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**An Analysis of the Creative Process**

**Committee:**

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Beau Thorne

**An Analysis of the Creative Process**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, for their patience and support. I hope this will provide you both with clearer insight into my craft.

## **Acknowledgements**

Without the screenwriting faculty at UT or my peers, I would not have improved as a writer nearly as much as I did. Thank you.

# **An Analysis of the Creative Process**

Jessica Lynn Chou, M.F.A

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Richard Lewis

The following report examines an individual writer's steps towards completing a polished screenplay, from inception of the idea to the revision of a complete draft.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 <i>Premise</i> .....	1
Chapter 2 <i>Logline</i> .....	5
Chapter 3 <i>Outline</i> .....	9
Chapter 4 <i>Overwriting</i> .....	15
Chapter 5 <i>Revision</i> .....	19
Chapter 6 <i>The MFA</i> .....	27
Bibliography .....	29

## Chapter 1: *Premise*

*The premise is the underlying idea of your story - the foundation that supports your entire plot. If you can establish what your premise is at the beginning of your project, you will have an easier time writing your story.*

– *Writer’s Digest*, 2008<sup>1</sup>

The joy of reading genre fiction has always been the “wow” factor of the premise (while the term ‘genre fiction’ technically means plot-driven fictional work, and is often used interchangeably with the term ‘popular fiction,’ the term ‘genre’ used here will apply to the specific categories of science fiction and fantasy), which always revolves around the question, *WHAT IF?*

*WHAT IF* our reality is actually a massive program created by our machine overlords that use humans as an energy source (*Matrix*)? *WHAT IF* we lived in a future where our genetic superiority mattered more than our drive, intelligence, and passion (*Gattaca*)? *WHAT IF* murders could be foreseen and prevented before they even happened (*Minority Report*)?

(At this point, two things should be established: 1.) Yes, I am a nerd, and 2.) I. Love. It.)

Throughout my childhood, all the fantasy Young Adult literature I read had great premises: a British boarding student learns her destiny is to lay the walking dead back to rest; an absurd collection of fairy tale creatures fight against the stereotypes they’ve been written into; a boy discovers he is a wizard and embarks on magical adventures with his friends in order to defeat the most powerful dark wizard of all time. Whenever I picked

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<sup>1</sup> “The Premise of Your Story.” *Writersdigest.com*. *Writer’s Digest*, 11 Mar.2008. Web. 10 July 2015



up a new book, what excited me most was the *potential* of each story to go in untold directions, and while each of these books presented incredible situations that would never exist in the real world, the fun in reading these books was tagging along with the characters and seeing how they reacted by out-thinking, out-daring, and out-awesoming the antagonists.

In short, a strong premise is a key factor to a strong story.

But how to come up with a strong premise in the first place?

When I was a young writer (i.e. a pre-adolescent writing in a flowery journal in my room after I finished my homework) and thought all ideas were generated from this elusive idea-generator called ‘inspiration’ that existed in the ether, almost all my ideas were the same: a young woman (whose age changed to reflect mine as I got older) faces a great and terrible evil force and must save her family/kingdom/the world relying on her prowess and daring. Oh, and she also happens to be incredibly beautiful and there is a really attractive young man/men around to acknowledge how wonderful she is and who inevitably fall in love with her (i.e. *Twilight*).

Once I entered my first writing program at the University of Missouri – St. Louis (UMSL), I learned after my first workshop that projecting my wishful thinking of how I wanted my life to be was not equivalent to good story. So, after many sessions of sulking, I changed how I wrote by changing what I read.

Reading countless genre novels and screenplays is enjoyable, but limited in its usefulness. I broadened my reading to essays, literary fiction, historical non-fiction, science articles on *NPR*, recordings of *TED Talks*, *IFL Science* blurbs, comics on *The Onion* and *The Oatmeal*...there was a wealth of information out there I had snubbed because it was not presented to me in the form of a story. Lazybones that I was, it never

occurred to me before then that I could take these nuggets and transform them into a story myself.

This isn't how I found my idea for my thesis project, "CT."

I was watching the Daily Show roughly a year and a half ago, and Jon Stewart's guest for that episode was neuroscientist Michio Kaku who was promoting his book *The Future of the Mind*. I don't remember much from the interview except Kaku's answer to Stewart's question: why should humans endeavor to map the brain in the first place?

Kaku stated that once the brain is mapped, all of that data – memories, experiences, likes, dislikes – can be downloaded, and that individual's consciousness could live forever within a database. In essence, mapping the brain equaled immortality.

