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Walking the Line: Surviving the Tension Between Jesuit and Hollywood Values

Marilyn Beker

The tensions between Hollywood's interest in the bottom line and Jesuit values challenge the screen and television writing professional to adopt a balanced approach to teaching students ethics and responsibility.

I came to Loyola Marymount University (LMU), a Jesuit University in Los Angeles, California, as a refugee. The oppression I was fleeing was an artistic one, the "hostile" country, Hollywood. Like many of my more idealistic colleagues in the film industry, I had been tortured for too long by the necessity for compromise dictated by values I did not entertain and by goals I did not embrace. I was tired of pandering to the financial bottom line. Believing there was another way of working, I embarked upon an academic life thinking it would act as a counterbalance to the soul-deadening, down pull of rank commercialism. I also hoped that teaching in a Jesuit institution would give me the humanistic support and value-system validation I craved as I continued to write "ethical" screenplays. I suppose my optimism and unbridled enthusiasm made me naive because I was not prepared for the almost unbearable tension between value systems that would often arise during my attempt to be a citizen of two very distinct worlds.

In order to understand this tension, it is important to know how Hollywood works. The entertainment industry, as everyone knows, is a for-profit business whose chief commodity is a form of popular art. The people who provide that commodity might look upon themselves as "artists," but industry executives who call the

shots look upon them as manufacturers of product. As it is with widgets or wing-nuts, the creation and design of entertainment product are determined by the distributors of that product and by the marketplace. If the product sells well, the manufacturer gets more orders. If a manufacturer wants to introduce a new product, that manufacturer must convince distributors it will sell -- usually by evoking examples of a best seller similar to his product or founded on sure-fire formulas for success based around universally popular themes. This might sound cold and non-artistic but it is a Hollywood reality -- a description of the entertainment industry at its most basic level.

The problem is that most people don't look at show business that way. Instead, bolstered by the myth of movie magic, most people tend to look at show business as an industry where madcap individuals gain fame and fortune because they are exceptionally talented and in the right place at the right time. Buying into that myth and believing that anyone with a good work ethic and an extraordinary ability to entertain (being gorgeous doesn't hurt) can make it big, hordes of idealistic hopefuls all over the world jump onto

Marilyn Beker is Associate Professor in the Screenwriting Program, and Coordinator in the School of Film and Television at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California. She is the author of Screenwriting With A Conscience: Ethics For Screenwriters, published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. mbecker@lmu.edu.

film school bandwagons determined to make millions from their personal artistic visions.

Alas, they soon learn they've got to give up more than they bargained for if they want to make it in Hollywood and that everything precious to them -- ideals, values, dreams -- will have to be compromised to conform to the visions of those who hold the industry purse strings.

Screenwriters who started their careers as dewy idealistic youths soon find themselves smack in the middle of an intense personal inner conflict. They go from asking, "Should I compromise my ideas and ideals in order to sell a script?" to, "How many of my ideas and ideals can I sacrifice before I turn into a seething puddle of self-loathing?" That's why the streets of Hollywood are littered with the corpses of idealism and humanistic values -- victims of the traitors of desperation and the drive to succeed.

Executives driven by the need to make more money and to survive in an increasingly competitive and economically strapped industry are still relying on the tried and true inducements -- sex, violence, greed and dishonesty -- to sell product. And they have had plenty of evidence those inducements work. Just look at the huge success of reality television shows like *Survivor*, *The Bachelor* and *Married by America* that dote on things most target audiences seem to want -- money, fame and a good time.

The reason is that target audiences for reality

shows and most other TV shows and films are teenagers and young adults who have already been conditioned by advertisers and the media to believe that "reality" values, no matter how degrading, are acceptable and even laudable. Target audiences might be told by parents that "reality" values are wrong, and deep down inside they might even agree that these values are suspect, but peer pressure and Hollywood endorsements are just too strong to resist. That is especially true for the young people (my

students) who go from being members of target audiences to hopeful makers of popular media.

In general, students who go to film schools expect to make films like the ones they see in theaters. Parents who send their kids to film schools hope that by doing so they are giving them a leg-up -- a professional advantage that most uneducated Hollywood hopefuls don't have. They want them to learn the ropes and get access to the inside track - - to beat out the competition coming from the mean streets of

Wannabe. Parents who send their kids to a Jesuit film school want those same things.

In addition, however, they usually expect that budding film makers and screenwriters might be inspired and encouraged to move away from the negative images rife in popular media, toward more humanistic and value-rich themes. They might even hope that their kids, positively influenced by Jesuit values (integrity, ethics, social responsibility and social justice), would

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apply these values to their creative work and, by doing that, effect a positive change in the entertainment industry as a whole.

