

Letter to a Young Screenwriter

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At the end of this semester, you asked me how you could become a better screenwriter. As you know, many of your contemporaries tend to be Tarantino-clones, who write scripts that could easily star Robert DeNiro or Harvey Keitel. In these screenplays, there is always a bank heist, an Uzi, and second-tier gangsters who grunt in Brooklynese. Everyone smokes stogies, drinks tequila, and plays a mean five-card stud, and they use the f-word an awful lot. The women characters appear mostly as molls, whores, or heroin addicts—auxiliaries to the main action. Every now and then there's a kindly, large-hipped woman who shows up dispensing wisdom and comfort food, much like Martin Scorsese's own mother, who acted in his gangster films portraying the matriarch of an array of dysfunctional men.

I wanted you to become a writer, to get in touch with your own voice, to create characters that are believable and that the audience can attach to in a meaningful way. When I gave my opening lecture and discussed this "inner voice," you furrowed your eyebrows. To you, it seemed, my request was aligned with the province of witches or female screenwriters who pen annoying "Chick Flicks."

But I think you are capable of listening deeply beyond the predictable, the stereotypical, and the easy. You are capable of a resolution beyond gunfire. You know that women can be heroes, have courage, say meaningful things without the benefit of a wonder bra, mini-skirts, and five-inch stilettos.

Scorcese commented in *Premiere* magazine that “there is something else going on out there with younger people, and I think it’s something at the very core of our materialistic society. The more gadgets you get, the more you get separated from what’s really human inside of you.”

For this very reason, I worked hard to create a course that would encourage you to develop subjects that come from within and to rid yourself of external distractions. It would be difficult, I knew, because your generation has been nurtured on Sega, sitcoms, and sound bytes. We live in a world of late-night talk shows, where unfaithful men sit center stage between two warring women with bad perms. This is the same world where male rappers sing about slapping women upside the head and where aging MTV rockers, pumped up with pheromones, incite bikini-clad women to spontaneously gyrate like pole dancers at a New Orleans skin club.

This bombardment by popular culture is one of the reasons I began the year with rhythms. I brought drums and tambourines to class and gave you free-writing assignments. Your only instructions were to write very fast, at hyper-speed, while I accompanied your creative fury with a beat, a rattle, a primordial tap. You resisted at first—half thinking, I suppose, that I was a hippie in mourning for Jerry Garcia. But when you read your works aloud in class, you could surely see that, for a few moments, you had each tapped into something deeper than a *South Park* slapstick. There was that look of recognition that teachers rarely see, the giant CLICK, the *Aha!* You got to a place that pre-dated the remote control.

My instincts told me that journal-keeping—a must for any writer—might also meet with some resistance. As you remember, I passed out 3" x 5" cards to each of you, and told you to keep them in your pockets. No matter where you were or what you were doing, I wanted you to write down whatever came to you. An idea. An image. A line of dialogue. Three of the women students handed in notebooks, finding the cards too small for their expansive writing where they often dotted their *i*'s with huge full-moon circles. You men handed in very little at first, or printed cryptic monosyllabic notes written too small to decipher without my reading glasses.

But gradually, you opened up, got beyond your initial resistance, and began to write. I remember your line in particular: “The white dove leaps from the railing, the spirit of my dead grandmother....”

“No Walkmans!” I shouted on our sensory tour through the Horticultural Gardens. We were there to savor oregano and licorice plants, collect petals, rocks, and pinecones, and watch grackles dive at wild berries. I wanted you to hear the hum of the universe (was it too much to expect?) on a forced march through nature, led by a drum-toting pedagogue hell bent on improving the status of film for the millennium.

By the end of the semester, your script began to show promise—the one with the anti-dissection rally staged during an advanced Biology class at Warren G. Harding High School by the three Honors Society girls who were bound for the Ivy League. I grew quite attached to the fetal pig, Harvey. It was a workable script with great politics until the girls turned out to be aliens sporting lizard tongues who resolved everything with intergalactic warfare. But, in spite of myself, I was full of praise for your three women characters who, for a while, lit up the screen with an otherworldliness that transcended wiseguys packing heat somewhere in New Jersey. Your singular progress made my semester an unquestionable success.