That idea had potential. In fact, it had *WHAT IF?* potential. I thought about it every day, generating new questions, new solutions, new storylines (and here is where the constant reading of science articles and other material became useful, because while the Daily Show provided the spine of the story, everything else provided the meat)...and after a week of mulling over this premise, I knew it was an idea worth pursuing: it had passed the seven day test (i.e. me thinking over it for a week and not becoming tired of it) and so, feeling very pleased with my own genius, I figured it was time to put it on paper.

I then waited another semester before writing it down because my Introduction to Television Writing professor said this idea was better suited for a feature than a pilot.

I never received a clear answer as to why it would be better as a feature than a TV series, but I still think it could have worked either way. For the TV series, I imagined it to be similar to *The Flash* in that the episodic element would be a case-of-the-week (my protagonist goes into databases to question consciousnesses about crimes that occurred in the real world) while the serial element would be some larger conspiracy/goal she was trying to solve/achieve. However, as I was in my first year of the screenwriting program

and very nervous about the fact that I didn't know what I was doing, I bowed to my professor's experience.

Perhaps one day I will convert this to a television show. That's the great thing about a strong premise. A single story can't contain it.

## Chapter 2: *Logline*

*A logline is a one (or occasionally two) sentence description that boils the script down to its essential dramatic narrative in as succinct a manner as possible.*

- *Raindance*, 2013<sup>2</sup>

I hate loglines.

The first assignment my cohort was given during our first screenplay workshop was to come up with loglines. Not for the scripts we were writing, but for movies we'd already watched: *Alien*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *Tootsie*. Famous movies that we'd all seen multiple times over many years and loved to the point where we could quote almost every line of dialogue.

Yet when asked to summarize the movie in one sentence, we sputtered into silence. I remember feeling irrationally angry at one point during the exercise, as our patient teacher Cindy McCreery fed us logline after logline when we couldn't come up with the correct ones ourselves: How *could* we condense a brilliant movie like *The Godfather* into one line, thereby stripping it of all its nuances, its amazing storylines? Cramming an entire work of genius into a single sentence was to cheapen it, to rip away everything that made that movie wonderful.

Within a few days, I realized my outrage was masking my embarrassment that I couldn't write the loglines myself.

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<sup>2</sup> Burbidge, James. "10 Tips for Writing Loglines." *Raindance*. 4 Apr.2013. Web. 16 July 2015.

I'd watched these movies dozens of times, and yet I couldn't summarize what it was about. Did that mean I hadn't watched the movies closely? Didn't know the A plot? Had I been a glassy-eyed dum dum sinking lower on the couch with no thought as to what I was actually seeing on screen?

Over time, we all got better at it (I took particular pleasure in making my students come up with impromptu loglines at the beginning of every class and rattling off difficult ones when they told me it couldn't be done). Yet my smugness was always punctured by the fact that I struggled to come up with a succinct logline for my own work.

Working with genre means building a world. Setting, time, and situation are key; without them, *The Matrix* logline could be confused with *The Transformers* logline ("a man battles machines for the fate of humanity" isn't the same as "In a future where machines have trapped humanity into a vast virtual reality, one man battles the controllers...etc."), but shoving an entire world into one sentence often leads to atrocious run-on's, as evidenced by the loglines I went through for *CT*:

In a future where only the wealthiest 1% can afford to download their consciousnesses into vast virtual realities in order to achieve immortality through a process called cybernetics, a corrupt detective who specializes in investigating these virtual realities and in the middle of a case involving a kidnapped child agrees to track down an enigmatic, elusive, and highly intelligent CT for a powerful corporation in order to achieve her goal of gaining her own CT chip to join the ranks of the immortals and reunite with her daughter's consciousness before her body dies of drug abuse.

This logline is informative, yet runs for seven sentences. If I was ever on the fence about reading a movie script and saw this logline on the title page, I'd throw it in the pile of not-in-a-million-years-am-I-wasting-my-time-on-this. The painful truth (to

me, at least) is that a well-written and concise logline not only conveys what the movie is about, but is also an indicator of how well written the script is.

I discovered the key to writing a decent logline for my scripts was to cut out anything that wasn't absolutely necessary to plot. So, to use it on the above logline:

1. The reader doesn't need to know the whole 'wealthiest 1%' deal. Save that detail for the actual script
2. Once people read the word 'cybernetics' their eyes will glaze over; not everyone is a nerd and will appreciate weird, fancy words
3. The kidnapped children case is not as important to the protagonist as reuniting with her daughter, so that means it's relegated to the B plot, and has no place in the logline.
4. "Enigmatic, elusive, and highly intelligent" are two descriptors too many.
5. While the drug abuse part adds a ticking clock to the story, it's not absolutely necessary to include in a logline.

