"Tower Heist" from the script writer's point of view

Screenwriting Corner
"Tower Heist" from the script writer's point of view
Genres: Comedy/Drama/Action/Adventure
By Ronnie Tharp-Garber

Designing Principle
Ben Stiller and Eddie Murphy lead an all-star cast in Tower Heist, a comedy caper about working stiffs who seek revenge on the Wall Street swindler who stiffed them.

Premise
After the workers at a luxury Central Park condominium discover the penthouse billionaire has stolen their retirement, they plot the ultimate revenge: a heist to reclaim what he took from them.

This is a comedy with the sub-genre of heist-comedy. The drama elements are the known Opponent, with a moral dilemma that blows in the Battle scene, with the Opponent defeated: finally a Wall St. multi-million dollar player who thinks he's above the law is brought down by some very creative "working stiffs."

The elements of action come into play with the Hero, Ben Stiller, greatly incensed when the trusted employee/doorman of a high rise tower building is bilked out of his life savings by the Opponent and then tries to commit suicide. To stay in this genre where comedy is the overall force, the doorman could not be killed — Ending up in a hospital, yes. And the Hero goes for a visit and vows to make things right. As a comic action Hero, "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do!"

The Character Web of hotel workers and bosses and funny residents of this super-expensive, posh residence that resembles Trump Tower is neatly played out. All of the secondary characters play against their natures, which contributes to that "comic gap" that is the mainstay of comedy: The desk clerk Russian young woman is studying for the bar and will end up being the shark lawyer for the Hero; the Jamaican maid is a brain with safe-cracking; the lonely, broke, divorced and bankrupt Wall St. occupant becomes part of the heist team instead of going asunder; the primo thief, Eddie Murphy, is bailed out of jail and wears a stolen business suit with attache case and becomes the heist trainer for these other "pansy-ass" would be thieves, who have never stolen anything in their lives.

All of the secondary characters support the Main Desire Line of the Hero, who wants to retrieve the money that the Opponent stole from the employees' pension plan. Each character approaches the Desire according to his/her particular "quirk" and value system.

What keeps the Narrative Drive going is the continued "immoral" acts that the Hero commits to reach his goal/Desire of getting the money back for the employees. The Hero smashes a prized race car to smithereens; he engineers a safe-break-in; trains with a jailed criminal. The comic gap with his straight man character is that in the beginning of the story, he is a perfectionist- well-respected and politically correct with the wealthy residents of the Tower at all times. He plays along with the Opponent boss and maintains his calm under pressure. But then he goes berserk and is willing to jump completely out of character to go after the goal/Desire.

In a tightly crafted script such as this one, the story beats are all orchestrated: There's the Inciting Incident at the 12-minute mark: The news that the pension fund has been raped by the unscrupulous boss. The end of Act 1 is at the

30 minute mark when the Hero receives new information to propel him into a definitive Plan of action to solve a huge dilemma that not only he is faced with, but all of his employees, or "working stiffs" as the Opponent likes to call them.

Act 2 is filled with preparation and training for the big heist moment. A sub-plot love interest for the Hero is woven in with the F.B.I. agent also desirous of putting the Opponent away, as she is totally disgusted with the rich raping the poor and being above the law. At the 60-minute mark, also called the Mid-Point Break, there is a distinct change of story world where the characters are in a very precarious time, just steps away from being discovered by the F.B.I., the Main Opponent, and the police. On page 75, a unique reveal occurs, and on page 85, another unique reveal occurs to jolt the audience forward with the Narrative Drive of the story. On page 90, the low point is very definitive, but because this is comedy, it is not a devastating low point.

There is a creative twist at the end, which comes after the Battle scene. The final sequences are compressed, as in comedy genre, these sequences are generally shorter than in other genres. The average comedy is about 96 minutes long, and this film is 99 minutes, including 5 minutes of credits. There is no Self-Revelation or New Equilibrium sequence, as the audience mainly cares about the Battle scene and wants to see the Opponent get his due.

For an entertaining, rollicking and good-humored 99 minutes, this film delivers. The cast is superb, the script is tight, and the comedy-heist genre is transcended, whereby the audience knows it will be a happy ending, but they will be surprised with the twist — It's not a deux ex machina type of twist, but rather a set-up in good script writing, so that the audience feels a "poetic justice" type of emotion for a clever turn on predictability.

