Making up stories to tell the truth:
Reflections on method

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Abstract

This reflection examines the process of writing the screenplay, *The M Room*. It's particularly concerned with the relevance of biographical facts and historical context, subjectivity in the writing process and the screenplay's relationship with others set in World War Two. It also explores ideas around delivering on, or defying, audience expectation, and how a film with a period setting can be made relevant to 21st Century viewers. It argues that a fictional story can better capture the truth of a historical moment than a true one, because of the perspective offered by time, because human motivation and action remain largely consistent, and because my experience and outlook as a writer and solo theatre performer help me understand how to challenge, and satisfy, an audience. It shows how crucial scholars of the real life events have been to the development of the script – particularly Martin Gilbert, and Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer. Finally, it demonstrates how a strong tradition of film narrative criticism is a great help to a screenwriter, but ultimately the writer's subjective reaction to the material is the most telling element in the creation of an engaging story.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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Introduction

Over almost three decades as a writer of drama, I have always been a firm believer that to tell a truly True story, you need to make one up. It's a notion that first implanted itself in my head when performing the solo theatre shows I'd co-written. In one of them (*Roadmovie*, Whitfield, Williams, 2003), I played two characters: a playful naïf called Alex, and a cynical nihilist called Elvis. Around the same time a friend was performing his own solo piece, and the character he played was, like him, called Neil. There was another solo theatre writer/performer on the scene called Guy, whose character was always called Guy.

Neil and Guy were thoroughly decent chaps telling us sweet (possibly overly polite) stories, as themselves. Their pieces didn't play challenging games with their personas along the lines of Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David, 2000-), or Steve Coogan and Rob Bryden in *The Trip* (Winterbottom, 2010-2020). But they did draw on the advantages of intimacy and direct address which solo performance in the theatre bring. At first I was worried that appearing under their own names made the work of other solo show performers more authentic, more honest: a primary concern of mine. I soon realised, though, that the fictionalised versions of myself that I'd invented were more free to say things that might be on my mind, but that I might not want to say as myself. This in turn allowed me a different, more intense, and complicated kind of relationship with the audience. Elvis could directly confront people with their taste for screen violence as pornography, for example. I'm not sure Neil or Guy had the elbow room to do that.

From the very start, I've been fascinated by the idea that fiction can tell the truth more effectively than true stories. In these reflections on the process of writing the screenplay, *The M Room*, I will explore some of the sources and experiences I draw on in my work, and the reasoning behind the decisions about storytelling form that I have made along the way. My aim is to show how the effort to get to the most honest, authentic, and subjective version of the story possible is best served by creating fiction.

1. Sources and resources

The initial impulse to write *The M Room* came from reading an obituary of Fritz Lustig, who died in 2017 (Fry,2017). Lustig, a German Jew, fled his homeland in 1938, arriving in London where he found temporary work. Things looked like they would change for the worse when, in the summer of 1940, all German citizens in the UK were interned, Lustig among them. The policy was, however, recognised as excessive, and so was short lived; Lustig was able to join the Pioneer Corps that September, where his skills at playing the cello

allowed him to enlist in the regiment's orchestra. This was better than being interned, but as Lustig himself states in a radio interview, touring with the light orchestra was a development he considered to be 'not a very effective way of fighting the Nazis' (BBC World Service, 2012).

As the war progressed and the British captured prisoners of war in battle a plan was hatched to monitor the conversations of the most influential, high ranking officers, who were being held in luxurious accommodation wired with hidden microphones. For this, native German speaking translators were needed: Lustig's chance to make a more meaningful contribution to the war effort `(Fry, 2012).`

By the end of the war, Lustig and his colleagues had collected 74,000 transcripts, and as an intelligence operation for the British, the scheme yielded important results, particularly regarding the V1 and V2 flying bombs: the Listeners made a material difference (Zaloga, 2018). After the war ended, Fritz married and settled in North London, living a very ordinary life until details of the operation emerged in the early 21st Century. Once the material began to be declassified, he did many interviews, an affable, philosophical man, growing old with dignity and panache.

In the course of their work, Lustig and his fellow-Listeners had to endure hours of overhearing talk about atrocities and concentration camps, with many prisoners boasting about the appalling things they'd seen and done. The operation had reams of evidence that could have been presented after the war at the Nuremberg trials, but British Intelligence, mindful of the next war (against the Soviet Union), did not offer it, or even admit to its existence. They decided that protecting their methods was more important.

Partially declassified between 1999 and 2004, and pored over by historians since, the transcripts are a compelling, invaluable record of the mindset of men who've been transformed by the violent chaos of war. Many of the conversations are recorded verbatim in *Soldaten* (Neitzel and Welzer, 2012), and they're a truly crushing read. It is genuinely terrifying to 'listen in' on how desensitised to suffering some of the men have become; how in many cases the pain of others simply amuses them. I intended to write this screenplay several years ago, but it has taken time to find it in myself to go back into the world of those soldiers. Their testimony affected me badly.

