

Kees Holierhoek Scenarioprijs

Lecture of Inspiration

By Frank Spotnitz

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We are living in uncertain times.

Uncomfortable times.

Covid has claimed millions of lives and shaken economies around the world.

Wars are being fought in Europe and the Middle East.

People in democratic societies are at each other's throats.

Authoritarian movements are proving stubbornly popular, not least in the United States.

Artificial intelligence threatens to make millions of jobs redundant – including screenwriters! – and lead to technological change with the potential to both save -- and perhaps destroy -- civilization.

While climate change remains a slow-moving disaster that could create irreversible environmental, social and economic harm.

The list of calamity and anxiety goes on and on.

So you can already tell...

This is going to be a funny speech.

I sometimes worry that we who write television and movies are not exactly making things better.

After all, if people all over the world are sat in their living rooms, anesthetized by binge watching hour after hour of television, how much time or energy do they have to go out and actually make the world a better place?

What is the value of watching television anyway? Let's face it, so much of it – most of it, really – is pretty disposable. You watch one series and then it's on to the next.

You might say that religion isn't the opium of the masses. We are. Or are we?

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Only a decade ago there was no binge watching. That term entered the lexicon after Netflix started making series back in 2013. *House of Cards* seem to promise a new age of high-quality, prestige drama, drawing feature-film talent to our HDTV screens.

Soon Netflix was getting competition from Amazon Prime, then Disney Plus, Max, Apple TV Plus and Paramount Plus. Regional players like Viaplay and Canal followed. The money spent on television drama ballooned, as did the number of series produced, and it seemed that even the most devoted TV viewer couldn't possibly keep up with it all.

And then – this past year – that flood burst the dam. The traditional Hollywood studios who'd followed Netflix into the streaming business saw that they this new model was losing them billions of dollars. It was amidst that sobering realization that the strikes by the writers and actors in the U.S. brought much of the television industry to a halt for more than six long months.

Now both strikes are finally over, but it's not exactly back to business as usual. The streamers no longer have the same thirst for content that they did before. Not in terms of creative ambition. Not in terms of the number of shows being made.

And these aren't the best of times for advertiser-supported broadcasters, either, who've seen their revenues decline in the post-covid economy.

The new normal looks nothing like the old normal.

The author Peter Biskind predicts that peak television is dead, and we're headed toward an era of lower quality, less ambitious drama.

Like I said, this is not exactly a funny speech.

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I was born in Japan. My father was a doctor in the military, so I spent the first four years of my life growing up on an Army base there before he was transferred to Colorado, then to Pennsylvania, finally retiring from the service and moving to Phoenix, Arizona. Where it was very hot.

I was the youngest of five boys – my poor mother – but despite the size of my family, there was a five-year age gap between me and my next oldest brother.

So I spent a lot of time alone -- reading, going to the movies and watching TV. I mean, I watched everything. It didn't really matter whether it was reruns of *Gilligan's Island* or *The Rifleman*, *Mission: Impossible*, *The Man from Uncle*, or *Wild Wild West*. If it was on TV, I

watched. My parents either had their hands full or weren't paying any attention, so I clocked hours and hours every week.

Looking back on it now, I see it as early job training.

Granted, this was far from the golden age of television. No one was making series of the sophistication of *Breaking Bad* or *The Sopranos* back in those days. But still, I loved TV and loved many, many, many shows from that era.

But there were two series that meant more to me than any others. *The Twilight Zone* was a mind-bending science fiction fantasy anthology created by Rod Serling. And the original *Star Trek*... well, you all know what *Star Trek* was.

Both series had already been canceled when I began watching, and could only be seen in reruns. You never knew how long they would be repeated before they would be pulled from the schedule, so each time I got to watch an episode it was like an event. In those pre-VHS, pre-DVR days, I used my cassette tape recorder so that I could at least listen back to the sound.

Tape recording wasn't an option when I went to the movies, of course. And once a movie ended its run in a theatre, you didn't know when you'd ever have the chance to see it again anywhere. So when I found a movie I liked – say, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, or *Diamonds Are Forever*, or *True Grit* – I would sit in the theatre and watch it two, three, sometimes four times in a row. And maybe go back to see it again the next day. Seeing something new in the movie each time I watched it.

Why? Was I just killing time? You might say that I was binge-watching long before there was such a thing as binge-watching.