[Understanding Myth Genre: "Avatar"](#)

"Avatar"

Genres: Mythology, Action, Romance –

Logline: A paraplegic Marine, dispatched to the moon Pandora on a unique mission, becomes torn between following his orders and protecting the world he feels is his home.

It's important to note that frequently, a film can be marketed as a genre(s) that may or may not have been the intention of the screenwriter. "Avatar" was marketed as a Fantasy, Action, Adventure. From the point of view of James Cameron, the writer, "Avatar" was crafted as a conflict between the Male Myth and a combination of Female Myth and Ecological Myth; Action, and Romance.

There is generally a misunderstanding of what the Myth genre really embodies. As a writer, it will greatly help you if you can distinguish between the different kinds of Myth forms that you can utilize when crafting your story. Whereas ancient myth dealt with a pastoral world and contained gods and goddesses who ruled that world in various forms, what can be called "the new myth forms" are cutting edge because they deal with mankind in the modern world.

To imbue your Hero with mythological elements when crafting his character is to create a Hero with great depth. This is a Hero who is also universally compelling because the genre of Mythology travels the world better than any other genre. Ie. It is not "culture specific."

Here are some of the basic Myth story beats that define it from other genres:

1. The Hero goes on a circular journey: He starts from home, travels and slays many dragons, and then returns home to find what was already there for him. After the journey, his perception is changed; he's been through a self-revelation which is public and oftentimes cosmic — Moses; Jesus; Odysseus; Kings or Queens; great warriors who have become leaders of their people.
2. The Hero has a late Desire line, but when he finds it, his Desire is his Destiny.
3. The Myth genre contains the following: Birth, Death, Rebirth. Other genres do not deal with this. Also, there may be more than one rebirth: Each dragon that is slain represents a rebirth. Myth genre therefore, gives us the broadest track of personal growth of all the other genres.
4. The Hero in "Avatar" has 4 rebirths. Watch the film and see if you can find them.
5. There is more than what has been called "the monomyth." Recommended reading is Joseph Campbell's The Hero's Journey. But this is "the monomyth." It's important to note that this monomyth is not found in all stories because it is the male warrior myth story.
6. There are more myth forms than male warrior myth. "Avatar" is a combination of 3 myth forms: The Male Myth, the Female Myth, and the Ecological Myth.
7. The male warrior is an archetypical character from the Male Myth; the earth mother is an archetypical character from the Female Myth. In the Ecological myth, the individual and the entire society are a positive blend and balance. The ultimate outcome of a utopian vs. dystopian universe is that the individual, the family, the society, nature, and technology have all blended together.

Suggested viewing: "American Sniper," "Frozen," "Gravity."

[Jason Bourne: Script Learning Curve](#)

Jason Bourne is a known entity — It is a highly successful franchise: The Bourne Identity, The The Bourne Ultimatum, The Bourne Supremacy, The Bourne Legacy, and now — Just plain Jason Bourne because that's all we need. The name says it all.

The genre that audiences love — Action/Thriller fully delivers, with a shaky-cam that can sometimes drive an audience to dizziness. Every single scene starts late and arrives early. In other words: The party is already in full swing when the guest arrives; a door slams and the guest is in his getaway car. The camera cross-cuts to the various story lines with record-breaking speed and then, we get a rap-up or mop-up in the last sequence of the story.

The story is compelling: A loner with a mysterious past. He's been dealing with amnesia, but through all the Bourne movies, he's slowly gotten his memory back. The plot has revolved around the fact that this Hero is looking for his past so he can understand his present and then hopefully, move on to a future. This is the compelling notion about crafting such a Main Character: Most of the people in the audience can certainly identify with his quest for self-understanding, as the journey most of us take through life involves connecting these three core elements: Past, Present, Future.