Following these edits, the logline ended up being much more manageable and tidy (thought still a tad long):

In a future where a human's consciousness can outlive its biological body by being downloaded into virtual realities, a cyberspace detective agrees to track down an enigmatic cybernetic consciousness for a powerful corporation in order to reunite with her daughter in the virtual reality.

Despite my griping about loglines, they are useful tools. The logline streamlines my idea, forces me to recognize which storyline is the most important and which others are there to jazz up the script as B and C plots. Learning how to write loglines forced me

to understand what exactly my script was about. In the case of *CT*, I learned the story wasn't about the consequences of immortality upon the world, or the class struggle between the 1% and the 99%; it was about the love between a parent and a child, and the lengths a mother would go to be with her daughter once again.

A story with heart is one an audience – nerdy or otherwise — can relate to and will want to watch.

Well, hopefully.

## Chapter 3: *Outline*

*The outline is your blueprint. Never write without a plan; that's screenwriting suicide.*

– *The Script Lab*<sup>3</sup>

The first screenwriting class I took was at the University of Austin in my first semester of the MFA screenwriting program. I'd read books before that (McKee's *Story*, Syd Field's *Screenplay*) from which I gleaned the barest understanding of what a screenplay should look like and cobbled together an atrocious script that somehow got me onto UT's waiting list (by the way, whoever the person was who chose *not* to go to UT and thereby opened up a space for me, thank you). I approached that first script the way I approached fiction writing, and my Creative Writing MFA degree specializing in fiction had taught me several things:

1. Character comes first. Always start with character, and the story will shape itself around him/her
2. Don't outline; you'll only restrict your story to the limitations of what you could come up with at the very beginning of the process
3. What you write doesn't have to be true, but it has to hold truth.

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<sup>3</sup> "How To Write the Perfect Outline." [www.scriptlab.com](http://www.scriptlab.com). The Script Lab, 21 Oct. 2013. Web. 14 July 2015.



Number Three holds across fiction writing to script writing. One and Two don't (this might be one reason I was so antagonistic towards loglines. When my screenwriting class was asked to come up with loglines for our first scripts, I didn't know much about my protagonist besides that I wanted her to be female, young, and ambitious. If I'd ever gone into a fiction workshop knowing so little about my protagonist, I'd have been crucified).

But by the time I got to my screenwriting workshop for my thesis script, I'd broken out of my rigid adherence to the fiction writing rules and adopted several screenwriting ones. The most important one was learning to outline.

Writing an outline is the most essential – and most frustrating – part of the script process. When I started *CT*, I knew my protagonist Frankie was a single mother: being a mother made her sympathetic and making her single meant she was a tough lady who had no one to fall back on if she failed. But aside from those two requirements, she could be anyone: cheerful, gossipy, depressed, bitter, alluring...it would come clear as I wrote the outline of my script what Frankie was because she would end up being what the story dictated she *needed* to be. In essence, based on the story I was writing, I would adjust Frankie to fit within it.

While this goes against everything I learned at UMSL, all my teachers at UT drummed into my skull how important it is not to fixate on any specific plot device or character trait. Being precious about my work means I'm adjusting story to fit around an action sequence or an interesting dialogue moment; since story is king, it needs to be the other way around. Everything must be fluid, every scene and character expendable. Every professor threw out the same piece of advice, over and over: Kill your babies. You'll make new ones.

I bring this up because it is especially key during the outline stage. Outlining is not about how clever I am at dialogue or how well crafted my action sequences are; all of that which makes writing so enjoyable is stripped away. All I can focus on – all I am allowed to focus on – is story at its most bare-bones level. This is why outlining is frustrating, not fun. Outlining is fundamental to writing, but it isn't *writing* so much as problem-solving.

No one becomes a writer because they love outlining. It's a painful process, laying out what essential story beats need to happen to get the story from A to Z. It involves imagination, trickery, and out-of-the-box thinking to bridge plot holes and cover up boring expository scenes that pop up every few pages as they attempt to sink the script. The entire time, all those little gems of scenes that want to be written down and expanded, tempting the writer to just move away from the outline and start writing already, must be ignored.

Skipping the outline process is akin to building a house without bothering to lay any foundation because you're excited to see the granite tabletops installed and the coral paint on the walls. You'll pay for it later when everything crumbles around you. I learned this lesson the hard way after my first feature script, and I did not intend to make the same mistake with *CT*.

