

Professional Writing and the Rise of the Amateur

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It's a pleasure to be here talking with you tonight. Over the last two days, I've been visiting a lot of classes, talking about screenwriting and movies, and well, basically talking about myself. Which I'm really good at. But when I agreed to give a formal public lecture, one of the requirements was that the presentation actually have a title. By which I mean a topic, a thesis. A point.

It all feels very academic, and I love that. I miss that. None of you will believe me now, but some day you'll look back on your college careers and be wistful. Nostalgic. Because there's something comforting about having to write a fifteen page paper on the use of floral imagery in "Pride and Prejudice."

I think what it is, is that even if you're completely wrong, it just doesn't matter that much. For the rest of your life, you're going to get called on bullshitting. In college, you're graded on it.

Anyway.

I decided I wanted my lecture tonight to be not strictly about screenwriting, but about writing in general. Because everyone in this room is a writer. You might write screenplays; you might write research papers. You definitely write emails. Every one of you is, and will be, a professional writer in some field.

So I wanted to talk about what that means.

But first, I want to talk about myself.

On March 21, 2004, at about nine in the morning, I got an email from my friend James, saying, "Hey, congrats on the great review of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory on Ain't It Cool News!"

This was troubling for a couple of reasons.

First off, the movie hadn't been shot yet. We weren't even in production. So the review was really a review of the script. Studios and filmmakers really, really don't like it when scripts leak out and get reviewed on the internet, because it starts this cycle of conjecture and fuss about things that may or may not ever be shot. So I knew that no matter what, I was going to get panicked phone calls from Warner Bros.

But first, I had to read what was on Ain't It Cool News. I'm assuming everyone knows what Ain't It Cool News is. It's that web site run by the fat guy with red hair where they talk about upcoming movies and how everyone sucks. And at the end of every article, readers write in their comments, which are generally incomprehensible ramblings about Hulk Hogan. That's Ain't It Cool News.

So I clicked over there. And started reading. I'm going to sort of excerpt it here, because it's really long. And it wasn't written by one of the regular guys. It came from someone calling himself Michael Marker.

Dear All,

I'm no inside source, just a lucky kid with a parent in the business. So with half-permission from Dad, a deep love for Roald Dahl, and a reinforced respect for John August, I'm writing my thoughts on his adaptation of Dahl's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

So at this point, one paragraph in, I'm certainly nervous. But "reinforced respect" sure sounds good, so who knows?

First let me say that there will be spoilers: The script is made of them. Too many details are twisted in with the plot and themes like the red in a candy cane -- enriching and vital.

Okay, a little flowery. But still.

As with P.J. Hogan's adaptation of Peter Pan, August keeps a firm focus on Dahl's text and subtexts, not only highlighting key pieces of the story and characters, but reiterating Dahl's vision with a brash inventiveness.

Cool. I rock.

August made the choice early on in the re-construction of this story to reset the locale from a Britishy, Oliver Twistian, Sixties game-show world into an amalgam of Hershey, PA and Detroit/Pittsburgh/Chicago/Suburbia. With Walgreen's-esquestores selling Wonka Bars, and Charlie's mom working overtime at the tennis shoe factory, August may be in critical danger of arrogantly over-Americanizing for shock value. I'm sure Mr. Dahl would be proud.

And here's where I get perplexed. "Perplexed" is probably the wrong word, because that implies an intellectual reaction, when what I actually feel is physical. It's the kind of nausea you get when you're falling. Because here's the thing: I didn't set it in Hershey, PA. Charlie's mom doesn't work at a tennis shoe factory. At all. But I keep reading.

Wonka's Entrance: The classic cane fall of course. Until an old man in the crowd kills the fun. "Imposter" he screams. ... The man produces a remote and freezes Wonka with a click. The man rips off his face and VIOLA!

It actually says, "Viola!" But I'm sure the writer meant "Voila!"

It was Wonka all along. He rolls the putty face into a ball and bites off a piece like jerky. He clicks the remote and robot-Wonka bows.