2. Context: Britain then and now

As a writer, the setting of this story immediately struck me as rich ground for a screen story. Which story though? A biopic of Fritz Lustig? I was sceptical when I read Lustig's comment on his reaction to hearing the monotonous, brutal tales of atrocities: 'We had a job to do. We had to be professional and not allow emotion to get in the way.'[Fry, 2017]

Like everything about him, this is an admirable notion, but if I'm to make an engaging, dynamic screenplay, I *need* emotion to get in the way. I need it to get in the way so much that it threatens to destroy my protagonist.

Looking at the operation itself, there are three main elements to the story that drew my attention as a screenwriter. The first is the vital information that was gathered that helped limit the Nazi war machine: the operation's military effect. The second element is the fact that the Listeners, mostly Jewish refugees, had to endure those hours of hideous descriptions of violence against their people, often delivered gleefully by debauched, arrogant men: this is the operation's emotional effect. The third is that this evidence was considered of secondary importance to the British military and political authorities of the time, before being then buried for half a century: the operation's political effect.

As I began to think about a screenplay, it was clear that while all three of what I am calling the operation's effects would need to find their place. My story would need to find a way to trace the force of each of these, while also focusing on the most compelling effect of all: the subjective effect of the process of listening. It was this that audiences also needed to experience for themselves.

To be able to make up the kind of story I wanted, I knew I had to work further on the context in which my characters operated. The third of the attitudes outlined above, is, for instance, unsurprising given the historical and political context regarding the handling of the Jewish 'problem' at the time.

While millions were being exterminated, the Leader of the British House of Commons, Anthony Eden, refused to countenance accepting more than an agreed 1000-2000 Jewish refugees into the UK, stating that:

> The only effective means of succouring the tortured Jewish, and I may add, the other suffering peoples of Europe, lies in an Allied victory. In devoting all their energies and resources to this end, the Governments and peoples of the United Nations are, therefore, seeking to bring relief to all the oppressed. (Gilbert, 1981, [p. 119].

This statement clearly presents the dominant British idea regarding the Jews that, as leading historian Martin Gilbert shows in his ground-breaking study, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, endured for the entire war. It also seeks to characterise the fate of the Jews as nothing special. This attitude had some dissenters, independent Members of Parliament and Bishops among them. In January 1943 the *New Statesman and Nation* published a leader article under the heading, *Our Part in Massacre*, which could hardly have been more explicit, identifying Hitler's plan as systemic and out in the open, and demanding an international, open-door policy for Jewish refugees, with specific proposals for immediate action (*Our Part in Massacre*, 1943).

The response of the War Committee for Refugees is recorded in secret minutes of their next meeting: 'It was essential to kill the idea that mass immigration to this country and the British Colonies was possible… emphasis should be laid on the complicated negotiations involved.' [Gilbert, 1981, p. 112] In other words, throw up a smokescreen and do nothing. And while the dissenters spoke with authority, those with real power maintained the establishment position. On the opposite side of the House to Eden, Clement Attlee made an almost identical statement to his.

To an extent, this focus on victory before anything is understandable; it makes a kind of sense, from a military point of view. Victory was by no means assured, and resources had to be targeted in a single-minded way to try to achieve it. Did I, therefore, need to integrate these kinds of argument –- relating as they do to the military effect of the Listening Operation -- into my screenplay? If so, what sort of characters would best represent them? And where might any discussions between them take place?

There is, of course, more to Eden and Attlee's words and the wider British response than military reasoning. There is also political calculation. When I explored in the work of Gilbert the underlying reasons for the inaction regarding intelligence about the death camps, the refugee crisis of the time, and the numbers involved, it became clear that this story presents a case study of politicians pursuing narrow interests at the expense of millions of people in urgent need. For example, efforts were made to convince the Arab League to accept significant numbers of Jewish refugees from Europe. But when they met with resistance, the British didn't insist further, as the preservation of the Empire, for which they needed the League's cooperation, was seen as a far more important matter.

This kind of political pragmatism, with such awful results, is a relatively untold story of the British in World War Two. It's not part of the genre, which is much more likely to feature a bunch of jolly good chaps putting one over on 'The Hun'. This might seem outdated, but it is in fact still, somehow, the standard UK film treatment of stories set in the conflict (see *Operation Mincemeat*, 2021). I find such films to be wholly negative examples of our culture, emphasising as they do a kind of British Exceptionalism ('We won because we were better') bound up with moral certainty: 'We won because right was on our side'.

