



What's the Problem?



5 Keys to Writing a Summer Blockbuster

Most screenwriters think a blockbuster is simply a film that does really well at the box office. Technically speaking, that's true. But the reality is that a script with blockbuster potential is a very special kind of script, with a number of story elements that studio executives are looking for. I'd like to point out five of the most important blockbuster script elements, out of about forty that we consistently see in the top money-making films.

Technique 1: The Myth Genre

The first blockbuster story element has to do with the genre you use to tell your story. A genre is a particular kind of story, like detective, action or comedy. When Hollywood was selling primarily to an American audience, executives thought that movie stars were the key to a hit film. But in the last ten to fifteen years, the vast majority of blockbuster films have had no movie stars. Now it's the story that matters.

The story that travels best on the big screen is the oldest genre of all, the myth form. Myth is found in more blockbusters than any other genre by far. Add up the box office for the following myth-based movies: Batman Begins and The Dark Knight, Lord of the Rings, Shrek, Star Wars and Avatar. Like any genre, myth has a number of unique story beats you must learn, and include, if you want to tell the form well. And remember: in blockbusters, myth is almost always combined with one or two other genres, such as action, fantasy and science fiction, that serve to update and unify the myth story for a young audience.

Technique 2: The Hero's Goal

The single most important element in an international blockbuster is narrative drive, the ability of the story to propel forward at an increasing rate. Narrative drive comes primarily from the hero's desire line. Desire is one of the seven major story structure steps, and provides you with the all-important spine on which you hang all characters, plot, symbol, theme and dialogue.

To make this "desire line" work, a hero needs to have a clear goal, and go through several struggles as he/she accomplishes the goal.

Technique 3: The Opponent

As screenwriters, we are taught to focus on the hero, since this character drives the story. That's sound advice. But in blockbuster films, the opponent may be even more important. One of the great principles in all storytelling is that the hero is only as good as the person he fights. Also, the opponent is the key to plot. And in the last ten years, blockbusters have become more plot heavy.

Once you're clear about the main opponent, try to come up with one or two secondary opponents, with at least one of them hidden from the hero and the audience.

Technique 4: The Scam

The emphasis blockbuster films place on plot leads to another story technique. And it's designed to solve a problem that plagues almost all screenwriters: how do you create maximum plot in the middle, where 90% of scripts fail? In blockbuster movies, the hero's plan is often a scam, or a plan that involves deception.

The trick here is to make the plan more deceptive for both hero and main opponent. When the hero scams, he becomes a trickster character, which audiences love. When the opponent scams, it gives you more plot and makes him/her a more challenging foe.

Technique 5: The Story World

The rise of the videogame along with the ability of special effects artists to realize wholly imaginary worlds has made the story world one of the three or four crucial elements in a blockbuster film. As little as a decade ago, Hollywood didn't care about story world, because it slows down narrative drive. Special effects were designed primarily to heighten heroic action.

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