The problems with this script were not enough to make the film a failure, but there were problems, and if you can identify what they were, it will help to make you a better writer.
First of all, Nicki, the potential love interest and ally is knocked off at the end of Act 1. At approximately the 31

minute mark, she dies from several bullet wounds. Because the writer chose to kill off the potential love interest and Bourne's only ally at the end of Act 1, no time was invested in any type of relationship between the Hero and his love interest, who did have a vested affection for Bourne, as was established in prior films in this franchise. The audience doesn't feel emotionally involved by Bourne's loss in this film because there is simply no set up for it. If the writer was counting on every viewer having seen the prior films, that was an error. She could have been killed off on p. 75 which would set up the eventual show-down with the Main Opponent, the Tommy Lee Jones character.

Instead, the Vikander character appears as Bourne's new ally. She is a fake ally, as will be revealed in the Climax. But again, this is a "dropped in" contrivance of the writer. The audience is sucked in to thinking she's the new ally, and she is set-up nicely for this because the Opponent is aware that she is helping Bourne, but finds her conveniently useful to advance his own Plan — to take down Bourne. Suddenly, she turns and wants power and the whole thing about being Bourne's ally hits the dust. He is on to her though, as he is a "superman warrior who misses nothing," and we are given this little "twist" at the end of the Climax, into the New Equilibrium sequence of the story. All of this at the end was contrived and predictable and highly irritating because audiences are not as stupid as Hollywood thinks they are.

By the end of Act I, Bourne has figured out his identity and he has also gleaned remarkably new information about his father. This was powerful stuff and certainly could have sufficed to catapult him into Act 2 to avenge his father's murder. Instead, as already noted, Nicki, the love interest is the "new information" that pushes him out of his Ordinary World of fighting in bars and just existing in hiding into the C.I.A. world of high gadgetry, action, more murder, car chases, more opponents — All the stuff that audiences love in

this genre. The high-tech guru, with heady references to Snowden and identity theft, also on today's audience's minds, takes a bullet on p. 75 instead of Nicki, the love interest. Maybe the writer toyed with this idea. What was lacking here was what the high-tech guru had as a relationship to Bourne's character development — I couldn't find it. It made for a big disconnect. It was not a good feeling to see the guy felled by a bullet, but it was a plot contrivance and it was predictable. Yes, it was set-up when the high-tech guru had his meeting with the Opponent, the Tommy Lee Jones character. But again, unless the high-tech guru character either challenged, supported, or negated the Bourne character, he should have been rewritten in this script.

Then we had, per an interview with Matt Damon, approximately 170 cars demolished in this film. Kudos to Las Vegas for allowing all this craziness on the Strip. But 70 cars demolished would have been enough. The massive pile-ups were staged to the point of looking like an animation. And why not take the money from the savings of buying 100 cars and then smashing them up and give the money to some out of work Vegas people? All the casino employees who lost their jobs when the bubble burst in 2008 would have loved a lottery to win a car from Jason Bourne.

This brings me back to the compelling Weakness/Need of the Hero who is trying to connect his past with his present so he can move forward into his future. He's been used and abused by a corrupt system within the C.I.A., a common mantra these days. The audience identifies with this Hero. I'm not discounting the acting of Matt Damon, a very lovable, believable "All American" kinda guy. And the genre of Action/Thriller is a crowd-pleaser. But certain elements in this action-packed thriller could have made the character even more compelling and elevated the story line to a much higher level. Fancy camera work, cross-cutting, and superb high-tech gadgetry aside, it's the story that everyone remembers. It's

the inner struggle, that term called the "character arc," that audiences remember. It was a bit thin in Jason Bourne.

[First in a Series about Genre: The Thriller](#)

When you first begin your journey of writing a great story, you want to be sure that your story fits within the parameters of the correct genre. What follows are 5 main Thriller genre story structure beats that you as a writer need to hit. I am using the film, *Hostage,* starring Bruce Willis, as an example, so you can see how this works.

1) In the Thriller genre, the hero acts like a detective, but becomes the hunted. In *Hostage*, Talley IS a cop (not acting like one) and is a negotiator, usually in charge. He becomes the hunted when MAIN OPPONENT has a line on him and takes Talley's wife and daughter as hostages. Now Talley is NOT in charge.