The original *CT* outline was quite different from what I ended up with, but I'll only include the MBM points from Act I here: Frankie, suffering from the effects of overdosing on nootropics (the drug required to enter the virtual reality) wants to be reunited with her daughter Kayla –who is in the virtual reality after her body died— permanently, but her daughter is showing signs of evolution and will soon move out of the known virtual reality, leaving Frankie forever. The Inciting Incident is Frankie arriving at the scene of a kidnapping: a wealthy boy named Johnny has gone missing, but

since Johnny has been downloading his memories into the virtual reality every night, Frankie can communicate with the older version of him in the virtual reality to try to piece together who took him and where he is now so she can save his body/his life. While Frankie is speaking with the virtual reality version of Johnny—who is so terrified that she can't get him to stay in one place long enough to answer questions—she runs into another consciousness (CT) named Dr. Ahlberg. Dr. Ahlberg asks her to break into his former employer Prometheus's corporate office (Prometheus came up with virtual immortality) and steal their research into biological immortality. In exchange, Dr. Ahlberg will tell Frankie how to bring her daughter back to life. Frankie agrees.

I won't go into Act II moments, but the ending I was writing towards was the reveal that Frankie had kidnapped Johnny so that his body could be used for Kayla's download back into reality. But the amount of nootropics Frankie was taking caused memory loss, and not only had she forgotten what she'd done, she'd also forgotten that she and Dr. Ahlberg had been working together for quite some time when he appeared to her in the first act.

I still love that ending: the reveal that Frankie was the kidnapper she'd been chasing all along; Frankie facing the choice of continuing what she'd set out to do to bring her daughter back to life at the expense of another child, or finding her morality at the expense of losing her daughter forever. There were also going to be pro-CT groups clashing with anti-CT groups with the Prometheus Corporation in the center, obfuscating who the true villain was; a great deal about the class unfairness of who gets immortality; and a slew of other world-building details.

If I do end up adapting for television, all this is coming back. But since I'd committed to making this a feature, there were several problems with the outline I had.

The biggest was that it was too complicated. In that first act, I would have had to establish:

1. The future/the world: what society looked like, what had changed
2. The concept of CT's, immortality, nootropics, and the virtual reality: how it worked, why it was important, what CTs were like, why a CT evolved, how a CT could exist of a boy who was still alive, the technology, etc.
3. The key characters and storylines, as well as the many side characters.
4. The tone of the movie and, even more importantly, the hook: what drew the audience to see/read this in the first place (would audiences want to see a thinky-sifici movie that contemplated the shifting socioeconomic landscape of our class system and the repercussions of immortality?)

Once again, I was drifting too far away from the heart of the story my logline had revealed: the story about a mother and a daughter. Everything else was muddling it.

With that in mind (and with the advice from my classmates and professor) I made several decisions: Prometheus would be the obvious antagonist (as opposed to that title being shared between Prometheus, a pro-CT group, an anti-CT group, Dr. Ahlberg, and eventually Frankie, all of whom required establishing background information to make sense); Frankie's desire of reuniting with her daughter would be represented in her concrete goal of attaining her own CT chip; Frankie would be dying but without memory loss; and the introduction would shift from quiet scenes of Frankie gaining the trust of Johnny in the virtual reality to larger-than-life set pieces and action sequences.

Almost everything served to streamline the story and make it manageable enough to fit within one hundred and twenty pages. The last decision – to include more action sequences by moving away from Johnny-the-kidnapped-child case – was intended to

draw in more of an audience; most people watch science fiction for the crazy, cool visuals (hello, *Inception*) and not because they want a glimpse into how depressing our future might turn out to be due to the technological shifts in our current society (hi *Ex Machina*), no matter how well made the movie might be. In my quest to explore the premise and consequences of CTs and immortality realistically, I'd forgotten the most important rule of screenwriting: a script must be entertaining. If it's not, then I haven't done my job.

I admit that I also made these decisions because I wasn't skilled enough at the time (and am still not skilled enough) to have pulled off such a complicated story. It was only the second feature I'd attempted after the brainy sci-fi feature I'd written my first year at UT (the feature I ever wrote as part of my application to UT was so terrible that it doesn't count), I was still struggling to grasp the fundamentals of screenwriting, and faced with the pressure of needing to move forward in the writing process so that I could have a complete script in the time frame of a semester, I chose to make my life easier rather than fight for the story ideas I loved.

I think it was the right decision at the time (I would have had an incredibly stressful semester if I'd decided differently), but I still worry that I caved too easily to suggestion. If my peers and professor thought all my plotlines were too complicated and didn't understand what was happening, then that could just as easily have meant that I'd failed to communicate them clearly, rather than the ideas not being worth pursuing. Because I came to screenwriting late (all my classmates had taken at least one screenwriting class in college, if not several), I assumed that everyone else's opinions had more weight than mine (they had more knowledge and experience) and so I must bow to their authority.