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As a kid, movies and television meant everything to me. They were my lifeline to the world, and introduced me to people, situations, emotions and ideas that I never would have experienced otherwise.

Some of the characters I never could have met because they couldn't possibly exist. They were from science fiction. Sometimes these kinds of stories were even more powerful – even more true – because they weren't rooted in reality. The logic of a character like the alien Mr. Spock, or the fantastical allegories of *The Twilight Zone*.

These stories did more than interest me. They did more than entertain. They thrilled me, they made me laugh, cry -- and think.

There was never any question in my mind what I was going to do when I grew up. Somehow, someday, I was going to tell stories.

So I graduated early from high school and went off to Los Angeles to study film at UCLA, only to be knocked for a loop a few months later by a family tragedy. My older brother Tom was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Three weeks after my 18th birthday, he took his own life. Tom was just 26.

Now keep in mind, nearly all those movies and TV series I watched growing up had happy endings. Not *The Planet of the Apes* --- one of my favorite movies, by the way. And not *Paths of Glory*, another one of my favorites. But in 99.9 percent of just about everything else, the hero persevered. The good guys won.

But now in my real life – in my own family – there was an ending that was not at all happy. An unbearable finality that even after all these years I haven't really been able to make peace with.

Something inside me collapsed, and the dreams I dreamt somehow no longer felt achievable. Or maybe even desirable.

So instead of pursuing film and TV, I became the editor of my college newspaper, and spent the next seven years after graduation working as a reporter, first in Indianapolis, then in New York and finally in Paris.

I spent those years interviewing and meeting all kinds of people and learning a lot about the world. But the more time passed, the more I realized that when I ran away from Hollywood after my brother died, I was running away from me. Sooner or later, I needed to stop. And face myself.

So at the age of 29, I enrolled at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles to study screenwriting. I graduated two years later and two years after that – by some incredible stroke of good fortune – I landed my first job in television. On a show called *The X-Files*.

Now I was as green as green could be. I had never been paid to write a script before, and had no experience whatsoever producing or making television. And *The X-Files* was an incredibly demanding and ambitious show. But, as it turned out, it was the perfect show for me. Green as I was, there was something about that series that I just understood from the very first day. And the series creator, Chris Carter, saw that in me.

I went from the very bottom rung on the ladder – staff writer – to the very top – executive producer – in three years. I became the president of Chris' production company,

Ten Thirteen, and co-wrote and produced three more series with him as well as both *X-Files* feature films.

It took a long and winding road to get there, but I finally found the place where I belonged. Back in the world of make believe where I'd surrounded myself since I was a kid. But now I wasn't watching TV. I was making it.

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In 2010, my wife Melissa, my mother-in-law, our three children and two dogs moved to London. But after working for so long as a writer and producer in Hollywood, I had no idea how profoundly different the television culture would be here in Europe.

The first day I started on *The X-Files*, I entered a writers' room with five or six other writers, all of whom had far more experience than I did. Day after day, week after week, I saw how they thought about character, solved story problems, wrote dialogue and scene description. How they persevered, often late into the night, until they came up with a story that was not just good enough -- *but actually good*. I was contributing to the room, of course, but even more important, I was learning. And being paid for it!

Back in London in 2010, the only writers rooms that I came across weren't writers rooms at all. While in the US we might spend two weeks breaking the story for a single episode, a writers room in the UK might last a day or two days – *for an entire season*. There was no rigor to the process. Because there simply wasn't time to be rigorous. As we all know, the devil is in the details, but here there were no details, just broad strokes. No wonder the results from these so-called writers rooms were so often uneven or unsatisfactory.

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Let me just pause here to say that I have come to believe there are two parts to writing. There is the art. And there is the craft.

The art is who you are. It's what makes you laugh, what makes you cry, how you see the world, and how you see yourself and others. It's your soul. It's what you're tapping into each and every time you tell a story. It's the view of life and the world that out of all the million trillion people who have ever lived and ever will live, you will always be the unique possessor. It's why you tell stories – to communicate your art – and why we watch them – to receive it.

The craft is the carpentry of writing. It's how you construct a story, how you structure a scene, or write a line of dialogue. Craft means nothing at all without the art – it's just empty scaffolding -- and yet without craft, it's very difficult to access your art.

Craft is something that just about everyone lacks when they first start out writing. You have an intuitive sense of storytelling – you've been seeing, hearing and watching stories all your life – but most of struggle with exactly how to construct one.

