

BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series, in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

David S. Goyer

23 September 2013 at BFI Southbank

David S. Goyer: Thank you, I've never given a speech before, so this will be interesting. I thought I'd start with a very bad screenwriter joke. There aren't any good screenwriter jokes, we'll see how this goes over.

So, a screenwriter is driving home from Universal Studios, drives up the hill, he sees smoke, hears sirens. He gets his way to his home, he threads his way past the cordons and the fire-fighters and the police and says 'I live here, I live here' and he finally gets to his house and it's completely burnt down.

He asks the cops 'what happened? What happened' and the cop says 'your agent came by the house and we think he went completely psychotic. He buggered your dog, and then he strangled your dog. He took a crowbar to your laptop and then the back up drive in the basement, and then he slashed your Warhol – I don't have a Warhol, I wouldn't be here tonight if I had a Warhol – anyway, then he poured gasoline over everything and he torched your house and there's nothing left.

And the screenwriter says 'my agent came to the house?'. Anyway, *budum bum*. I'm a terrible, terrible public speaker, so I have to read from what I've written. Thanks for joining me, I'd like to thank BAFTA, the BFI and the JJ [Charitable] Trust. Jeremy [Brock] as well.

I apologise in advance for any awkward pauses or disjointed transitions or assorted dangling participles. I hope some of what I say tonight will be inspiring, or informative. I don't claim to be an expert, I'm just a guy who's managed to make a living for the last 26 years as a writer of film and television.

Before I started cobbling together these notes I went online and I looked at what some of my peers had said. First I thought I would wing it, and then I got really nervous when I saw what they had done. I was particularly impressed with Charlie Kaufman's speech; he's a writer that I admire greatly. As I listened to him, though, I got kind of depressed because I realised that essentially I was the antithesis of the kind of writer he was championing.

He writes these deeply personal, idiosyncratic films, and I basically represent the enemy. I'm an 'A-list screenwriter' - and I use that with air

quotes - who makes his living churning out the kind of tentpole pictures that are allegedly destroying Hollywood.

And since I'm a blockbuster guy I'll probably never be up for a BAFTA, so being here tonight probably represents the closest I'll ever get to one of those shiny little masks. Which, apropos of nothing, every time I see a picture of a BAFTA I think of the movie *Zardoz* and the giant floating head. It's the one where Sean Connery's got a ponytail and a ray gun, and he's got a weird banana hammock – I think I've got a picture of the poster of *Zardoz*. I just wanted an excuse to show that poster, it's my favourite bad movie. But yeah, that always reminds me of the BAFTAs.

Anyway, I predominantly work for the so-called majors, so my comments are necessarily going to be informed by that bias. But I do think what's happening to screenwriters in Hollywood is kind of a bellwether for what's happening to screenwriters abroad. Amongst the things I'm going to do tonight, I want to touch on the future of screenwriting, and where I think the industry is heading, and what that means for all of us.

I wrote this great speech, or what I thought was a great speech, and then I gave it to some of my assistants and they said 'it's really dry, and you didn't include any personal anecdotes, you've got to do that'. So, sprinkled within – hopefully – a real speech is a bunch of bullshit personal anecdotes. I'm probably going to be the writer that swears the most at these events.

Hopefully there'll be some pearls of wisdom buried beneath the bullshit. I'm 47 years old, I sold my first screenplay when I was 21. It wasn't a very good script, and the resulting film wasn't much to brag about, but it got me my start. I landed an agent when I was 20, and here's how. I'd read about a young man that had become an agent when he was 22, and I reasoned that someone who had made agent at the age of 22 was probably a hustler, and I wanted that kind of person working for me.

So I cold called his office from my dormitory room, I was still in school at the time, and I left a message with his secretary, saying that I'd written a screenplay and his assistant promised to get back to me – and I knew she never

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would. I hung up, saying thank you. The next day I called his office again and I left the same message.

