

THE DIRECTOR'S PERSONAL THEMES PROJECTS

From Chapter 1: The World of the Film Director

Here are four projects that can help you explore your own life issues and identify your personal themes. These exercises work in tandem with the development of your artistic voice as a director and can help you focus your sources or inspiration and topics when developing your story ideas.

PROJECT 1: THE SELF-INVENTORY

To uncover your real issues and themes, and thus what you have to say to others, make a nonjudgmental inventory of your most moving experiences. This is not difficult, for the human memory jettisons the mundane and retains only what it finds significant. You can do it this way:

1. Go somewhere private and make rapid, short notes of each major experience just as it comes to mind. Keep going until you have at least 10 or 12 experiences by which you were deeply moved (to joy, to rage, to panic, to fear, to disgust, to anguish, to love, etc.).
2. Organize them into groups, giving a name to each group and the relationships it deals with. Some moving experiences will be positive (with feelings of joy, relief, discovery, laughter), but most will be painful. Make no distinction, for there is no such thing as a negative or positive truth. To discriminate like this is to censor, which is just another way to prolong the endless and wasteful search for acceptability. Truth is truth—period!
3. Now try looking objectively, as though what you wrote were someone else's record. What kind of expressive work should come from someone marked by such experiences? You should be able to place yourself in a different light and find trends, even a certain vision of the world, clustering around these experiences. Don't be afraid to be imaginative, as though developing a fictional character. Your object is to find a storytelling role that you can play with all your heart. If you find nothing is taking shape, explain your notes and groupings to a friend. It's quite strange, but the mere act of telling another person will reorganize how you see your own formation.

Sincerely tried, this examination will confirm which life events have formed your quest, and bring into focus the underlying issues they represent. Almost certainly you'll see that you have resonated all along to these issues in your choice of music, literature, and films, not to mention in your friendships, love affairs, and family relationships.

PROJECT 2: ALTER EGOS

Here's a more oblique approach to your deeper aspirations and identifications. Particular characters or situations in films, plays, or books trigger a special response in us, so they offer useful clues to our underlying makeup. This project takes another route to finding how you resonate.

1. List six or eight characters from literature or fiction with whom you have a special affinity. Arrange them by their importance to you. An affinity can be hero worship, but becomes more interesting when you respond to darker or more complex qualities.
2. Do the same thing for public figures like actors, politicians, sports figures, etc.
3. Make a third list of people you know or have known, but leave out immediate family if they complicate the exercise.
4. Take the top two or three in each list and write a brief description of what, in human or even mythical qualities, each person represents, and what dilemma seems to typify them. If, for instance, O.J. Simpson were on your list, he might represent an Othello whose jealous passion destroys what he most loves.

- Now write a self-profile based on what the resonances suggest. Don't hesitate to imaginatively round out the portrait as though it were about a fictional character. The aim is not to define who you are (you'll never succeed), but to build a provocative and active picture of what you are looking for and how you see the world.

PROJECT 3: USING DREAMS TO FIND YOUR PREOCCUPATION

Keep a log of your dreams, for in dreams the mind expresses itself unguardedly using surreal and symbolic imagery. Unless you have a period of intense dream activity, you will have to keep a record over many months before common denominators and motifs become clear. To do this, keep a notebook next to your bed, and awake gently so you hold on to the dream long enough to write it down. If you get really interested in this work, you will spontaneously awake in the night after a good dream to write it down. Needless to say, this won't be very popular with a bedroom partner.

If you are not able to wake up during the course of the night, wake up early enough in the morning so that you can recount your dreams as soon as you wake up—preferably while you are still sleepy and the duties and worries of the day have not yet pushed the images and events of the dream right out of your head.

In either case, do not worry about spelling, grammar, legible handwriting or especially trying making the dream “make sense.” Your job is simply to report as accurately as possible from the field of the subconscious—in all its rawness, strangeness and power.

Often dreams project tantalizing images that are symbolically charged with meaning. The British novelist John Fowles started both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot* from single images—one of a woman gazing out to sea toward France, and the other of a mysterious group of horsemen crossing a hillside accompanying a lone woman. Whole complex novels developed from investigating the characters “seen” in these alluring glimpses. You, too, have hidden patterns and propitious images waiting in the wings to be recognized and developed.

PROJECT 4: THE DAILY OBSERVER

Everything we know and understand about human behavior and how people negotiate conflict (both large and small) does not emerge from our own imagination but from what we've observed in our families, at work, among our friends and in the world around us. Vivid examples of human power dynamics, strategies for achieving goals, actions which reveal internal intentions and even subconscious motivations, are around us every day but often go unnoticed. Writers, directors and actors must constantly be on the lookout for the dramatic material which is right in front of them, existing in the everyday.

This exercise asks you to keep your eyes and ears open all the time and to keep a notebook handy to discretely jot down what you observe. This notebook is a journal of daily observations—moments, interactions, overheard discussions and impressions of people you come across—to help fine-tune your antennae and make you more observant of the material that is around you every day.

The notes you take should be quick and raw but fairly thorough. Obviously you should take note of the principal interaction, but also take time to observe what surrounds your central subject. What is the environment, time of day? Are there bystanders (witnesses)? Later, you can look through your raw notes and add more detail from memory.

From time to time some observation will strike you as having a particularly interesting dramatic arc or reveling action or colorful characters. Take these standout situations and develop them into short scenes in screenplay form (2—7 pages). You should resist the temptation to fully fictionalize these observations, choosing instead to present them as closely as possible to what you witnessed. In the translation from reality to screenplay, you will, however, need to finesse your observation somewhat so that it works as a dramatic scene. This process involves cleaning up verbatim dialogue, using visual and dramatic language, and finding ways to incorporate feelings or ideas which you “understood at the time” but may not have been immediately apparent, so that the exchange more successfully expresses the spirit of what you actually witnessed.

At first you will naturally be aware of the unusual, the humorous, and the extreme—but the more you exercise your capacity to observe the interactions around you, the more you will become attuned to the from: *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics* fifth edition

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subtle dramatic implications of more common exchanges. You will even start to look at your own personal interactions at work, with friends, or even with family as fodder for dramatic material. At first this exercise might feel a bit mercenary. You are after all looking at life itself from a highly analytical perspective and looking to glean dramatic material from it—but on a fundamental level this is what dramatists do, but maintaining an honest and empathetic perspective as you “steal” from the lives of those around you, should lead you to ultimately render sympathetically truthful behavior in your “fictional” work.

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