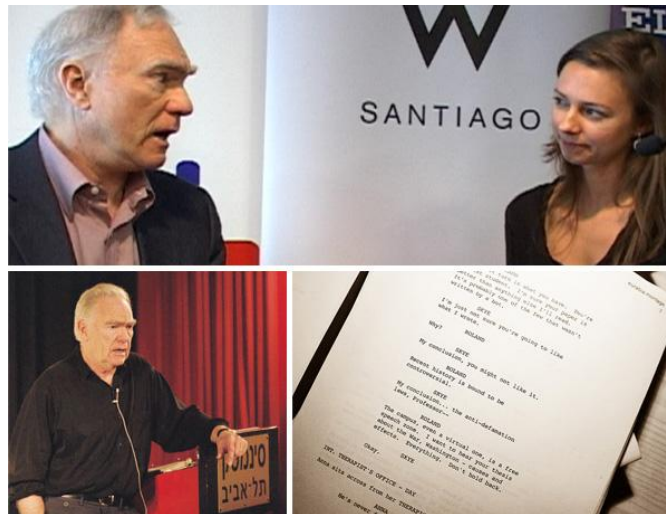
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McKee advocates a narrative structure of three acts. This is the classic story structure, having been around since Aristotle, and it is ever popular in mainstream cinema. In a typical Hollywood film, you can time the events and conflicts – the “plot points” – down to the minute in these three-act narratives. In Act 1 you have the “set up” of characters, then at around 30 minutes into the film, at Act 2, you know that there will be some sort of “confrontation,” an obstacle thrown in the character’s path; and finally, Act 3 will see the “resolution” of the conflict.

One successful Hollywood writer expressed boredom over this type of film structure. She told me, “A basic sense of Aristotelian drama of three acts can be good, but Hollywood being essentially conservative and Hollywood being obsessed with this form makes it a little banal after a while.”

She went on to describe problems in developing story ideas with studio film executives. “Well, since this is Act 2, we have to have this and that happen’ they say. It’s like they’re obsessed with the template, it’s impossible to think outside it...it gets very frustrating.” The result of this same repetitive structure often makes for a relaxing, even numbing cinema experience: as viewers, we know what the rhythm of the story will be. Watching this type of film is more of a ‘comfort’, than a thought-provoking experience, “which is absolutely fine,” adds the screenwriter; “the problem comes when this becomes the dominant film in a movie-going culture, as it has in Hollywood.”

The main problem is that making a film in Hollywood is terribly expensive, and writers, directors, and studio execs alike are afraid to take risks. Put simply, they want to keep their jobs, and so instead of trying to create a film that is distinctive and unique, they tend to take the safe route and follow the three-act structure, which has repeatedly proven to be commercially successful.



McKee is a fierce advocate of the three-act narrative structure, affirming it to be the classic art of storytelling, hence its greater potential for success. He argues that everyone must know the rules before they break them—even the most avant-garde of filmmakers. However, for some, McKee’s work is merely the delivering of a recipe for “cookie cutter” films. In the 2002 Charlie Kaufman film, *Adaptation*, McKee is portrayed (arguably unfairly) as a stickler preaching clichéd Hollywood endings. Says the film’s protagonist, “I’d want to let the movie exist rather than be artificially plot-driven... or cramming in sex, or car chases, or guns...or characters learning profound life lessons.” The character is a screenwriter suffering from writer’s block who attends one of McKee’s fictional seminars and is shot down by McKee after asking a question.

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The question I had asked McKee in our interview had to do with Hollywood: Does Hollywood adhere too rigidly to the Aristotelian structure McKee teaches, taking it too literally perhaps? Are film execs, studios, and writers afraid to step outside the structure box resulting in “cookie cutter” films?

“This is very boring to me,” he said. “Hollywood against the world is a tired argument and you are generalizing horribly.” He was right, and I should have given up then, but I persisted. “You don’t think commercial Hollywood produces films with elements of sameness?” I asked.

“We are not going to get along,” he shrugged. “Where did you get all your clichés from?”

“I’m 26, so maybe from watching too many bad Hollywood films,” I laughed, trying to lighten the tone. McKee was becoming increasingly incensed, not what I had wanted at all.

“I have not taught Hollywood to tell stories. I do not teach how to write, I teach what writing is,” McKee insisted in his deep growling voice.

My own interview with McKee took place in Chile where he was giving his Genre seminar on Horror, Suspense, Comedy and Romance. That other blockbuster genre, Action/Adventure, wasn’t on the agenda because it’s just “too damned expensive to make a film like that, certainly in Chile,” he said.

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When questioned about La Nana, a Chilean film nominated for a 2010 Golden Globe, McKee said: “It is a lovely film with a good Education Plot arc like Lost in Translation or About Schmidt... An Inner Life genre, beautiful and meaningful,” he went on, “but provincial and local, difficult for a person outside the culture – America or elsewhere – to understand. So make those films, but don’t expect international success.”

Thus McKee tours internationally, taking his seminars to countries with newer or smaller film industries. “The genres I am lecturing on in Chile are very exterior – about social relationships, personal relationships, Crime, Comedy, Horror, Romance. These are the genres that have a great international market... I’m here to try to help develop films for Chile that will be great international successes,” said McKee.

And with his knowledge and experience he will surely succeed. The hope is that smaller film industries, even when making broad, international-genre films, will retain their unique flavors instead of simply trying to imitate Hollywood.

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