

PROTECTING THE VISION

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STORY VS. VISION

Do you only protect the narrative story or do you protect your story's vision?

The narrative story runs like this: Yolanda gets fired from her high-paying computer programming job. Her life spirals downward because she has no practical skills until she is homeless, when she realizes her true calling—as a street singer. She's then discovered by a record producer and becomes a big star.

The narrative itself is very clear, the story unfolding with each step pretty much in order: first this happens, second she says this, third, this happens, fourth, he blows up over what she does, etc.

Think of the possibilities when what appears to be a foreboding turn of events becomes the most fantastic opportunity—ever.

The premise of Yolanda's story might be, "There's no such thing as bad news." Or, "What appears to be a loss always turns out to be a win."

Do you protect the story—or the vision of the story, which is the way you want your story to be expressed visually on screen?

There's a difference between writing the *vision* of the story and *writing visually*.

The *vision* is the way the story is presented without a linear breakdown of every detail that is part of the setup or interaction or way we get involved in the story.

Writing visually means detailing the objects we see onscreen and having the sense that the writer is "directing" the film, specifying angles, types of shots or metaphorical objects.

Many screenwriting teachers tell us to think visually, but *not* write visually.

WRITING THE VISION

Writing the vision (not writing visually) can mean inserting a metaphoric visual reference, such as showing a glass half full (or is it half-empty) of water to indicate

how the character experiences his life. If he sees a glass with water in it, he may instead reach for an empty glass, indicating his emptiness.

In Yolanda's story, the outcome is a full glass, which would be shown at the end of the film, probably being filled and then drunk by the character whose life has gone through stages of emptiness, half full/empty, and finally fulfillment.

If metaphorical visions are not painstakingly carefully included, they can be difficult for script readers to comprehend, so their importance may well be missed.

And directors love adding visual conceptual touches themselves, but if something is in the script that nails the story's vision, strengthening its telling, good directors will want to enhance your suggestion.

PROTECTING THE VISION PROTECTS THE NARRATIVE

Many directors believe it is their job to protect the story and work fervently to maintain each element of the narrative because, of course, the story is the key to accessing the characters and all that happens to them.

But writing the narrative in a way that allows the story to unfold in a way that is on-the-nose first-this-happens, then that happens, weakens the story. Significantly.

In my opinion, protecting the *vision* not only protects the *story*—it makes the narrative much stronger.

As a director, I consider protecting the vision of the film my main objective, so I try to write scripts that I direct with a keen sense of vision.

Here's how I did that recently.

THE NARRATIVE

A 12 year-old boy, Steven, is happy in his alternative—biker gang—family in an old empty, condemned hotel building. An

abandoned infant, they found him in an open garbage can. No one reported him missing, so they've cared for him since. Because most of them came from neglectful or abusive homes, they decided to be the best family they could be for Steven.

One gang member, Ray, assumed the role of responsible and nurturing parent for the youngster. He did a good job. Steven is well adjusted, earns good grades, plays on a soccer team and is protected from the gang's drug culture.

State child protective services discovered his living situation through one of Steven's schoolmates. CPS caseworkers investigated and they now want to remove him from the gang's hotel hangout.

The old hotel in which they live is dangerous in parts and leaves a lot to be desired in terms of cleanliness, tidiness and heat. But it does not lack for attention, love and care for the people living there.

Despite the evidence that the gang has been a loving, nurturing family to this blossoming adolescent, authorities want to remove him from the hotel because of its dangerous location, condition and residents.

THE SCRIPT—PROTECTING THE STORY

Typically, writers who work to protect the story too much itemize far too many facts and background details when introducing the story. They have several characters discuss the setup in unnecessary expository and too often on-the-nose dialogue.

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I've never seen this more poorly done than in the new film, *The Life Of David Gale*. Despite its stunning and hardworking cast, most of the writing, especially in Act I, is embarrassingly amateurish, right out of Screenwriting Guru of Choice blueprint 101.

Protecting our story, the script would show lots of the old hotel, the gang members talking about their predicament and emotionally responding to what appears to be the injustice of it all.

Here's what I mean by story-protected script: Gang members talk to Steven—and Steven to them.

A CPS caseworker gives them their options—which are, frankly, none. Give up the boy or they go to court in an attempt to make him a ward of the state.

"HOME"

INT. SMALL FAMILY COURTROOM

A small, diverse GROUP OF PEOPLE sits in the front row of the public seating area. From biker gang gear to smart office chic, they speak quietly, but intensely until STEVEN, 12, wearing a T-shirt and unzipped hooded sweatshirt enters the room. He walks ahead of CHARLENE DAVIS, 30, a sharp-dressed state child protective services caseworker.

They make their way across the room to stand in front of JUDGE HARVEY KEEN, 50, a dashing but very serious, no-nonsense and thoughtful judge.

From the other side of the room comes RAY "THE BUG" FALK, 39, dressed in an old clean T-shirt with an open leather vest. His arm is showered in tattoos and his hands full of gnarly rings.

Steven brightens when he sees Ray, but is restrained by Charlene.

CHARLENE

Your honor, Steven... Doe... last name unknown, was picked up as an abandoned infant by the Hell is Hero biker gang. Instead of turning him over to the authorities, they kept him. To be their gang mascot as he was growing up. Not raise him like a real boy, but to keep him around like the San Diego Chicken.

RAY

We are Steven's family! We love him!

(puts arm around Steven)

Sure, some of us have ... colorful backgrounds...

Steven fights back his tears.

THE SCRIPT—PROTECTING THE VISION

When the vision of the story is safeguarded, the essence of the story is refined and intensely revealed, whether comedy or drama, like peeling off layers of content with deeper and deeper subtext.