These ideas still prevail in British culture, from the Brexit campaigner to the football hooligan, and they damage our country. That's why telling a story like that is not an option for me. I want to tell one that better reflects what actually happened, and might even make us think about the conduct of the British in the war a little differently, and likewise reflect on who we are now.

For this reason, it was clear that my version of this story would not be a biopic of the great Fritz Lustig. He deserved better than to be rewritten to suit my needs. To integrate my research (throwing up as it did, a range of different, often competing perspectives on the war) with my political engagement with

the Truth, I needed a more complex, morally-compromised protagonist: I needed to make up a character who would be better placed to explore the mess that was the Allies position in these key elements of World War Two.

So the next question I faced was: If he's not Fritz Lustig, who is he?

3. Josef Leibowitz and me

Another iteration of 'Making up stories to tell the truth' might go something like, 'Inventing characters to write about oneself'. This is undoubtedly what I do. My film *Skeletons* (Whitfield, 2010), written in the wake of my father's death, is populated with a variety of characters struggling to deal with loss. I remember sitting in a screening of that film and realising that they were *all me*, in one way or another: the kid looking for a father figure, the woman digging holes in the woods looking for the missing man, the seer who's become addicted to visiting his family in his past. Each character was an honest portrayal of an aspect of my own grief.

That film is a lo-fi science fiction comedy, which provides much of its appeal, but the reason it resonates deeper amongst some people, I am convinced, is that painfully honest portrayal of people struggling to come to terms with loss.

The basic story architecture of *The M Room* dictated that my protagonist would be a German. Would he, like Fritz Lustig, be a Jew? My instinct told me that he shouldn't be, because if he was he would know too certainly what he should do. He would have skin in the game, a side to fight on, complete with comrades, philosophy, ritual and community.

I preferred the idea that my character was something of an island. I'm like that, resisting clubs, cliques and proscribed paths. It's a flaw, and often not very helpful, but it's genuine. What it does for my script is link the character to me, and give me the opportunity to explore that historical context set out above through the eyes of someone with no allegiance to anything. That way, when he finally chooses the path that defines him, at the climax of the story, what I might achieve is a fundamentally human response to the reality of an era-defining situation, while other characters are unable to offer anything so elemental, mired as they are in politics, pragmatism and narrow self interest.

One is never sure when making these decisions, and the tyranny of infinite possibility can make it hard to commit to something, but this choice regarding my protagonist became easier to make when I realised that it's not a million miles away from the story of Rick in *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942). Like my character, he's an island, determined to remain outside the fray, until circumstances and the political situation on a global scale make his position untenable, and he is forced to act, risking his life and sacrificing his own desires for the greater good. With this comparison to reassure me, I ploughed on.

Beyond my need for honest self-expression, there are other factors in the making of a screen story that it would be disingenuous to ignore. Firstly, it has to be exciting, with twists, turns and climaxes that sustain the audience's engagement throughout, to a satisfying (but surprising) conclusion. It sounds obvious to say, but films that can be described that way are too rare.

Secondly, as a personal choice, I always want my work to be quite unflinching in the way it regards the world, but ultimately embedded with a seam of genuine hope and optimism. The great Russian theatre director Stanislavski's ambitions for the theatre are ones I share in respect of film: 'It should heighten perception; it should ennoble the mind and uplift the spirit'(Benedetti, 2004: 16).

How does one achieve this in a story where a major factor is that pure motives are in short supply? Conventional screenwriting theory, drawing as it does on James Campbell's seminal cross-cultural analysis of myth, teaches us that the key to an optimistic story is having a protagonist who changes (Campbell,1949; Bordwell,1985 and 1997; McKee, 1996; Vogler, 2007). On this point, I'm entirely on board with convention. I'm also (largely) on board with the conventional 'three act' structure serving as a means to trace the movement of change across the story (Field, 1979). The key lies in the hero. The H Word. What is one of those?

The prevailing model of a hero in contemporary cinema, as the success of the Marvel franchise has shown, is the superhero, someone blessed with inhuman powers, fighting an antihero with superpowers of their own, until the former's inevitable victory. I'm more interested in people who have no power at all, with daunting forces ranged against them who, through the struggle to survive, change and find in themselves a heroic moment. The change will endure after the film ends, but the moment doesn't need to last longer than that. It does, though, have to be earned and have to be real. I find that hero to be a much richer gift to the audience, because they could be him or her, while they'll never be Iron Man.

So these other imperatives driving the making of the story tell me that it has to be exciting, there have to be unexpected twists and the protagonist has to change and find a heroic moment in him or herself. Good sense tells me that the latter has to happen as close to the end as possible.

That change in the protagonist, and the subsequent heroic moment, are key to the whole identity of the film, which is where the emphasis comes back to the imperative to present something honest.