Certainly parents expect that those of us who teach at Jesuit institutions would share these goals. Many of us may. But often, new faculty hired from the industry and burned out from a brutal business where teaching screenwriting and production in Los Angeles is the golden goose of second careers, sign on with the attitude that even though they are not passionate about LMU's mission statement, they can "live with it." At first, they don't realize that passion for the ideals expressed in the mission statement (perhaps the very thing that attracted them to LMU) might be what makes their creative work and their teaching here vital and meaningful.

Passion for the mission statement of LMU doesn't mean, (as many of my colleagues around the country might think), that every faculty member at Loyola Marymount University is a practicing Catholic. The faculty at LMU is profoundly diverse, and that diversity allows for a wide range of opinions and approaches and creates a dynamic absolutely essential in a creative atmosphere. When faculty members make a commitment to the mission of LMU, they commit to promulgating the ideals of the statement in their academic and creative lives. They commit to becoming effective guides and examples for students of how it is possible to maintain ethics and ideals during a challenging creative life.

The consistent and ongoing reaffirmation of the commitment to Jesuit values is, in fact, the cornerstone of a faculty member's continuing willingness to engage in a sometimes numbing battle to maintain a balance between the demands of the industry and the academy. But achieving such a balance is very difficult if faculty members are given the message that the only way to get tenure and promotion is to sell something

to the industry -- something that definitely will get produced. And we've already discussed how difficult that is to do.

Rank and tenure committees (and administrators who dole out merit raises) need to learn some balancing skills of their own. While celebrating faculty-screenwriters who do manage to sell to Hollywood, committees also need to reward faculty-screenwriters whose creative work is not necessarily industry friendly but does demonstrate strong Jesuit values. That kind of work might be "smaller," independent and less widely distributed (disseminated) but might contribute just as much (perhaps even more) to the goals and reputation of the university.

To set an example, faculty in film schools should make internal awards to student work using the same criteria. While all student work should be held up to a standard of excellence, work that also demonstrates Jesuit values and humanism should be especially lauded. In this way, Jesuit universities can demonstrate to the world how films and scripts coming out of a Jesuit film school (by both faculty and students) are



Photo Courtesy of St. Louis University

unique and go beyond the glitzy competence of "secular" film schools into a deeper dimension.

A Jesuit film school needs to demonstrate that while it can compete (and beat) any other film school in excellence and professionalism, no other film school can compete with it when it comes to substance, ethics and social idealism. That is why even simple attitude changes by administrators who grant merit raises and rank and tenure committees will give faculty the confidence to set examples by their own creative work that entertainment can be ethical and socially responsible. We can't convince students of that if we don't demonstrate it ourselves.

We can also reinforce our point of view by introducing courses into the curriculum that explore how image-based entertainment generates propaganda powerful enough to change lives and societies. We need to make students aware that all art is a kind of propaganda for the ideas and ideals of the artist, and that is why it is especially important for artists who work in popular art to be conscious of the messages they foist on an unsuspecting public and to wield their power responsibly. While artists may deal with debasing acts, blatant inhumanity or violent and unethical behavior in works of art, the degree to which those are depicted in order to make a point should be ameliorated by the size and scope of the audience for which the works are intended.

The audience should always be respected and

considered because it is the audience, by virtue of its numbers, that can and does influence the world in which we all live. This doesn't necessarily concur with the view of ultra-commercial Hollywood; that the consumer is an insatiable patsy who needs more and more graphic stimulation in order to buy into what is being sold. I believe that audiences need to be stimulated, but they should be stimulated to think about the nature of life and life's greatest questions.

In a climate of political correctness, however, and in an "anything goes" atmosphere, shouldn't I champion a student's right to be graphic or irresponsible -- especially if that student wants to succeed in the Hollywood system? And how can I champion First Amendment rights while stressing the importance of ethics in film making and screenwriting?

In my nearly twenty years at LMU, I've taken a practical approach that will allow me to do those things and to continue to do my creative and academic work with confidence, determination and joy. Besides making a conscious daily commitment to my

personal ideals, I prepare students for the industry by making sure their professional skills are exemplary. I am extremely rigorous when it comes to teaching the elements of the screenwriting craft: story, structure, dialogue, character. But, because I don't believe that preparing students to work in the industry also means making them hard, cold calculating

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business professionals who write in response to marketing issues, I also put great emphasis on personal story, on original thought, on personal voice and belief systems.

Many teachers of screenwriting think that this approach is politically incorrect. They say that we need to be careful to avoid considering subject matter with students or dissecting themes in students' creative work for fear of sounding censorious. They believe that students must make up their own minds and should be free to express whatever they want to express.