So here's my vision-protecting scripted version of this story:

"HOME"

INT. SMALL FAMILY COURTROOM - DAY

A small, diverse GROUP OF PEOPLE sits in the front row of the public seating area. From biker gang gear to smart office chic, they speak quietly but intensely, until:

STEPHEN, 12, shuffles into the room. Small for his age, he looks around desperately, walking in front of a Children's Protective Services CASEWORKER, who follows. We only see her right hand, arm and the part of her midriff that is closest to Steven. She wears a sharp pants suit.

Steven lights up! We see only the tattoo-covered arm and hand, which carries some major, ass-kicking rings, of RAY, 39, approach him. Ray wears an old, clean T-shirt, leather vest and worn blue jeans. The Caseworker yanks Steven back as he attempts to hug Ray, and turns him to face the front of the room.

With Ray at his right and the Caseworker at his left, Steven looks up, admiring Ray, then agonizes over every word said by all the adults.

CASEWORKER (OS)

Your Honor, he's never been legally adopted by anyone. They found him as an infant, in a garbage can. They did not take him to authorities. No, they made him their biker gang mascot. Like the San Diego Chicken. They live in a filthy, old abandoned hotel.

Steven fights back tears. Ray gently takes his hand.

RAY (OS)

We are Steven's family. We love him.

(puts arm around Steven)

Yeah, some of us have a colorful past, but he's never around crap like drugs, alcohol -- he don't smoke. Won't start neither.

Steven frowns.

RAY (OS)

Plays soccer, gets straight A's.

Jeremy's a great cook.

Steven concurs as Ray slowly lowers his hand.

RAY (OS)

Cindy sews his clothes --

Steven hugs Ray's dangling arm as if he has to remember this feeling forever. The Caseworker grabs Steven's other hand and yanks it toward her.

CASEWORKER (OS)

They live in an old abandoned hotel! Just look at the man he calls "dad!"

Steven yanks his hand away from the Caseworker and hugs Ray's tattooed arm.

STEVEN

Why are you doing this?

(tormented, covers ears)

Stop! Stop it! My head hurts like electric worms are crawling inside! I love my dad! I feel safe with him. I love our digs! I'm happy! We play games and sing. I read to them-

CASEWORKER (OS)

I'm sure the TV is on day and night --

STEVEN

Don't have a TV. Got a computer. For homework. Why is this happening? Kids at school tell awful stories about their parents fighting and drinking and hitting them and stuff. We don't do that! I'm so lucky -- I couldn't stand being away --

Steven holds and hugs Ray's arm.

JUDGE (OS)

I've heard enough. Steven, one day you will Thank me for this. Steven ... Doe ... I declare you, . . . a ward of the state.

As the GAVEL POUNDS, the Caseworker grabs Steven's hand and pulls him away from Ray, dragging the boy out of the room.

Steven holds out his other hand, desperately trying to grab Ray's outstretched hand.

STEVEN

No! No! Please don't do this! Don't take me away from my Dad! Daddy! Don't let them do this! Stop them!

RAY (OS)

(over Steven)

Steven! Steven! We love you, son! Don't give up! We'll never give up! You'll be home! Soon! I swear!

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By focusing the vision on the boy, which I believe is the heart of the story, I've made everything else extraneous to the visual image, while the words of the adult characters remain significant. I'm showing, not explaining, through dialogue, the dreadful situation that exists for young Steven and the dilemma the biker gang faces.

In my opinion, when I stay with the vision of the story, I make the story that much stronger in the writing. All I did here was write the scene in a way that the scene is based on Steven—his situation, and his reaction to all the manipulations of adults around him.

Now think of all the great complications the story can bring.

From Steven's POV—what happens if the biker gang kidnaps him and hits the road? Wasn't the very thing that made "home" wonderful its stability? The disintegration of home, relationships, his safety and his future would be inherent.

So what happens to Steven if the gang moves from the old hotel—after all, it is a dump—and gets a nice house? One they could bring up to code to qualify as foster parents for Steven. It's the only way the state would allow Steven to live with them, even on a supervised basis. What would that do to Steven and his world? Especially if the state continues to deny Steven's pleas to live with the gang?

What happens to the boy if Ray leaves the biker gang to become Steven's legal guardian?

What happens to Steven if the state tries to socialize Steven into the world of "normal" people?

The plot points boggle at all the dramatic and comedic possibilities!

MAINTAINING THE VISION AND WRITING VISUALLY

As you can see from my little example, there were no on-the-nose or metaphorical visual items, angles or special "shots" suggested. There is no writing visually.

To maintain the vision of the story, the scene is written as a close-up of young Steven, seeing only parts of the adults and hearing only their voices. The adults who are fighting over and deciding where he should live, with whom he should live and how he should live, without Steven's advice, consent or knowledge.

The adults who claim they are doing this to decide what *his* best interest is.

Even if the actions taken turn out to be in Steven's best interest, the youngster still cannot understand that concept and he cannot "see" what they are talking about, so I wrote and filmed the scene capturing his reaction to the adult manipulation and mutilation of his life.

COLUMNIST'S LEGAL DISCLAIMER

What you have just read constitutes an original thought, a concept, an idea captured by your dedicated Screenwriter's Café columnist.

I hope I have described it effectively enough for you to think up ways to use and expand upon it in your own work.

It makes good filmatic sense to me, and it looked great when I shot it. So I'm convinced that if we writers at least think about concentrating on the vision of the story as I've described it, rather than trying to "direct" the script with angles, tricks and bizarre SFX, at least some stories might be written more intensely.

With the input of a good director, I bet a pretty decent film can be created.

Please feel free to let me know what you think! ■