

Screenwriting and Schizophrenia

To write movies it's useful to be a little crazy

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Over more than forty years as a professor in the film school at UCLA, my office was located in a drab architectural mistake of the 1960s.

Happily, however, Macgowan Hall abutted the Franklin K.

Murphy Sculpture Garden, several acres of grassy landscaping with beautiful shade trees, sinuous walkways, and an impressive array of world-class pieces by champions such as Henry Moore, Jacques Lifschitz, Alexander Calder, Richard Serra, and Robert Graham, among many others.

Somewhat larger than scale, Auguste Rodin's *Walking Man* stood just outside the entrance to my building. It depicted in bronze the headless body of — what else? — a walking man. It had to weigh a ton, probably several. There's no way it could have been installed in the garden absent the use of an industrial crane.

Day after day throughout my tenure, year after year, *Walking Man* stood there, rock-steady and still.

All the same, the sculpture appeared somehow at the same time to be very much in motion. The figure seemed to be midstride, purposefully and determinedly navigating its way across the territory.

A piece by Serra was at least twenty times larger and heavier than the Rodin. Created from rusted steel, it could have been an item of wreckage from the World Trade Center. All the same, it resembled a gently curved fragment of whittled wood. For all its weight, it could have been a slender sliver of bark carved from the branch of a tree, somehow light and airy, as if it would be blown away in gentlest breeze.

Song of the Vowels by Lifschitz was another weighty piece of industrial metal, somewhat abstract, somehow seeming to depict a bird's wings hovering above a fanciful Earth. Notwithstanding its unmistakable heft, the 'bird' seemed light as a feather, on the verge of lifting off and flying away toward Covell Commons to the south.

This contradictory quality, forces contained in a single object that operate in apparent opposition to one another, characterizes not only sculpture but also graphic art. Examining an impressionistic painting by, say, Claude Monet, looking at it from only a few inches above its surface, provides on one hand the appearance of total abstraction, arbitrary swathes and swatches and patches of pigment apparently applied randomly, even haphazardly, with plenty of canvas showing through. Step away just a few feet, however, and the image appears not abstract but realistic. Indeed, it seems even more realistic than a photograph.

I posit that all art operates that way.

Whatever the medium, contained in a singular work are forces standing in stark contradiction to one another.

We've observed here that in sculpture it may be stillness versus motion.

In movies, it's reality versus illusion.

As I have argued repeatedly, there is nothing less real than a

movie. No medium plays so fast and loose with truth and falsehood as film. No other platform shuffles and reshuffles, jockeys and manipulates time and space. Audiences know that's not Butch and Sundance up there but Paul and Bob. They understand that the snatches of dialogue the characters appear to invent actually represents the memorized recitation of language written by writers.

Over the years I have seen a wrongheaded devotion to lofty notions such as so-called Truth ruin more screenplays than I can count.

The first (and best) book on screenwriting (more broadly, the creation of dramatic narratives) is still Aristotle's *Poetics*. He advises writers to favor *the plausible impossibility over the implausible possibility*.

That's a fancy-ass ancient Greek way of saying: *Lie through your teeth*.

What matters in a movie is not real-life happenstance but the *appearance* of actual circumstance.

All that aside, there is one aspect of movies that is wholly, totally, completely real, and that is the emotions that the audiences feel. The hi jinx on the screen is phony, but the audience's feelings — grief, loss, rage, frustration, disappointment, pain, and everything else — are genuine.

That is the Truth screenwriters should seek.

To achieve so elusive a quality, screenwriters should know that it is useful to be just a little crazy.

[Follow Richard on Medium](#) and [subscribe to his free Get Reel podcast+newsletter on Substack](#).

PS. Do you have any questions about screenwriting? Reply in the comments and I'll do my best to answer them in future articles and episodes. :-)