This is not even remotely what happens in my script. Our version has a parody-slash-homage to "It's a Small World" in which the little puppets catch on fire and melt. So I have to stop and think, "What the hell am I reading?" Did this guy get a copy of some other, older Charlie script without a writer's name on it and just assume that it was mine? Or is he completely bullshitting? Either way, that nausea is becoming actual shaking.

But I keep reading:

A small touch: The doors in the Bucket house and the Chocolate Factory never close entirely. In the house it is a human habit, in the factory it is a mechanical hiss halting all doors at 99% closure.

I have no idea what this is. I have no idea what it even means.

Though modest with most visual descriptions, August has every sentence read like candy: "Show your hands and arms child, I want no secrets in this house", "A distant dog barks, a different dog, dark, seductive".

Hey, if I can write a seductive dog, I am a damn good writer.

And then we get to the Oompa Loompas.

Wonka explains their history in a tone as eerie as Thomas Jefferson's letter to Tom Hart, a fellow slave owner, in 1806, "The negro has been transplanted from the Deadly Jungle of Tribal Conflict and the demons of Disease and Famine, but has done so against his will. Some would say this is the white man's benevolence. I say it is the way of things."

Holy shit. Thomas Jefferson? White man's benevolence? For the record, this is a movie about a Golden Ticket and magical chocolate factory. I think we're trying to avoid the larger socio-political ramifications of Western imperialism.

The article is signed, "A loving work of fiction by Michael Marker."

This guy is basically saying that he made up the whole thing, but here it is online, presented as if it's true. This "review" is overwhelmingly positive, but also overwhelmingly wrong.

So what do I do?

Fortunately, I know exactly one person at Ain't It Cool News. His name is Jeremy, but he goes by the handle "Mr. Beaks." I'd had lunch with him a couple of weeks earlier to talk about Big Fish and Tarzan. So I email him, and say, hey, that review of the Charlie script is bullshit.

Actually, I don't say that. I say, "That guy is bullshitting you." It's not that I'm wronged, no. It's that that guy, Michael Marker, is besmirching the good name of Ain't It Cool News by trying to pass off his deluded ramblings as truth. How dare he!

And it works. Mr. Beaks talks to Harry, and Harry posts a new article saying that the review was bogus. They don't pull the original article, but oh well. It's basically resolved.

But I can't help but think... This article was wrong, but it was really, really positive. What if it had been negative? Would Mr. Beaks or Harry Knowles have believed me? Probably not. They would have said, "Oh, sour grapes." My complaining would have made the readers believe the bogus review even more.

See, the thing is, if you ever try to really go after Ain't It Cool News, or one of the other film-related sites, criticizing them for say, running a review of a test screening or just outright making shit up, you get one standard response:

Hey, we're not professional journalists. We're just a bunch of guys who really love movies.

And that's where we rejoin the thesis topic of the evening: professional versus amateur.

What do those words even mean anymore?

The classic, easy distinction is that the professional gets paid for it, while the amateur doesn't. For a lot of things, that works. You have a professional boxer versus an amateur. You have a professional astronomer versus an amateur -- some guy with a telescope in his back yard.

A friend tried to make the distinction that, "The amateur does something for the love of it." Which is kind of defeatist if you think about it. Like, the minute someone pays you for doing what you love, you stop loving it.

Maybe that applies to prostitution, but I don't think it's a universal by any mean.

For instance, I feel exactly the same way about screenwriting now as when I first started, back when I was sleeping on the floor and eating Ramen Noodle. That is: I

kind of hate writing, but I love having written. I would rather do almost anything than sit down and write a scene. But having written it, then reading it back? Pure gravy.

And really, the “getting paid for it” distinction doesn’t hold up to much scrutiny. An amateur photographer can take a picture that ends up in Newsweek. That doesn’t make him a professional. A blogger can sell Google ads on his site, a few pennies per click. That doesn’t make him a professional, at least not in the way I think we want to use the word.

And here’s my first thesis for the evening:

“Professional” has nothing to do with getting paid.

When we say “professional,” I think what we’re really talking about is “professionalism,” which is this whole bundle of expectations about how a person is supposed to act. I’m going to try to list what I think those characteristics are.