But it's a skill that gets stronger through repetition. Which is why we tell writers if you're going to write, write as often as you can. Write every day if you can.

If you go to the gym once a week, you're not going to get a lot stronger. But if you go five times a week, or seven days a week? You're going to notice a difference pretty quickly. The same for learning another language. Study it a couple times a month, and you're not going to get very far. But study it every day, and you'll improve quickly.

The perfect story is an inextricable intertwining of character and plot. You cannot pull them apart. This plot could only happen to this character. This plot is most interesting because it is happening to this character. The plot presents the perfect obstacles for this character, designed to challenge them in a way they would not challenge anyone else. It's a perfect blend of art and craft.

You can't really teach writing. But you can tell aspiring writers what tools you use to write, and they can observe how you write. Then when they sit down to write themselves, they began to apply those tools, what they've seen and read, to their own work. To internalize those lessons. To make them their own.

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Working alongside other writers in the *X-Files* writers room – where I helped developed 24 episodes a year for eight years -- helped me hone my craft. And it's only got stronger and easier for me after the countless hours I've spent writing since.

But the art? The art is still hard. It will always be hard. Which is why no matter who you are, no matter how successful you get, you can always fail. Name any master of film or television, and you won't find one among them who can't – who hasn't – failed. And who can't or won't fail again. That's because – if you're doing it right – every time you tell a story, it's different. No two stories are alike. No two characters are alike. You're facing a different challenge, a different puzzle, every time out. Of course it's hard. It's meant to be hard. If it isn't hard, then I'd say you're probably not doing it right!

But that's why it's such a rewarding career. Because no matter how good you get at this, you will never master it. It will never be easy. It will always demand of you everything you have to give. And then some. If you want to do it well. And if you don't want to do it well, then why do it all?

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Beyond helping me to learn my craft, the writers room taught me another lesson that was at least as valuable – the value of collaboration.

Collaboration does not mean a democracy where every vote is counted and the majority rules. Collaboration does not mean compromise.

Collaboration means working together to come up with a story that is better than it would have been if we'd devised it by ourselves.

It means exploring every idea, and coming up with the answer that is the best answer you can find in the time you have for that story, for that character.

When you're in a good writers room – and believe me, there are plenty of bad ones - - but when you're in a good one, you can feel the energy. You are harnessing the talents of all these smart people all focused on the same narrative, and bringing it together. A problem that might have stymied you for hours or even days when working alone can often get solved in minutes. It can be exhilarating.

Whether or not you ever work in a writers room, the most radical value that emerges from it is that the best idea wins. *The best idea wins*. It's not because the boss dictated it. Or some genius auteur thought of it. It's because -- *it's the best idea*.

A happy writers room is one where staff and showrunner recognize this is what's being achieved. The showrunner has the trust and support of the other writers because day after day they can see what they are all building together. The showrunner isn't given this respect or trust because of their title – they must earn it.

In Europe? These are fighting words. In far too many countries, there is a top down structure in television, starting with the broadcaster, followed by the non-writing producer and the director, with the writer below them all. Whether or not the path they're leading you on is the best one.

Now as I said, not all writers rooms are good ones. And I've heard producers here in Europe say, 'I tried a writers room once, and it didn't work. Writers rooms don't work.' Which is basically like saying, 'I went to a restaurant once, and it wasn't good. Restaurants

aren't good.' Of course not all writers rooms are going to work! Probably not even most of them are going to work that well. A writers room is just a system, a methodology, and it's only going to be as good or bad as the people who are running and participating in it. But when it works? It works very, very well.

This is not to say that every series should have a writers room. Thousands of terrific television series have been done – and are being done -- without them. That's proof positive that writers rooms are not necessary.

But let's say you are doing a series of a certain scale – say 8, 10 or more episodes in a season. And let's say that you want that series to return in a fairly regular fashion. Well, then, I'd say you'd really better have a writers room. Because a single writer is going to struggle to deliver that quantity of episodes with consistent quality. And certainly won't be able to do it year after year without delay or fatigue.

The other argument I hear is that writers rooms are simply too expensive. As if script development was a part of the budget where you should cut corners. The truth is that you can make a bad film or television series out of a good script, but it is impossible to make a good film or television series out of a bad script. Everything we do as storytellers begins with the script. There's no more important line item in a budget – no more important investment – than the script.