The third day I called his office again and I left the same message. And I kept doing that for 45 business days – this is true. Finally on the 45th business day the agent jumped on the line and he barked into the line 'who the fuck are you, and why do you keep calling me?'. I knew I had a couple of seconds, and I said 'my name is David S. Goyer and I've written a screenplay' – at 20 I added the 'S' because I thought it leant some kind of mystique or something like that.

I said 'I'm about to graduate from film school, and I've written this amazing screenplay and I'm going to be a really big writer some day and if you don't sign me you're going to regret it'. He laughed and said 'fuck it, send me your script. But don't call me every day to see if I've read it or not'. So I sent my script in, and I waited two weeks, and then I started calling him every day, for – I don't know – two or three weeks.

Finally he picked up the phone again and he said 'your script's actually pretty good'. So he said he was going to sign me, and then he admitted that he decided he was going to sign me even if my script was mediocre. I said 'why in the world would you do that?' and he said because I'd shown such ridiculous confidence in calling him every day that he figured I'd probably get somewhere. Now why did I show confidence? There's a point to this.

I didn't really have anything to lose. I was sitting in my dorm room, literally in my underwear, calling every day and I just thought 'what's the worst thing that can happen?'. The guy would laugh at me and he'd hang up, or maybe tell me I was a shitty writer. At the beginning of my career I had a number of people tell me that I was a shitty writer.

So here's my first point; probably every successful writer in stage, screen or prose has been told some version of 'give up' at some point in their career. It's rejection. If you can't deal with it, if you can't pick yourself off the floor after someone has completely crushed your soul, if you can't continue onward, then

you probably shouldn't be trying to write for a living. That's my first pearl of wisdom.

The other thing, now I'm going off book for a second, when you're trying to write for screen – this is film or television – you're trying to convince someone to make your script. I think what a lot of beginning writers, or even professional writers don't realise – and I had this epiphany about five years into my career – is I think someone once said that for every film that gets made a thousand scripts are written. You're not just getting your film made, you're killing off those other 999 scripts, the possibility.

Your script sperm has killed off the other male sperm. And it's a big deal because you realise that in order to even get a small film made someone else has to spend a million dollars, or two million dollars or three million dollars, or \$300 million. So part of writing a good script is actually convincing people to risk all their money and their livelihoods in making your film.

So perseverance and stick-to-it-ness, that's a really important component of writing. Anyway, thanks to my perseverance I got an agent, but I hadn't yet sold a script. My agent asked me if I could try my hand at writing an action film – I never thought I would be an action writer, I thought I would write comedies. I'm probably glad I didn't do that, but *Die Hard* had just come out, and a few months later I wrote a script called *Dusted*. It was a story about a cop who gets sent into prison undercover, and at the time I was working at a studio as a runner.

I was delivering mail and getting executives bagels – grunt work. My agent called me in the middle of the bagel run, literally, and he said 'there's this guy called Jean-Claude Van Damme, do you know who he is? He calls himself JC'. I didn't.

Anyway, he'd made a moderate splash with a couple of B movies called *Bloodsport* and *Kickboxer*, and he'd read my script and he wanted to meet. A few hours later I was sitting down with him. JC was this sort of Belgian pretty boy model who'd learned how to do the splits and a spinning wheel kick and somehow got himself a film deal.

He could barely speak English, but he was very enthusiastic. And MGM was going to make a

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new film with him. JC said, and I'll always remember this, he said 'I think you're a great writer. Hollywood will try to destroy you (this is verbatim) but I will protect you like an eagle' and he made that motion. And then he gave me a big hug, this is true, and he kind of rubbed his knuckles on top of my head like you would with your little brother.

Anyway, he said he wanted to have MGM buy my script and he wanted to start production on it immediately. Incredibly that's exactly what happened. Four months later I was on the set of my first film, I was 22 at the time, I had to take all of JC's dialogue and sort of portion it out to other actors because he could barely speak English. And I had to change the title to *Death Warrant* because MGM had market researched titles and 'death' had scored well. So *Dusted* became *Death Warrant*.

And I thought, you know, I could show clips of really good stuff that I've done and I guess I'll do that, but I'm going to show a clip of *Death Warrant*.