Because I am a staunch supporter of the First Amendment, I agree with them. I too believe that young artists need to be able to find their voices and to explore a variety of themes and subjects not always in keeping with Jesuit values. I also believe that one of the main purposes of a school of film and television is to provide a safe environment where artistic experimentation and expression can take place. But I also believe that those of us who work in a Jesuit institution have a responsibility to teach our students *a process*. That process is one by which they can make decisions about what messages they express in creative work, based on personal convictions they have explored thoughtfully and in depth. Students need to learn how to make ethical creative choices and how to express these choices, and the messages they convey, responsibly in creative work intended for the general public. Sometimes that may mean pushing students to explore exactly what motivates them to create the images they are determined to create, in Los Angeles, California.

Often, encouraging such exploration might move into discussions and assessments of personal values, goals and world views. That process might indeed be politically incorrect. In the current social atmosphere, it seems as if everyone is entitled to an opinion no matter how outrageous. In fact, I've heard screenwriting

teachers say that any student creative work (particularly if it is "experimental") should be deemed valuable even if it is inappropriate or just plain awful. I don't think so and I'm not afraid to say so in a classroom or a public arena. Every point of view isn't valid just because it is a point of view.

Of course I fight for students' rights to express themselves, but they first need to demonstrate that their expression is based on sound thinking and personal points of view that have been developed deliberately and carefully. I encourage students to truly understand what they are saying and why they are saying it, if they are to be defended or applauded. I tell students that they can write about anything, as long as they truly believe in what they are writing about and take full responsibility for it.

Using exercises, discussions and debates, I require students to consider carefully and be able to defend the motives and messages inherent in the stories they tell. I expect them to learn that this process is just as important as acquiring technical proficiency in a creative art. I've found that, in the process of examining their personal beliefs and motives, and taking responsibility in public for them, even the most contentious students -- those who write graphic sex and violence -- back away from irresponsible and unethical material. Those who choose to go forward with material that may to some seem objectionable, are encouraged by me to stick to their beliefs and express them as professionally and expertly as they can.

Of course, that means that sometimes I am faced with helping a student to improve material that offends me. When that happens (and it happens very infrequently), I tell that student that he/she needs to find another professor to work with and that will facilitate that process. Does this mean that I've neglected to teach my students how to collaborate in a collaborative

medium? I don't think so. I believe that our first responsibility in a Jesuit institution is to create a thinking individual with a personal voice and conscience.

Certainly, in the larger picture, personal voice sometimes becomes subservient to the greater reality and often must be modified to ensure economic and social survival. And, obviously, learning to work with others who have differing views is essential -- especially in Hollywood where screenplays get rewritten many times before they are produced.

For me, the problem with Hollywood collaboration is that it tends to create art by consensus. That, in turn, makes screenwriting a craft every bit as consumer-driven as accounting or marketing, which unfortunately buys nicely into the Hollywood model I've already explained and abhor. I firmly believe that before one can collaborate successfully on an artistic project, before one can modify or subdue personal voice, one must first find that voice and develop the ability to define and express it. If I prepare students to work within the industry by, from the onset, collaborating and compromising their voices, what messages am I giving them? Am I telling them, as so many of them like to think, that if they write the "party line," if they do things in the accepted and popular fashion, they'll get to the top of the screenwriting heap and then will no longer have to compromise to stay there? I don't believe that's possible in a world where so many are constantly vying for a place in the spotlight.

If a writer writes trash for years, I don't believe the trash will magically take a back seat to integrity and high-mindedness when the writer finally gets to write something he/she wants. The mechanism by which one writes becomes tainted by constant camaraderie with base motives just as it becomes confused by the adoption of many points of view. That is why I stress the importance of the development of personal voice

before the collaborative process. To do that, I put less emphasis on in-class peer review of material and more on working with the students as individuals until students develop a clear sense of their voices. I wait until the student has completed the defining work on motive, message story and first draft of a screenplay before allowing other voices to influence the material.

My approach is unconventional in the face of "traditional" workshop approaches to teaching screenwriting, but I find that by taking a one-on-one approach, I can show students how to develop personal points of view and express them dynamically without preaching. I can also maintain an emphasis on the importance of personal and social responsibility and ethical writing before the student is forced to work in an atmosphere of consensus. In that atmosphere of frenzied collaboration, it is all too easy to put the blame for unethical or socially irresponsible work on other people -- studio executives, the director, the producer, and even other writers brought on to rewrite bad "bon mots."

My own personal creative work also continues to be controversial. For example, the teaching techniques I've adopted and painstakingly developed over the years have culminated in a book just published. It is the first and only book on screenwriting technique ever to address the issues of ethics and social responsibility, and it is the direct result of my work within the Jesuit institution and my belief that there can be détente between Jesuit and Hollywood values.

I continue to work to achieve this détente by staying focused and maintaining my courage as I walk the tense line between two worlds. And I know that to survive I must become both warrior and alchemist -- a warrior who fights to uphold my Jesuit values and an alchemist who changes students into screenwriters who refuse to compromise theirs.