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I have said that I believe writing to be both art and craft, and that while the art is the point, the craft is what helps you access and express it.

But I'd like to talk a bit more about that art. And where it comes from. I don't know about you, but for me that is always the hardest question to answer. Where did that idea come from? What made you think of that? It's a mystery.

And that's because – if writing is art and craft – then the art itself can be seen in at least three ways.

The first of those is intellectual. You have a formal, rational understanding of the story you're telling, what it's about, why you're telling it. It's left brain thinking and essential to helping you organize and express yourself.

The second part is emotional. It's what the characters feel, the mood you're creating and sustaining, the reason you and your audience care about whatever story you're telling, and equal in importance to the intellectual part.

The third and most important part is intuitive. This is the part that we are quickest to dismiss or take for granted. And yet this is the richest and most mysterious source of creation. It's tapping into our subconscious mind. It's writing that comes from a place you may not understand at the time, and may come to understand later – or never. It's the mystery of who you are. So many times you will be writing and not know why you want a character to do or say this, or why you want to go to this scene. For some reason it just feels right. And the more you can tap into that, the stronger your writing will be.

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In most countries, writers are rarely if ever allowed anywhere near the set, have no voice in casting or locations or any other production decision. They certainly aren't let into the editing room. That's the domain of directors and producers.

The first week I started working on *The X-Files*, I was sent into the editing room. Because in Hollywood, writers are trained to be producers of their own work. To be showrunners.

Of all the many producer duties I was assigned, none was more vital or to my development as a writer – to my understanding of filmmaking – than being in the editing room.

The editing process is known as the 'last rewrite' for a reason. It's there, when you have all the film assembled, that you retell the story for the last time. You move, delete or intercut scenes, add or subtract lines of dialogues, change timing and select takes with specific intonations and meanings. You shape the story in countless ways that profoundly affect its success or failure.

As a writer, you come to understand what was done right or wrong in the script that the production worked from. You realize that a certain scene began too early or ended too late, that a line of dialogue was missing or an idea repeated, and on and on.

Why are architects required to understand engineering, when writers are not even allowed in the editing room?

The script is nothing but a blueprint from which a building – the finished episode – is constructed. The more the writer understands about how their blueprint will be executed, the better able they are to draught it properly.

I have heard some producers in Europe tell writers not to worry about issues relating to budget and production.

They tell them to just dream up whatever their heart desires, and leave it to the producer and director to determine what can or cannot be done.

As if the producer and director were the adults and the writers were children.

And indeed some writers in Europe say that they feel useless on a set, and only come reluctantly. '*I show up just before lunch, and leave just after,*' they say with a smile.

It's a writer's choice if they don't want to be involved in anything but writing. But they are ceding control to others, and depriving the production of their full value.

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But why does any of this matter? If the world is beset by so many existential crises, what's the point of making television?

If history has taught us anything, it's that people don't change. Go back and watch *Oedipus* or *Medea*, or read *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. People who lived more than a thousand years ago wrestled with the same moral dilemmas, emotions and human flaws and virtues that we do today. We have not changed at all.

So if people are unchangeable, then why does storytelling matter?

Leo Tolstoy wrote that "the purpose of art is to transmit... feelings vitally important to humanity." He believed that art is a means of awakening and strengthening the best feelings in people, such as love, compassion, and selflessness. Art may not be able to change people, but it can help them to understand each other better and to forgive each other for their differences.

Oscar Wilde said that "All art is quite useless." But he didn't really mean that art was unimportant. He meant that art's value lies in its ability to transport us to a realm of beauty and imagination, where we can escape the mundane realities of life and experience something truly transcendent.

Wilde thought art was rebellion against the ordinary. It challenges our perceptions of the world and allows us to see things in a new light. Art can awaken our senses, stimulate our intellect, and enrich our emotions. It can make us more compassionate, more understanding, and more open-minded.

Art, Picasso said, is "a lie that makes us realize the truth."

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I said that when I was a kid, I watched everything, but the two shows that meant the most to me were *The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek*. And I think that's because these shows not

only entertained me – not only engaged my emotions and made me care deeply about the characters – but they made me think. They didn't tell me what to think.

Propaganda tells you *'Here's the problem, and here's what you should do about it.'*
Art tells you, *'Here's the problem as I see it,'* then asks, *'Now what do you think?'*

Art trusts and respects the audience enough to let them make up their own minds.
Art is humble enough to accept that the audience may arrive at different or even better answers than the artist.