This is an insecurity that I still face with each new writing project and critique.

## Chapter 4: *Overwriting*

*When I write [a first draft], I throw in everything plus the kitchen sink.*

– *Writer Unboxed*<sup>4</sup>

A first draft is the vomit draft. No one will see it, so why not get everything out onto the page? This method works particularly well with novels, when there is that drive to fill as many pages as possible with text, to go deeper into character, and just generally “allow your story to breathe” as my UMSL professor called it. A good example of this would be deviating from the main storyline of a depressed white collar family man who denies his depression to ruminate on the work it took to build his garage dark room for a chapter or two (*The Corrections*).

This was one of the more stressful aspects of switching to screenwriting from fiction writing: keeping to a strict page count. One page equals to one minute of screen time. The rule of thumb for a feature used to be ‘keep it at 120 pages,’ (two hours of screen time) but now that rule seems to have changed to ‘under 110 is good.’ There could be no more waxing poetic or philosophical on a character’s moment of epiphany or spending time crafting gorgeous sentences that stretched entire paragraphs; there simply wasn’t room.

However, this couldn’t curtail my anxiety to describe *every single detail* in my protagonist’s world. After all, *CT* is a science fiction script. That means world-building is key: the audience has to know what the city Frankie lives in looks like and how it differs

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<sup>4</sup> McCoy, Sarah. “Underwriting vs. Overwriting: Just Write.” *Writerunboxed.com*. *Writer Unboxed*, 25 Marc. 2014. Web. 14 July 2015.

from the present. Descriptions of the cool technology from the types of skyscrapers to cars to phones...all this establishes tone and lets the audience know they've entered a different world.

The every-single-detail-is-necessary anxiety felt even more important when covering plot holes, and could only be assuaged when I followed these rules:

1. All science-y things must be explained. That ranged from tech/science that played pivotal roles as plot points to the smallest tech device that showed up in the first act and was never mentioned again.
2. The audience had to know the why, when, and how of every science thing in the script or they'd be lost. It was my job to treat them like elementary students who'd recently entered the Nerd Academy as lost, bewildered children.

By following these rules and being so obsessive with explaining every detail and every plot device, I forgot my first rule yet again: a script must be entertaining.

My classmates made sure to tell me I'd failed in this in their written critiques of my work. Their critiques included: "I don't understand what's going on"; "there's so much science that my brain hurts"; "when I see too many science words I don't understand, my brain gives up." During every workshop, I got the same comment over and over: "What is this story about?"

They were getting so bogged down in understanding every line of description, action, and dialogue that they had no idea what the script was about, which ended up at 135 pages. Far too long for even an action script.

So how did my favorite sci-fi action scripts do it? *Minority Report*, *Matrix*, *Alien*...all very entertaining stories that did a great job establishing the world its

characters lived in, yet the pace was quick and the audience never felt lost. I read each script again (I had read each script in preparation for *CT* before, studying for structure) to determine just how much science needed to go into a script so the audience understood what was happening without being weighed down by it. *Minority Report* and *Matrix* both use the same device – introduce a character who has no idea what the world is/how the technology works (Witwer and Neo, respectively) and a veteran/knowledgeable person (Anderton and Morpheus) takes the time to explain it to him, thereby also explaining it to the audience. These explanation scenes that establish the rules of the world never last longer than a few pages all together, happen in the first act (or early in the second act), and once done it is assumed the audience can keep up with whatever comes next.

*Alien* did not do this. Since it takes place on a spaceship, every character has to be familiar with the world otherwise they have no function being there in the first place, so nothing can be explained to the rookie/audience. The script is loaded with science and tech jargon – practically every other word – and yet aside from the barest visual descriptions, the writers don't spend the time to explain/elaborate on any of it. I wondered how they got away with it before realizing the science didn't matter to the script because the story was so simple: a bunch of people on a ship find themselves trapped with a dangerous, murderous alien. Their goal is survival. Nothing else matters. Once the audience knows this is what the story is about, no amount of jargon-laden dialogue is going to throw them because the suspense, tension, and danger of the situation will hold them.

I thought my premise and story were solid, but hidden by all the science and world-building descriptions that cluttered up the page. If I could strip all that away to the bare minimum – essentially, differentiate between what the audience needed to know and what I wanted the audience to know – then the script would have a shot of standing on its



own. And so, finishing up the first, polished draft of CT, I needed two things going forward: clarity and brevity.