Clip of *Death Warrant*

I thought no-one else is going to show a Jean-Claude Van Damme clip. I also don't like to take myself too seriously. I like to do a good job writing, but I always cringe when I say 'I'm a writer'. It's clearly not my finest hour, but we all have to start somewhere. Which leads me to my second pearl of wisdom, which is everyone wants to write an Academy Award winning film, or a BAFTA winning film their first time out, but there's nothing wrong with learning your craft in the trenches.

Coppola and Scorsese started out with Roger Corman [as did] Jonathan Demme, James Cameron, and in those days B movies were a good place to earn your water wings. I never worked with Corman, but I worked with Van Damme. And believe it or not he actually taught me some things.

He once said to me, and this is true, while we were filming that movie, he said 'one day you'll write a script that's too good for me', and thankfully I did. In 1994 I wrote a script called *Blade*, and that script changed my career completely. For the first time I wrote a script without any editorial interference.

An executive at New Line named Michael De Luca, he gave me the shot, and he didn't try to dictate the story. He just said 'write it the way you think it should be written' and this is a very rare thing to happen. There's another pearl of wisdom hidden there, hire someone you think is talented and then get the fuck out of the way. Park your ego, it's a lesson that very few studio executives and producers have managed to put into practice on both sides of the Atlantic. But if more of them did I genuinely think, I believe, the film industry would be much healthier.

I've been involved in three film franchises now where I was allowed to write with virtually no creative interference. The *Blade* films, *The Dark Knight* trilogy, *Man of Steel* and it hasn't been lost on me that those three projects were also the ones that were the most financially successful. You can't just chalk it up to the fact that Batman and Superman are well known, because nobody knew who *Blade* was.

But I want to go back to *Blade* for a second, for an additional point. That script wasn't made immediately, it floated around for about four years before it went into production, but it was a script that the community liked. It was passed around from one film executive to another, and they liked it because it was brash, because it didn't feel like a generic Hollywood film.

The reason it didn't feel generic was because I was writing what I wanted to write, and I didn't have any regard for what Hollywood might desire. And even though the script took a while to get made I was now being offered projects as opposed to having to audition for them. So my point here is that a good script can open doorways for you even if it never makes it into production.

Being John Malkovich was a script like that, it was floating round Hollywood for years before Spike actually made it. Around the time I wrote *Blade* I had a set of business cards printed up. I was feeling kind of bullish, and they just said 'David S. Goyer, Writer'. I showed them to my writing mentor who's an old timer named Nelson Gidding who'd written a lot of films for Robert Wise. He promptly took the card and he threw it in the trash.

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He said 'no writer worth his salt prints up a fucking business card that says writer on it'. If any of you have business cards that say 'writer' on them I apologise right now. Nelson continued. He said 'it's bullshit, you're not a writer, you're a human being who writes for a living'. So here comes, I guess, another pearl of wisdom.

Nelson was old school; he considered writing a craft as opposed to an art. He felt that all writing, even science fiction or fantasy, needed to be based on human experience. One of his grips with young writers like myself was that we wanted to start writing films without actually living any of our lives. A writer has to have human experience, a life beyond the page, or else they're essentially drawing from nothing.

Nelson had been a navigator on a bomber in World War II, his plane was shot down over Italy, he was one of only two survivors. He was Jewish, a Jewish-American soldier captured by the Nazis, imprisoned with other Allied officers for two years. Tried to escape, was recaptured. Tried to escape, was recaptured. Finally was liberated by the Russians near the end of the war.

And he spent a year drinking and carousing his way through Europe with the Russians, before he made it back to America and told them that he was actually alive. When he got back to the States his fiancée had married someone else. Heartbroken he went to the South Pacific and somehow – this is true – managed to save Truman Capote from being knifed in a bar fight. That is human experience, and I didn't have anything like that. And I'm not suggesting you should all go out and get in bar fights.

So I threw away my business cards and I started travelling. I went to the South Pacific, I learnt to scuba dive, I bought a motorcycle, I crashed a motorcycle. I went skydiving, I went to Africa and South America, all throughout Asia. I got out of my comfort zone, and I got some life experience. And my writing started to improve – it markedly improved.