That's not to say that all questions are equally interesting.

If you ask, *'Should good triumph over evil?'* then I answer, *'Yes, of course.'* Because you haven't left me with a terribly interesting question to answer.

But if you ask, *'What is the quality of goodness?'* or *'What is the quality of evil?'* then you have got me thinking.

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I said a lot of television is disposable. True enough. Most of it is. But that doesn't mean the television that we make has to be disposable.

I suspect that most if not all of the people in this room are here for the same reason that I am. That when you were young you saw a movie or a television series that made a deep impression on you. Maybe it made you laugh or cry or frightened you. But somehow it made you feel something. It communicated something to you that was important. And valuable. And you became a writer because you wanted to communicate the same thing to an audience. To pay forward the gift you received.

That's what storytelling is. It's an act of *human* communication. Which is why artificial intelligence may well cost some jobs, but writers will always remain. Because writing is *people* speaking to other people. Saying, *This is what I think – what do you think? This is how it feels to be alive to me – how does it feel to you?*

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If we're going to write good scripts, we must have ambition. We cannot try to make a movie or television series that is simply OK. Being OK may well turn out to be the result, but we have to start by aiming for the highest star. If you aim really, really high, and end up landing a bit lower, then you're still doing pretty well. But if you start out aiming for the middle – for just OK – then you're likely to end up in a place where no one ever wants to land.

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I told you about all the happy endings I grew up watching, and about the terribly unhappiness of my brother's life's ending. Here's a true story.

During Season 7 of *The X-Files*, David Duchovny – the actor who played Agent Mulder, the star of our show – told us that he wanted to leave the series. Mulder's central quest in the show was to find his sister Samantha, who he believed was abducted by aliens when she was 8 years old. Now, with very short notice, we had to resolve the mystery of Samantha's disappearance in the few episodes we had remaining before David left the series.

The expected ending – the ending that *The X-Files* undoubtedly would have scripted had it been made when I was a kid – would have been a happy one. Mulder would have found Samantha alive, and happy tears would've flowed during their reunion.

But that's not how most missing persons cases really end. And I knew from my own life that not all endings could be happy ones.

So in the two-part episode that solved the mystery of Samantha's abduction, the truth was revealed. Samantha was dead. In fact she had been dead for many years. Mulder was reunited with his sister, but on a spiritual plane, not a physical one. His victory was facing the truth – facing himself -- and being allowed to grieve her loss.

Mulder's story was my story. And I was able to tell it in a way that people could receive it. They could learn from my pain. And maybe, just maybe, in some way I could help to ease some of theirs.

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Almost no one starts out being a good writer.

When you decide you want to be a writer, it is an act of faith in yourself. You may not be able to write well now, but you are proceeding with the faith that if you keep at it, one day you will.

That's why the hardest time in a writer's career is the beginning. You already have a strong critical sense. You can watch a television series or movie and point out – correctly – everything that's wrong with it. But at the beginning of your career, could you write a series or movie anywhere near as good?

When you're a new writer, you worry, '*What if I can't do this?*' or '*What if I'm not good enough?*' These fears are understandable, maybe even inescapable.

But you need to set aside those fears and write. Write and keep writing. In time you will discover if you're good enough. Or rather, you'll discover whether you want to write badly enough to become good.

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The most important story you will ever tell is the story of your own life. You tell it to yourself every day, silently in your own head. You are constantly rewriting it, changing the narrative to reflect your present circumstances.

The more closely your story hews to reality – to circumstances and events that those around you would recognize as true – then the more valuable that story is to you; the more likely you are to have strong mental and emotional health, and to see yourself and the world around you for what you and it is.

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The world needs storytellers. People who are willing to sacrifice and devote themselves to becoming good storytellers. Especially now, when times are tough. When everything feels so uncertain and scary. Especially when fewer television shows are being made, and when the people who control the purse strings are lowering their ambitions.

Human nature may not change, but each generation needs to understand itself. To laugh, to cry and – as Tolstoy wrote – to better understand ourselves and our differences with others.

Stories are our only chance to see the world through someone's eyes. The world is such a complex place, and people think and behave in so many different ways. Stories give us the chance to begin to not just understand other people, but to empathize with them.

That's why we don't just enjoy stories, we need them. I hope every one of you will keep on telling them for many years to come.

Thank you.

ENDS