The first is “presentation.”

I used to call this, “giving a shit,” but I decided I was swearing too much for an academic setting.

Here’s what I mean by presentation. Let’s say you write a business letter, and it’s full of typos and grammatical mistakes. Not professional.

Or you’re a funeral home director, and you sit down with the grieving family while wearing a Ramones t-shirt. Not professional.

Obviously, what I’m getting at is that there’s an expectation about how a professional presents him or herself, either in person or in writing. You want to make sure that your audience sees you in your best light, which means spell-checking and putting on a clean shirt.

Being a professional means looking like a professional.

The second characteristic we’re talking about when we mean “professional” is “accuracy.”

If you're an accountant, and you misplace a decimal point, that's unprofessional. If you're a surgeon who amputates the wrong arm, that's inaccurate, and unprofessional. And really awful.

The third characteristic is “consistency.”

Let's say you go to a restaurant, and they serve really good Mexican food. The next time, they serve all Hungarian food. Do you go back a third time? Part of professionalism is consistency. It's delivering what people expect every time.

And of course, showing up on time. If the only thing you're consistent in is “consistently late,” then that's not professional.

Next, “accountability.”

That means, when asked the question, “Who did this?” You can raise your hand and say, I did. I was responsible. Accountability is sort of the opposite of anonymity. It's why you see bylines on newspaper articles.

The last characteristic of professionalism, at least that I can think of, is “meeting peer standards.”

By that I mean that within the class of people doing what you're doing, there's consensus about what's acceptable and what's not. Sometimes, that's codified, like Realtors with a capital-R, or lawyers and the bar association. A lot of times, it's less formal, but that doesn't mean it's not there. Whether it's waiters sharing tips with the busboys, or undergraduates sharing notes before a test, there's pretty clear agreement about what's okay. And probably more importantly, some consequence if you don't meet the standards of your peers.

So to review, here's what I'm including in my definition of “professional”:

- Presentation, a.k.a. “Giving a shit”
- Accuracy
- Consistency
- Accountability
- Peer standards

There's no good acronym. I tried. But I think these five things are what you're really talking about when you use the word "professional." Which leads us to:

Thesis two: **A lot of the "professional" media is staggeringly unprofessional.**

That seems pretty obvious, but it doesn't make it any less depressing. Here are two magazines I bought at the airport on the way here.

The first is Us Weekly. The second is OK Weekly. You can see they both have articles about a certain celebrity couple.

Wow, you know, I spend sleepless nights worrying about Tom and Katie's marriage. To bring this back to me, which is the topic I feel most comfortable with, I actually know Katie Holmes, from Go. I adored her. For a while, I would actually call her on her birthday. But then I realized that a 19-year old woman and a gay guy who's quite a bit older having nothing in common.

But God bless'em. They're making it work.

We hope. It's hard to say. Because one magazine says they're rock solid, the next says it's falling apart. Let's try to apply our standards of professionalism to these magazines to see where we're at.

* Presentation

You could object to the font choice, and I hate when they write on the photos, like it's a yearbook or something. But everything is spelled right. You can't say the presentation is unprofessional.

* Accuracy

Well. Tougher to say. Are Tom and Katie really splitting apart? I've been in relationships where I had no idea whether we were staying together or falling apart.

* Consistency

Not a strong suit. If you think back to Nick and Jessica (I know, heartbreaking), one week it was his fault, one week it was hers. And you got the impression the editors wrote it both ways and decided which version worked better with the photos that week.

* Accountability

How do we know there's trouble in paradise? "Sources say." Really. Sources. Why do I have a hard time believing these sources? Maybe it's because the sources they actually bother to mention by name have nothing to do with Tom or Katie, and are openly speculating.

That's a dangerous trend, because you can find someone who will say just about anything for you. Some of the terms to watch out for are "media watchdog" or "celebrity observer." Really, aren't we all celebrity observers? I bought this magazine. That makes me a celebrity observer.