And even though I'd been making a living for almost ten years at the time it wasn't until I'd had these experiences that I felt I could truly call myself a writer. Now you might be asking yourself 'how does one apply their personal life

experience to a film about vampires, or a vigilante who dresses up as a bat?'. I'm going to give you a couple of examples.

In my travels I'd managed to go tracking in Tibet, and when Chris Nolan and I sat down to reinvent Batman we wanted Bruce Wayne to travel far afield. I showed Chris some of my photographs from Tibet, which I'd taken during my experience. And those formed the basis for Bruce Wayne's vision quest. You can show a couple now – these are just photos that I took when I was in Tibet.

But the point is, when Chris and I were breaking the story of *Batman Begins*..... that's me drinking yak butter tea, which is terrible. This was a place that had never seen white people before. I can't say that the Tibet trip was an easy trip, it was actually a very difficult trip, but I never would have imagined that that trip would become the basis for the beginning of *Batman Begins*, and it did.

I showed all of my pictures to the production designer, and that's why Bruce Wayne goes to Bhutan in *Batman Begins*. Batman and *The Dark Knight* films led ultimately to Superman, and again you might be wondering what possible personal experiences I could have applied to Kal-El's origin. During the period that I was writing *Man of Steel* my father died. We'd been estranged, and I'd only seen him three or four times from the time I was 18.

But I did manage to see him a week before he died. During the same period I became a stepfather, and a biological father. As I was writing *Man of Steel* I realised I was crafting a story about fathers and sons. I didn't realise it when I started out, it was sort of about midway through. I decided to lean into it. Early on in my relationship with my step-son I remember having a conversation with him.

He was concerned that I was my biological son's father but not his. He said to me one day 'can't we just pretend I'm your son?'. So here's a clip from *Man of Steel* where you can see I completely plagiarised my step-son for the movie.

Clip from Man of Steel

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Of course Kevin Costner was way cooler in replying to his adopted son than I was to mine. But for me, I remember sitting there having that conversation with my step-son and that was the emotional 'in' for me, into this crazy, giant movie. It was really that simple. So can a superhero blockbuster have these personal and resonant moments, even within the constraints of a genre film? I'd like to think that's one of the niches that I've carved for myself. Anyway, that's my encapsulated origin story, and hopefully there are a couple of things that amused you or inspired you, and having done that I'm not going to completely crush all of your dreams.

Two years ago I ran for a seat on the Board of Directors of The Writer's Guild of America, and much to the dismay of my wife I won. I wanted to help my fellow writers, I was curious to look behind the curtain and to drill down in the specific economics that were driving our industry.

I'm speaking of America obviously, for years, ever since the writers' strike of 2007 and the collapse of the home video market we've been hearing that the sky is falling. The narrative basically goes like this. Mainstream studios are making fewer films, fewer writers are being employed and middle class writers are becoming an endangered species. To make matters worse profit margins are supposedly shrinking.

Is there any truth to this? Yes and no. So ten years ago the major studios released 136 self produced films. Last year they released 101, so it dropped considerably. Ten years ago there were roughly 2,000 working WGA screenwriters, last year there were 1,500 so that's a big drop. It sounds bad, and to a certain extent it is. Fewer films means fewer opportunities for screenwriters to ply their trade.

In America the box office is dominated by the box office mentality, like *Man of Steel*. There used to be a healthy market for mid and lower budgeted films, for indie films, or even B movies like *Death Warrant*. But [apart] from micro budgeted horror fare like *Paranormal Activity*, that market has almost completely dried up. If you're going to make a tentpole film today you'd better base that film on existing intellectual property, on something that has

franchise potential. It's all the studios talk about.

Unless you can make a toy line from it, or a key chain or bobble head of an iPhone case, or unless that movie can be firmly characterised as what they call a four quadrant film, meaning that everyone from tweens to grandmothers want to see it, then the studios are probably not going to make that movie.

Maybe they'll make one raunchy, R rated comedy a year, maybe one chick flick – and yes, they call them chick flicks over there. But the rest are going to be based on superheroes, or the young adult series de jour, or they're going to be remakes of existing films.