2) In the Thriller genre, there has to be a Desire line, which is an external goal that the main character is GREATLY motivated to achieve while the main character is being pursued. Tally's Desire: Get the 2 kids out of the house while

escaping attack by the Main Opponent.

Question asked in Thriller Genre: Is your suspicion justified?

We first realize that bad guys are the 3 young men who have broken into a rich man's house, taken his 2 children hostage, want to steal his money; psycho wants to abduct the daughter.

Talley first thinks their father is good guy. Then he realizes the father is in cahoots with the Main Opponent; Talley's Desire will become obsessive when the stakes are raised. He also struggles with his weakness/need, which involves his wife and daughter, with whom is having trouble communicating; his "hostage/negotiator" world has so hardened him to cynicism and he feels he has failed to rescue some of his victims, that he can't have a normal family life. This weakness/need is the internal part of Talley's psychological and moral conflict. The Desire line is part of his external goal that will drive the story action forward.

3) The Thriller genre focuses on inner feelings of the hero. Detective should have a quality that makes him susceptible to danger. Talley's weakness/need is that he failed in his job to protect innocent children. He will die to protect innocent children who are casualties of psycho society in which he moves as a negotiator. His need to jump into the action can possibly get him

killed and he is in constant conflict with the other police chief as to proper protocol vs. just jumping into action.

4) Thriller: Single suspect. Main Opponent is with a mask all the time. We don't get to see his face, but he is well-acquainted with Talley's weakness/need as he knows Talley was a chief negotiator in LA and he tried to escape that psycho world by coming to a sleepy town. The stronger and more in control that the Main Opponent is in will mean that there is a dual of wits with the hero. When the Main Opponent knows some of the hero's background, he uses that information to "get under the skin" of the hero.

5) In the Thriller genre, we can connect love to the thriller: Faith vs. skepticism. Talley loves his wife and daughter, but he lives in a world of psychos and has disconnected from his family.

Therefore, the story line will have 2 lines: Personal line and Crime line. We need to show how the hero's unique psychological and moral weakness will be solved by solving the crime.

Talley will be re-united and re-connected with his family after he saves them from certain murder by a master killer Main Opponent.

Talley's weakness/need vs. Opponent who keys in to Talley's weakness/need makes the story move forward, beat by beat, obstacle by obstacle. The 3 young bad guys are also keying into Talley's

weakness/need and this also makes the story move forward, beat by beat.

Stay tuned for the coming entries, when we will look at the 7 major story beats that a writer must hit for ALL genres. We will also be looking at Story Structure, scene by scene for the genre of Thriller, using the film, *Hostage* for examples.

What is Genre?

What is Genre:

A category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter.

GENRE: HISTORICAL EPIC©

Is Exodus a historical epic? Is Exodus a drama/war film? Is it a historical tragedy?

Why is it so important for a story writer/screenwriter to get the genre correct from the get-go? First of all, to stay within the parameters of genre is to deliver to audiences

what they have come to pay for their admission ticket. Also, characters are believable and credible. A story line that contains a spine and ultimately, a theme causes the audience/reader to sit at the edge of their seat/turn the page until the climax or epiphany is reached by the main character/hero.

It is easy for a screenwriter to grapple with genre throughout the writing process. Because there are certain elements that can or cannot be included in a specific genre, it is easy to get confused along the way. A particular story line lends itself to a certain genre. Yes, there are "cross-over" genres, but only experienced writers should attempt them. It is hard enough to write the great story with one genre in mind.

The historical epic is a genre that can include a biographical epic, such as Schindler's List or Gandhi, or a dramatic epic, such as Gone With the Wind or Gladiator. In the biographical epic, the hero is a real character, as opposed to a fictional character. In the dramatic epic, such as Gone with the Wind, the hero is fictional. The story is based on real events, but the characters are fictional.

In some movie reviews, Exodus is listed as a drama/war genre. Drama is a genre, but not necessarily based on real historical events, such as the history of the State of Israel and all the events both before and after the creation of the

State of Israel. War is not a genre. Within a drama, there can be war, certainly. And within a historical or dramatic epic there can be war.