* Peer standards

I'm picking on two magazines. Are all magazines the same? Honestly, no. I think Time Magazine or Newsweek generally have higher standards, particularly when covering "hard news" as opposed to entertainment journalism.

"Entertainment journalism" is one of those weird terms that gets more unsettling the more you think about it. To me, it's like that optical illusion where it's either a vase or two women looking at each other. Is it journalism about entertainment, or entertaining journalism?

That's probably a whole other lecture. But I think we obviously don't hold Entertainment Tonight or Access Hollywood up to the same standards as 60 Minutes. As an audience, we watch and we see, "This is a show about celebrities," and just assume and accept that most of what we're watching is manufactured. Where it gets awkward is where you have an actual news person like Diane Sawyer going with Brad Pitt to Africa to talk about the famine. It's not really a news story; it's not really news. And I think it makes it harder to take Diane Sawyer seriously when she's reporting actual news.

Now, one of the things that's not readily apparent to people who live and work outside of the film industry is that Hollywood is a really small town. Everyone calls each other by their first names, even if they don't know each other. And we have two small-town newspapers: Variety and The Hollywood Reporter.

If you work in the industry, you subscribe to both of them, and they're delivered every morning. Variety in particular is known for its own insider lingo that makes it almost unreadable. They call it Slanguage. Premieres are called preems; presidents are called prexys; and no one ever quits a job, they ankle. Their most famous headline was from 1935: "Sticks Nix Hicks Pix." Which meant that people in the Midwest weren't attending movies about farmers.

The Hollywood Reporter, on the other hand, is written in English.

Both newspapers have web sites, where you can get most of the same content you get in the physical paper. But the Hollywood Reporter also has a blog, written by its Deputy Editor, Anne Thompson. The blog doesn't really have full stories, but rather little blips, paragraphs. Like, well, a blog.

About a week ago, I read something on the blog that sort of troubled me.

Thanks to Stax, IGN FilmForce's resident Bond maven, for this link to a description of the new James Bond script. If you don't want to read the spoilers, don't go there!

And it included a link to a review of the script for the new James Bond movie.

Now, if you've been paying attention to when I started this lecture-type monologue, you'll remember that I kind of have an issue with script reviews. I don't think they're a good thing. To me, it's like calling someone's baby ugly off of an ultrasound.

I was upset by the script review of Charlie on Ain't It Cool News, and that was a bogus review. Here's the Deputy Editor of The Hollywood Reporter linking to a script review. I didn't think that was right. So I called her.

And her first question was, "Is the link broken? Did it not work?"

Yeah, Anne, it works. But I don't think it should be there at all.

I asked her if she would have run the same piece in the printed version of The Hollywood Reporter. She said no, of course not. But this was a blog, and blogs are different.

And that's when we got to the heart of the matter: she envied the blogs. On some level, she envied Ain't It Cool News, because they were able to report on rumors and speculation without the same burdens as The Hollywood Reporter. The trade papers have an unspoken contract with the readers that they are only going to report the verifiable facts. The blogs of the world don't, and because of that, they can get away with a lot more.

We had a good conversation about her decision to include the piece, and the challenging distinction between capital-J journalism and what happens on the internet. Ultimately, she revised the piece to remove the link.

But what I didn't tell her, but I'm going to tell you now, is that I think it was incredibly unprofessional for her to have posted that piece in the first place. It was ridiculous that it took me calling her for her to agree to take it down.

Coming back to the issue of professionalism: There's no question that she's a professional journalist in the classic sense. She's a paid editor at one of the most respected industry newspapers. She can't turn around and say, oh, but in this context, I'm just a blogger. You can't hold me to the same standards.

That's really Thesis #3:

You don't get to pick when you're going to be professional, and when you're going to be amateur.

Maybe the best way to prove this is to think back to when you were in high school geometry class. Which for some of you, was like, last year. Remember, there are two kinds of proofs? There are direct proofs, where you follow from your postulates and axioms to prove something, and then there's the indirect proof. For the indirect proof, you assume the opposite, then follow it through until it reveals itself to be illogical.

This is an indirect proof.