## Chapter 5: *Revision*

*The more you leave out, the more you highlight what you leave in.*

*– Henry Green*

My meeting with my thesis chair and thesis reader to go over the revisions I had to make for *CT* went both well and poorly. The meeting started with both my professors assuring me that a lot was working in the script, that they liked the premise, the characters, the general plot. Most importantly, the mother-daughter relationship beats were working well, and just needed to be frontloaded at the beginning of the script.

However, they were both quite firm on two things:

1. The script was way too long.
2. The big reveal of the mystery that my protagonist solves (and isn't revealed to the audience until the end of the second act) was obvious.

As discussed in my previous chapter, I knew I had a problem with length. But knowing you have a problem and knowing how to solve the problem are two different things. Somehow, I had to cut out at least twenty pages of my script while making sure that the story retained its sci-fi edge and not lose audience comprehension along the way. I had to comb through every line of description—both world-building and action—and eliminate unnecessary words one at a time, swapping out multiple lines in place of more efficient word choices.

This was very tedious.

But it did work. Line-by-line edits are often considered superficial changes to a script, the least important part of the writing process. I found it to be incredibly useful; evaluating every description and every word made me realize what a sloppy writer I'd been up to that point. Apparently, my motto when writing that first draft had been: Why use one word when five will do?

Going through the script line-by-line made me realize how many redundant scenes I had. Often, a scene prior to the one I was working on could incorporate the same information or vice versa, and so one whole scene could be cut all together. Each scene did more as a result (my teachers had been telling me to do this every semester, and I always assumed I had; turns out, not so much). All it took to fix this problem was time and concentration.

I did lose some of my favorite scenes: the comedic scenes between Leeroy and Frankie; some cool set-piece sequences in the virtual reality; some snarky exchanges between Frankie and Neil. But since I couldn't justify them being in the script other than I liked my writing in them, they had to go.

My thesis reader also pointed out that over-explaining to the audience was a matter of trust. Namely, that I had no trust in my audience. I assumed that my readers were too stupid to make the leap from A to C and had to carefully lay out B for them, but my reader put it in terms I could understand: "The viewer likes to connect the dots themselves. It makes them feel smart, like 'I figured this out for myself' when really I [the writer] set it up for them to get to that last dot."

So it wasn't so much 'trust your audience' as it was 'trust in your ability to set up the framework that readers could navigate.'

But before I did any of this, I was stuck. The other issue raised by my professors – that the transmigration reveal would be anticipated by the audience – felt like a much

bigger problem. I started to sink under the weight of writing anxiety; if the reveal of using children as vessels for older, richer consciousnesses was obvious, then what was the point of continuing to work on the script? The mystery of *why* the children were being kidnapped was tied directly into the mystery of why Frankie was sent out to track down Dr. Ahlberg's CT in the virtual reality. One without the other sank the script; writing the child-case storyline out meant a page one rewrite.

My panic must have showed, because my thesis chair paused the meeting to assure me once again that there was a lot in the script worth keeping, that they were just giving me something to think about, and not to go overboard in the rewrite. I nodded along even though I was confused. I had to do a major overhaul to compensate for the child-case reveal, yet they didn't seem to think it was necessary. I didn't know how I was going to keep what I had *and* change over half the script at the same time.

So, I procrastinated. I pride myself on not being a procrastinator: finishing my work a week before it's due, being the kind of student that classmates tease for being so on top of things that a tattoo reading 'Teacher's Pet' would not have looked out of place on my bicep. But I didn't know how to rewrite *CT* without changing just about everything, and the thought was so overwhelming I decided it would be better to marathon *Daredevil* on Netflix than do any actual work.

Three weeks later – after I couldn't postpone the rewrite any longer – I worked through my entire script, rearranging things, deleting scenes and exposition. When I reached the last page, I patted myself on the back...and then realized I'd only lopped off two pages worth of edits. The script still sat above 130 pages. I hadn't done anything except go through and rationalize that the script should stay exactly the same because everything I'd written was genius and the audience couldn't be trusted to figure anything out themselves.

I sulked for a few days, then went into my second attempt at a rewrite with a different mindset: kill my babies. Kill all my babies.

I started by reworking the introduction to Frankie's character. Instead of meeting her in the middle of a chase sequence of a suspect, we see her in an intimate moment with her beloved daughter in the hospital to establish the importance of their relationship and Frankie's goal of attaining a CT chip. As duty calls and Frankie leaves her daughter, my thesis chair suggested I drop a hint of what is to come by having an unknown 'Shadow' (Ahlberg) lurk outside Kayla's hospital door. Only then does the script move forward with a chase sequence that (hopefully) entertains sci-fi action enthusiasts with plenty of cool visuals and tech, as well as some expository scenes to establish the world, premise, and tone of the script.