And there's definitely a self-fulfilling prophecy that seems to be playing itself out in Hollywood, a sense of the snake eating its own tail. My own Batman film was a reboot from one that had been released eight years prior, and I've just written another script in which we're rebooting Batman yet again, only a few years after *The Dark Knight*.

Now, you're probably thinking if I didn't cut my teeth on comic books – like myself – or Hogwarts, I'm screwed. And to a certain extent you are, and to a certain extent you aren't. And here's where a little bit of hope trickles back into my presentation. While the screenwriting industry has contracted, the television writing industry has expanded, rapidly.

An acquaintance of mine was in a meeting with Jerry Bruckheimer, who produced *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Top Gun*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Bad Boys*, and also TV shows like *CSI* and *Without A Trace*. He told my acquaintance 'television won'. So let's look at the numbers. In 2003 there were 14 American broadcast basic cable and pay cable networks airing original programming. Today there are 29, so they've doubled.

In 2003 there were roughly 3,000 WGA members working in television, today there are 3,500, so you can actually see where those 500 odd screenwriters have migrated. Television is no longer regarded as a second tier medium. Increasingly high end screenwriters are gravitating towards scripted series. You've got

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Jonathan Nolan of *The Dark Knight* fame, creating Person of Interest. Frank Darabont of *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*, *Walking Dead*. David Benioff scripted *The Kite Runner* and *Troy*, helms *Game of Thrones*. Graham Yost who wrote *Speed* reinvented himself with *Justified*.

You've got feature directors like [David] Fincher and Michael Mann, Guillermo Del Toro, Jane Campion, all migrating towards television. I've followed the trend as well, first with a show called *FlashForward*, and I have a show on now called *Da Vinci's Demons*. I'm acutely aware that that list is dominated by white men, but that's a subject for a different lecture, probably not from a middle aged white man like myself.

Why the great migration? First of all television is more profitable than film. It's a higher margin business. International cable markets are quickly growing and all these channels need product. International co-productions are booming. My own show, *Da Vinci's Demons*, receives production funds from both Starz and BBC Worldwide. You've got additional new platforms emerging, like Netflix and Amazon, Hulu, Xbox.

And it's important here to cite the level of film actor talent gravitating towards television as well, because they're basically better roles. You've got Glenn Close, Laura Linney, Holly Hunter – and on the Y chromosome end of the spectrum you've got Kevin Bacon, Kevin Spacey, Kevin Costner, I'm only going to list guys named Kevin. Those are the only men in television. TV's basically making the kind of epics and genres that the movie studios used to make.

Historical costume dramas and crime stories and zombie apocalypses; and TV is often doing it better now, with more complex narratives and corresponding budgets and critical acclaim arising. As an example of a narrative specifically designed for TV I've got a scene from a show I did called *FlashForward*, and it takes place after everyone on the Earth has experienced a vision of their lives six months [into the future]. I want to show this clip from *FlashForward* to show you basically the kind of scene that couldn't be done in a mainstream [film] today.

Clip from *FlashForward*

It would be very hard to do a scene like that in a mainstream Hollywood film these days. On television, instead of having to tell your story in two hours you've got six episodes, or 13. Characters and audiences are given the opportunity to grow. Writers also tend to be better treated in television. It's true. Film is a director's medium, and in television at least in America, the writer is king.

And there's a reason for that, in television directors tend to be more itinerant [but] in serialised television writers can't be. Someone needs to keep track of the storylines. Is that line of dialogue consistent with Lady Mary Crawley's backstory? Who are we going to ask, are we going to ask the director or are we going to ask Julian Fellowes? We're probably going to ask Julian Fellowes.

Who's going to keep track of Don Draper's myriad lies? Probably Matthew Weiner, the guy who invented him. In the American system we have a class of writers known as showrunners. Brett Martin recently published a book on the subject, entitled *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution, From The Sopranos and The Wire to Man Men and Breaking Bad*.