To see Exodus as coming under the genre of drama is not accurate. Put simply, drama is where the hero/protagonist confronts complex human emotions, which are tested throughout the story. Drama can be a love story, such as Love Story or Wuthering Heights. Drama can be called a thematic drama, such as The Shawshank Redemption or Seabiscuit. Drama can be a psychological drama, such as Good Will Hunting. A drama with tragic overtones could be The Godfather.

To call Exodus an historical tragedy is not the correct genre either. A tragedy in the Greek sense is a cathartic characterization of characters who have flaws that overwhelm them. One associates tragedy with Shakespearean classics such as Macbeth. If tragic events occur to the main characters, then certainly the story that is being portrayed is a tragedy, such as Schindler's List. But the genre is not tragedy.

Let's examine the two films that are basically on the same topic, the Israel War for Independence: Exodus, produced in 1960 and Kedma, produced in 2002.

Now, a look at just a few Exodus film critics' reviews.

Genre: Historical epic

"Exodus" 1960, Otto Preminger

Based on Leon Uris' novel, this historical epic provides a dramatic backstory to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, in the aftermath of World War II. Ari Ben Canaan (Paul Newman), a passionate member of the Jewish paramilitary group Haganah, attempts to transport 600 Jewish refugees on a dangerous voyage from Cyprus to Palestine on a ship named the Exodus. He faces obstruction from British forces, who will not grant the ship passage to its destination.

Another synopsis:

Fictional but fact-based account of the struggle for the emergence of modern Israel as an independent country and home for world Jewry.

MOVIE REVIEW (partial)

Exodus (1960)

3 1/2-Hour Film Based on Uris' Novel Opens

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

Published: December 16, 1960

THE gingerly awaited film version of Leon Uris' novel, "Exodus," which its producer-director, Otto Preminger, unveiled at the Warner Theatre last night, turns out to be a massive, overlong, episodic, involved and generally inconclusive

"cinemarama" of historical and fictional events connected with the liberation of the State of Israel in 1947-1948.

Another film on the same topic as Exodus is listed as Drama/War:

Genre: Drama/War, 2002 Israeli film

"Kedma" Amos Gitai, Director/Writer

<u>One synopsis:</u>

In May 1948, shortly before the creation of the State of Israel, hundreds of immigrants from across Europe arrive in Palestine—only to risk arrest by British troops.

<u>Another synopsis of Kedma from Wikipedia:</u>

The film is a historical tragedy set during the opening stages of Israel's 1948 War of Independence. The film follows the fate of a group of refugees from the [Holocaust](#) who are illegally brought to Israel by the [Palmach](#). When they arrive, they are chased by British soldiers. Once they escape, they are immediately drafted into the war, and take part in a grueling battle against Arab irregulars. The film centers on two long monologues, one by an Arab peasant who pledges to oppose the Jews forever; and one by an emotionally demolished refugee who laments the seemingly endless suffering of his people. Gitai intended the film to be a more realistic answer to the

romanticized depiction of the war in Otto Preminger's *[Exodus](#)*. The final shot of *Kedma* is identical to the final shot of Preminger's film.

In summary, the genre for Exodus and for Kedma is historical epic. One of the problems with Kedma is that the director's ego got in the way of producing a story with believable and credible characters, where the audience forms an opinion based on the story line. The film or story should stand on its own and not be an "answer" to someone else's film or vision. If the story is a tragedy, then the audience will form that conclusion when the elements of the story follow the parameters. An audience feels manipulated or confused when the spine of a story meanders in order to follow the writer's preconceived notions of what "truth" should be.   The characters in the story are compelling to an audience as they go on their journey, as opposed to a writer's pre-formulated goal for them.

TEST TIME: WHAT IS THE GENRE FOR TITANIC??? DON'T LOOK IT UP. WHAT DO YOU THINK AND WHY???

GENRE FOR TITANIC:

Titanic was indeed a ship that sank in 1912, but the characters of Jack and Rose were fictional and their love story was the catalyst that moved the action of the story forward and caused the audience to feel an enduring epiphany along with the characters. The genre for Titanic is OVERALL,

historical epic, but SPECIFICALLY, a romantic/dramatic epic. JAMES CAMERON COULD — USE CROSS-GENRES LIKE A CHAMP. THE FILM IS AN ALL-TIME GREAT!!