My chair pointed out that the character Lemming, a high-powered lawyer, has a grand entrance into one of these early scenes, but after she says her piece stands in the background doing nothing, which is not only *out* of character but a wasted opportunity. I went back through to make sure she is a presence throughout the scene by giving her more lines of dialogue and forcing my protagonist to interact with her.

The next scenes that underwent a major revision were the first ones between Frankie and her new partner Neil Clint. I rewrote their first conversation so Frankie could explain to the rookie/the audience some of the rules of the virtual reality to dispel any questions that might linger after the opening. I also included an advertisement for CT chips as Frankie and Clint drive so the audience could clearly see what CTs were and how they were created (and which served to break up the monotony of their drive). Because I added the advertisement/exposition about CT chips here, there was no need to keep the scene where Frankie and Clint go to Prometheus together as the main purpose of

that older scene was to establish the corporation while putting in visual terms what the CT transfer process was like.

In the next sequence, Maxson originally gave Frankie the DNA signature of Ahlberg, which she tracked directly to the Eye. In order to simplify plot (having Maxson be the one who introduces a major plotline is unnecessary if Ahlberg becomes more active as the 'Shadow' lingering outside Kayla's door, seeking Frankie out) I altered the scene so that Maxson gives Frankie a completely different assignment to drive home that she's a dirty cop. This puts Frankie face to face with an almost evolved CT, a phenomenon I'd originally explained via dialogue between Frankie and Clint in a later scene, but which works better with a visual representation of what an evolved CT actually looks like.

Moving up Frankie's discovery that something has been visiting her daughter to directly after this scene meant Frankie would *know* something new and unexplainable was trying to get to her daughter by the Act One Break, which seemed like a legitimate Plot Point (Frankie moves from her ordinary world to the extraordinary world). Making this the Act One Break also ensures that the mother-daughter storyline is the most important of the script, and a constant thru-line.

Going into Act II, the first meeting between Frankie and Howards (CEO of Prometheus) is unchanged, as is Howards request for Frankie to work for her to track down an evolved CT. Directly after this, I added a conversation between Frankie and Neil on their way to question Johnny's (the child found during the raid) father to highlight the dangers of being a virtual investigator and the abuse of nootropics (more world building, setting the stakes, etc).

One of the notes I'd gotten from both my chair and reader was that Neil, while amusing, was too often placed in the role of 'damsel in distress.' While I wanted Frankie

to have the most agency out of the pair, I moved some of the ‘eureka’ moments around the children-kidnapping case to Neil so that he could pull his own weight in the script (Neil now makes the connection that the kidnappers wanted blood samples to gauge the health of the children) and I put Neil in the position of sacrificing his own safety for Frankie’s well being (when Neil gives up his gun when he sees Frankie on the ground, a gun to her head).

At this point in the original draft, Frankie bribed a technician at Prometheus to use one of their Wonderland entry points. I moved that scene to Leeroy’s apartment so 1.) his character could have more screen-time and 2.) the scene location could get more than a one-time use. When Frankie gets back to Wonderland, I had her take Kayla out of the hospital and hide her in the cabin she tracked an earlier CT to; this highlighted her desperation to keep her daughter safe and her desire to stop Kayla from evolving under the influence of the mysterious CT. This illustrates Frankie’s understandable selfishness of wanting to keep her daughter trapped with her despite her daughter’s wishes to evolve and explore.

When Frankie flees Leeroy’s apartment, I added a conversation between her and the hacker so that he might do some of the more boring detective work related to the child-kidnapping case off-screen while Frankie was engaged in the A-plot of tracking down the mysterious CT. When she eventually goes back to see Leeroy, he is then able to redirect her attention back to the case without it appearing too forced (which would then send Frankie to the morgue to reunite with Clint, etc).

In the second conversation between Howards and Frankie (when Frankie takes the assignment), I placed the reveal that the CT Frankie is asked to track down is the same CT that’s interfering with Kayla together. This streamlines the story more efficiently and gives it an added kick: the audience doesn’t care that Frankie has been asked to track

down the father of cybernetics, but they might care if that CT is the same one that's been messing with her daughter.

Originally, the first time Frankie goes into the Wonderland, she almost dies without finding Ahlberg; the scene existed because I liked the visuals/special effects, but it took up too much of the script while accomplishing very little, so I cut it and moved the second time Frankie goes into Wonderland – she sees Kayla on the carousel, meets Ahlberg for the first time – up to the first time. This gives the story momentum and keeps the pace quick.