Reading about the mealy-mouthed political exchanges dealing with this catastrophe at the time is very much like observing the politicians of today. They lie, obfuscate, childishly avert their eyes from impending disaster (climate change), encourage others to follow suit by pretending the real problem lies elsewhere (wokeism!), and generally use words to avoid accountability and the fact that they are ill equipped to lead us.

I decided the change in my protagonist, Hans, needed to represent the opposite of this. He needed to become a truth teller. In the context of this real, historical story (as in so many), that was what was missing which, had it been present, could have made the most difference.

He doesn't start out this way, though, this is his final destination, and as a wise script editor once told me, if at the beginning you make the protagonist the polar opposite of what they are at the end, then the journey will be all the more satisfying. By this logic, in the search for the richest audience experience I could muster, I concluded that if he ends as a truth teller then he must start out as a teller of lies. Hans's polarity is from a state of deception to one of honesty.

I like this construction because it accommodates a core belief of mine; that we lie and conceal the truth more than we tell it. I don't say that as a cynic, I just think it's normal, a default human setting and nothing to be ashamed of. It does, though, make moments of honesty all the more important.

So a story about deception/honesty is important from a personal point of view and thematically on point with a story about espionage. With these start and end points in place, I could construct a story on more solid ground, knowing the direction of travel.

Achieving change in a character is always a challenge. The question of what combination of elements provokes it, when and how hard they have to apply pressure, requires good judgment, mostly achieved through several drafts. In this case, a big factor is that the protagonist is posing as someone else, and is in danger of exposure, which is a constant pressure. As the job he's doing gets more and more dangerous (another big factor in applying pressure and breaking him down), I reveal that this stolen identity belonged to his friend, murdered in front of Hans partly because of the latter's big mouth. The guilt around this episode is an element that grows in influence during the story, also contributing to the erosion of Hans's constructed defences.

Along the way, and another vital factor, is the fact that Hans has the same reaction to the soldiers' tales of atrocities as I did. He can't bear to hear it. I know this to be a true reaction, because it's the one I had that stopped me tackling the screenplay for a few years. If the protagonist and I are experiencing the same emotional difficulties, thrown up by the action of the film, then I think I'm in a good place as a writer.

By the time we reach the end of the screenplay, writing Hans is a pure pleasure. Having been exposed as a fraud, he's finally able to speak as himself, taking great pleasure in it. Circumstances allow him to do the dangerous job he's assigned at the same time as he shows these two armies, the atrocity machine and the one standing back and letting it happen, exactly what he thinks of them. Although he's disguised as a German POW, he's speaking as himself and, although I'm writing about a German man in 1944,

by then I'm speaking as myself too. Again, it feels like a good place to end up as a writer.

This change is amplified as the third act progresses, and culminates in the heroic moment I mentioned before, where Hans, posing as that German POW, goes against his orders and ignores an invitation to make himself safe, in order to pursue his own agenda. It's the same agenda he's tried and failed to get the British to get behind before, a final attempt to find out vital information about Auschwitz and therefore stop the horror that's happening there. Nobody requires him to do this, they'd much rather he didn't. It's his own decision and in taking it he blows his own cover. The moment where he gets the information is the same moment that he is exposed as a spy. That's what makes it heroic.

Conclusion

Under pressure to name his (entirely made up) commanding officer, a name he cannot recall, he uses the moment to taunt these arrogant, fanatical men with the name of his dead friend, Josef Leibowitz. He knows that naming him will almost certainly lead to his own murder, but he does it anyway, twice, because naming him to these men has become the most important thing he could do.

There follows a fight, a chase, and Hans jumping through a first floor window and breaking his body to save his life. In the hospital, he urges the British to act against Auschwitz, but it doesn't work because, it didn't work. As I established at my starting point, they let it go on. That truth is a vital part of this story and must stand.

It's not exactly an ending to uplift Stanislavsky's spirit, except there's a little more. A year later Hans goes back to the woman who was his lover in the first act. He's scarred but healthy. He tells her everything about himself and we get to measure the change in him. Before, he hid the truth, refused to discuss it with her, but now he's a truth teller and she gets to hear the lot. The ending might be pessimistic in terms of the continuing cruel indifference of politics, but there's hope in a man who can become honest and find a deep connection with another.

I wonder if this is a very 21st Century ending to this story, telling us that meaningful change in the systems that control us is no longer something we can hope for, and that personal transformation is the most that we can hope to achieve. If so, perhaps it is more cynical than I would like it to be. Unfortunately, it's hard to argue against that thesis. In any case, I'm satisfied that this screenplay (although it needs more work as screenplays invariably do) does present an honest account of my view of governments in general, the ruling class of the UK in particular, and the pressure that their indifference puts on normal people. This subjective, true account of my own thoughts and feelings is the unique offering I have for the audience. It could only come from me, and the process outlined above has been crucial in its creation.

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