If you haven't read it it's an interesting book, and the premise is basically simple. You get good television when creators refuse to compromise on their creative visions, which takes me back to the lesson of hiring talented people and getting the fuck out of the way. For whatever reason it's happening a lot more now in television than in features. Showrunners also aren't as common in the UK, you've got a whole job category here that doesn't exist on my side of the Atlantic.

I'm not knocking script editors, they just don't exist in America. And if I can make one generalisation about the television industry here, it's that I think in America our writers tend to be more empowered than British television writers. When we started production on *Da Vinci's Demons* I told my British partners that I wanted a writer on set every single day of production. They said 'we don't really do that over here' and I said 'well you're doing it now'.

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And we have been, we're in our second season and I think everyone agrees that the product's benefitted from it. You've got some phenomenal TV writers here in the UK. Julian Fellowes, who I mentioned before, Steven Moffat, Mark Gatiss, Neil Cross, Dennis Kelly. Abi Morgan just won an Emmy. I watch virtually everything these writers produce, and if I could wave a magic wand over the industry here I'd wish your television writers be given even more autonomy. Interestingly enough, as the critical perception of television has risen we're seen this reverse migration back into features.

Neil Cross is writing movies now, Steven Moffat. Scott Gimple, who's currently running *Walking Dead*, has moved into film. And the list is growing. And amusingly the justification used by film executives when hiring TV writers now is that they're looking for writers who are capable of more character nuance and narrative complexity. In other words all the kinds of things that used to make movies good now tend to be happening on television.

But if an infusion of TV writers can make film more watchable I'm all for it. So where does that leave writers? Well, there are always going to be a certain number of tentpole pictures made every year, and I suspect we're going to be stuck with Spandex and dystopian teen melodramas for a long time. But Jerry Bruckheimer, I think, was essentially right. Television won. Conventional wisdom taught us that all these new distribution platforms like internet streaming and video-on-demand, they would cannibalise the television industry.

But in actuality they haven't. The numbers bear it out too. People are simply watching more television on Smartphones and tablets on the backs of seats in aeroplanes. And the industry as a whole, particularly the international market, is booming. Increasingly the big conglomerates are divesting themselves of any branch that isn't pure media.

Warner Bros. has dumped AOL and Time. Fox is spinning off news and book publishing. There's even talk about Sony shedding its consumer products division. Why? Because over the last decade the core media businesses have been the ones that have been the most profitable.

In the last four years Time Warner's stock has nearly tripled. The same with Viacom, Fox and Disney. And all of that growth has been driven by the newly emergent television industry, which is much more profitable than the film industry, which is in turn being built on the backs of writers. Writers are increasingly crafting stories that are challenging and genre busting, and they're creating the kinds of memorable roles that keep people up at night chattering away on Twitter and the message boards.

So is the sky falling? Not really. It's just that the work and the opportunities are migrating elsewhere. Believe it or not I think today is a more exciting time to be entering into the film industry than when I started back in 1988. It's just that now most of the exciting stuff is actually happening on the small screen as opposed to inside multiplexes.

Can I show the clip from *Da Vinci's Demons* as well now? Again, something that I'm not sure I could have pulled off on film.

Clip from *Da Vinci's Demons*

When I was growing up probably my favourite film of all time was *The Man Who Would Be King*. I loved *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *The Devils* by Ken Russell, and all these great, amazing adventure films. The reason why I did this show was because I knew I could never make a movie like that in Hollywood any more. But I realised I conned the BBC and Starz into letting me do this show, which is basically those movies just done as a television show.

I grew up loving those films. Other films like *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Parallax View*, I used to bemoan the fact that the studios aren't making films like that anymore. Then I realised that they are, they're just doing them on television. So all of the pearls of wisdom I've iterated tonight still apply on television, and maybe some of you will be lucky and will write some films, but certainly the work is migrating there.

Perseverance, life experience, write what you feel passionate about not what you think the market is dictating. At the end of the day good writing, and passionate writing, I do believe will always win out. And if you have a card that says 'Blankety Blank, Writer' consider throwing it

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out. Anyway, that's my little presentation tonight, thank you.