Talking Back: Doing Wrong to Discover What's Right

David Baugnon
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Bill: I think people will be devastated. I think the scene that will undo them after they are emotionally filled up will be the Pieta when Mary holds Jesus and looks out at the audience. People will squirm in their seats, and it's not going to be a question of Jews or Romans, it's going to be Jesus and me. Where have I been in all this? I think it is going to be an intensely personal moment.

Eddie: Is there anything I have not asked you that you would like to comment on or talk about a little bit?

Bill: One thing that occurs to me is that regularly in Rome and now even this evening I have said Mass in Latin using the Tridentine form for Mel. The Cardinal made the comment when I told him about it the other night and he said you do what you have to do in pastoral situations. That was the only comment. You Jesuits are good at that. You do what you have to do. But I have gotten a lot of flack from that sometimes from fellow Jesuits who say, you know you are catering to somebody's perversity, and so on. To my mind this is such a minor thing what form the Liturgy takes. Here is a man whose influence is enormous, and to keep the door open with him and to speak with him and to do something that is fine in itself even though people may say it's not the most up-to-date thing.

I am just trying to address myself to his needs. I'm not aiding and abetting sinfulness or stupidity. I'm trying to deal with a sensitive man where he is and where he can feel comfortable because he is doing something that is outstanding and remarkable. And little by little because of this dialog, he is moving away from that kind of position. One, because I don't threaten him, and I don't try to convert him. I don't try to pound something into his head, and I think this is what Jesuits should do.

Doing Wrong to Discover What’s Right

To Marilyn Beker
By David Baugnon

As a Loyola Alum, a working screenwriter and a screenwriting teacher, I know all too well that the realities of the business can crush idealism. When I graduated in 1990 from Loyola New Orleans in Communications, I couldn’t get a job to save my life. I went to Japan in 1992 where I taught English for four years, lost thirty pounds on the poverty diet and was nearly killed in the Kobe earthquake. My takeaway from that experience: life is sometimes hard. Very Hard.

You would think I would have learned my lesson, but I then moved to New York to take up screenwriting. Six years later, I have had a small amount of success. I optioned a script, I had two short films play in film festivals and I teach for Writers Boot Camp 22 month program that focuses on teleplay writing and screenwriting. Not great, but I doubt I would have made it this far if it weren’t for my optimism.

But let’s not confuse idealism with naïveté: most screenwriting students will never have their ethics tested in this business—they won’t even get the chance. Screenwriting is one of the most competitive and difficult fields to break into, full of sexism and ageism. On top of that, any script reader will tell you, 90 percent of what crosses their desk is unproducing junk. Maybe 9 percent is competent and only 1 percent will actually go into the collaborative process.

And that’s exactly what it is: collaborative, and that means compromise. While I applaud Loyola Marymount Professor Marilyn Beker for stressing Jesuit values and originality in her students, her exhortation for them to become screenwriters “who refuse to compromise their (values)” seems more likely to yield rejection than a green lit script. I am not saying screenwriters must compromise their values. I am saying they have to know the market realities and be able to put their values across in an entertaining and cinematic way. If one way isn’t working, find another.

Just under two years ago, I optioned a script (coincidentally titled Code of Ethics about an ethics professor at a Jesuit University) that had a scene

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where the Opponent shoots a man during a little league baseball game. At the time I thought it was crucial to show how bad the opponent was, a real villain. When my producer said the scene had to go, I fought him on it until he put it like this: "Well, if the studio says 'Hey, we need more violence in front of children,' then we'll put the scene back in." I immediately realized that the scene was overkill and I was compromising my artistic values for ethical values. The collaborative Hollywood process actually made the script better (or at the very least, less objectionable).

I agree that young writers must find and develop their personal voice in order to successfully collaborate. One aspect missing in all this talk of screenwriting, ethics and finding one's voice is the amount of time needed and the life experience it takes to discover what your personal vision really is. And, in the process of honing your craft to an industry acceptable level, failing and learning from your mistakes is an integral part of the process. I often tell my students, sometimes you need to write the wrong thing in order to discover what the right thing is.

For me, the crux of Ms. Beker’s article should really be on how to be ethical in the entertainment industry. Or, more appropriately, how do we write entertaining, salable scripts and still promote values?

Is the sex and brutal violence in Fight Club justified by its message that we are a society about to reap the devastation (both physical and spiritual) from our over-the-top consumerism? The story revolves around a schizophrenic man, fed-up with the superficiality of the rat race, who plans to blow up the credit unions to erase everyone's debt record. The film presages 9/11, and if one has a mind to see it, the movie is an indictment of our American culture. Like the Japanese of Hiroshima, who see themselves as victims and not aggressors of World War II, we now view ourselves as victims of terrorism rather than seeing our own government's hand in exploiting third world countries for their resources. Pretty heady stuff for a film many dismiss as being about men fighting for no reason (a simple, powerful message there as well).

But is it really okay to use sex and violence to drive home a moral point? The touchstone for me is if the message of the work is clear. I'm amazed by how often writers have no idea what their movie is about or what their theme is. And if they do know their theme, how they often bury it in mindless dialogue or action, having nothing to do with theme, let alone plot or character development.

Still, a clear message may not justify all stories. All scripts glamorize what they are showing, whether the viewpoint is pro or con. For example, let's say you wanted to write a script about the horror of children beauty pageants and the over-sexualization of our children in the media (the latter being one of the most disturbing trends in television and movies). You have a clear agenda that child beauty pageants are wrong but aren't you adding to the problem just by graphically showing it in your film?

Does a movie like Gus Van Zant's Elephant (a nonaligned re-envisioning of the Columbine High School massacre) bring home the devastation of gun-toting school children, or does it glamorize revenge? Or a bit of both? Do we need to see this horror played out on screen to bring some sort of understanding to this tragedy or are we just rubbernecking at our own morbidity?

It's a tough call and a lot of it depends on how the script is executed on the page (not to mention what the director does with it and how an audience receives it). While I push my students to make their ideas bigger, to exploit the visual medium of film, I remind them that what we don't see can have just as much impact as what we do.

The reality is that any script, value-based or otherwise, is going to be a tough sell. And although an argument could be made that a lot of junk is churned out by Hollywood, audiences grow tired of predictability and producers are always looking for smart, original material. May the best script win.