In order to give Frankie more agency, I revised the second time she travels to Wonderland for Ahlberg from just a revealing conversation with Ahlberg about Prometheus' shady plans of transmigration to a revealing conversation *and* a trap she lays for him in order to get her original goal: a CT chip.

At the end of Act Two, the original version of the script had Frankie waking up from her seizure without Ahlberg or a CT chip. In this newly revised script, Frankie wakes up having successfully caught Ahlberg and with a newly implanted CT chip, thus accomplishing her original goal (yay False Ending!). But since she's now worried about Prometheus' motives based on what Ahlberg has told her – and finds Johnny in the care of Howards, which means his life is in danger – that original goal is no longer important to her.

These changes meant cutting the scenes where Frankie and Clint go to the funeral of his old family friend; finding Resa; watching Resa die a horrible death; Frankie realizing that Clint was assigned to her to snitch; and Frankie and Clint figuring out that the missing children are for transmigration. All this filled up roughly ten pages, and any important plot bits were moved to other scenes that already existed or condensed into one, more effective scene. For example, the moment Frankie realizes Clint is a snitch is



now part of the scene where she's been arrested and is waiting to be moved from the police station. Since she, Clint, and Keefe are all in one spot together, there's no need to have another scene at a different location.

Moving the transmigration reveal up was also the best solution I could think of to my thesis reader's main concern: that using children to be new bodies for the wealthy was a common trope, and everyone in the audience would figure it out before my characters did. If this discovery on Frankie's part was revealed during the middle of Act Two – as opposed to the end – then the script would no longer hinge on transmigration being a big reveal/climactic moment. Instead, it became part of the larger story and (hopefully) the audience would be interested enough to see what Frankie's strategy to deal with the crisis than they were about the fact that many sci-fi novels and movies had used this premise before.

The third act now takes place entirely at Prometheus – as opposed to split between Prometheus and Maxson's lair – in an effort to condense the climactic action. Based on my thesis chair's suggestion, I switched the orders of the villains' deaths around (Howards is not as threatening an antagonist as Maxson, so she should die first) as more of a tension buildup. I also have Maxson die *after* Frankie saves Johnny because if a child's life is in the balance, the stakes are raised. I cut the sequence of Neil carrying Frankie and Johnny out of the collapsing building at the end to lessen the appearance of Neil-saves-the-day when it's Frankie's movie. Now, he 1.) aids Frankie's escape from the station and 2.) prevents Maxson from killing her, but she still achieves a happy ending under her own steam (as opposed to Frankie being a vegetable at the time of the credits).

By the end of the rewrite, the script was tighter, more focused, and much more fun to read. I also managed to get the script down to 105 pages, and *that* was a sign that I'd done my job and killed many babies.

## Chapter 6: *The MFA*

*While it's possible to learn something from writing classes, it's not easy and I don't recommend it.*

*- Lawrence Watt-Evans<sup>5</sup>*

My thesis chair (hi, Richard) wanted a section about how the MFA changed me as a writer, so here goes.

I've been improving my craft steadily but slowly over the last few years, making small steps towards bettering my prose and story. However, once I arrived at UT, I wasn't making small steps anymore, but leaps and bounds. It was shocking how much I improved over a short amount of time; I was absorbing information from every class, every script, every lecture...and it all translated into my work. The first script I wrote at UT isn't good – the story meanders, my characters lack arcs, I don't take chances – which isn't that surprising, but the last script I wrote at UT is something I feel quite proud of.

What makes me really happy is reading over that first script and knowing how to improve it. I see the flaws, the missed opportunities, the story possibilities that would bring the script to another level of storytelling. The premise is still strong, but now I have ideas on how to better showcase it.

Seeing my rapid progress makes me certain I could not have achieved it in such a short amount of time without the MFA. I feel confident about my work and hardly ever face writing blocks anymore; the techniques and skills I learned at UT taught me to write smart, not just profusely, to go in with a plan and execute it well.

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<sup>5</sup> Watt-Evans, Lawrence. "So You Want to Be a Writer?" *www.watt-evans.com*. Misenchanted Page, 1999. Web. 12 July 2015.

Most importantly, the MFA taught me that writing is a never-ending learning process. There will always be room for improvement, and as I mature as a writer, I need to keep my mind open to feedback and constructive criticism for the sake of story.

Writing has always made me feel happy, but now it also makes me feel calm. I couldn't ask for a better passion to pursue.

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