So let's say, okay, you **do** get to decide when you're going to be an amateur, and when you're going to be a professional. Let's follow that logic through.

When would you choose to be a professional? Well, probably when you're doing your best work. The work you feel confident about. Good about. It's easy to be a professional when everyone says you rock.

What do you get out of identifying yourself as a professional? Well, sometimes you get access. If you're a professional photographer, you might get access to a news event that an amateur wouldn't. You might be paid. As a professional screenwriter, I get paid pretty well for writing witty dialogue. A professional actor gets paid a lot more for saying the witty dialogue I wrote (but that's another issue).

As a professional, you also get respect of your peers. You get to sit at the grown-up table, rather than the kiddie table. In terms of life-satisfaction, that can be worth a lot.

Clearly, there are a lot of reasons why you want to be considered a professional.

When would you choose to be an amateur? Well, probably the moments in which you obviously suck, either because you don't know what you're doing, or you're just not very good at it. Or at least in the moments when people are criticizing you. You'd say, "Hey, what do you expect? I'm only an amateur."

That sounds like *Ain't It Cool News*. You're using amateur status as an excuse.

You're basically saying, "Don't judge me."

And here's where this indirect proof falls apart: **People will always judge you.** You can't control that. You can't control what scale they're going to judge you on, or which criteria are most important.

The only thing you can control is your work. And that's why your work, all of your work, has to be professional.

And what do I mean by professional?

Back to the five things that I don't have a good acronym for:

* Presentation

If your writing is rambling and incoherent and ungrammatical, people are going to judge you on that.

* Accuracy

If you're flat-out wrong, that matters. And that's not just in the sense of journalism. If you're drawing conclusions that aren't backed by the data, that's a problem. If you're studying human cloning, you can go from being the hero of South Korea to its greatest villain in about a week. Trust me, that guy isn't going, "No, you don't understand, I'm an amateur cloner."

* Consistency

Can people count on you? I'm sure everyone in this room has had to do a group project. And there's always that one guy who doesn't pull his weight. Shows up late. Didn't get that thing written quite yet. Don't be that guy. You need to show up, on time, and be ready.

* Accountability

Do you stand behind what you say, and what you do? It's really easy to have strong opinions. It's a lot harder to live by them.

* Meeting Peer Standards

Going back to Thanksgiving, once you graduate to the adult table, you really can't go back to the kiddie table. You can't throw food any more, or they're going to stop inviting you.

So my thesis was, "You don't get to decide when you're going to be professional, and when you're going to be an amateur." We can shorten that: "You don't get to be an amateur at all."

Right now, a lot of you are thinking, crap, that's a lot of pressure. When I graduate, when I'm in the real world, I'm going to have to be, like, professional.

And I'm saying, no. This IS the real world. You have to be professional right now.

Because everything you're writing, be it your English paper or your profile on FaceBook, that all has your name on it. It all stands for you. And in the age of Google, everything you've ever written, even that snarky comment you left on the message board, is linked back to you.

So you have to ask yourself: a year from now, five years from now, how am I going to feel when someone asks me about that thing I wrote?

Truly, honestly, I don't mean to be Mr. Doom and Gloom. If you feel like writing 1500 words about your cat in your blog, go for it. I'm just asking you, pleading with you, to spellcheck. Mr. Whiskers deserves it. Tuck in your virtual shirt and take even the frivolous stuff seriously.

Let me talk about two examples from my own experience:

The very first script I wrote was called Here and Now. It was a romantic tragedy set in Boulder, Colorado. It was your classically overwritten first script, where I tried to cram in everything I knew about everything, because there's that sense of, maybe I'm never going to write another script, so I better put it all in this one.

The script turned out well, and was ultimately good enough to get me an agent, and eventually got me a paid job writing a script for somebody else.

Now when I go back and read the script. I wince. I'm a better writer now than I was then. But I'm not ashamed of that script, because it's professional. Presentation-wise, there's no egregious typos. It's accurate, at least about the emotional details. It's consistent; in screenwriting, there are a few acceptable ways of formatting things, and any of them are okay, as long as you pick one and stick with it. I still feel accountable for the script. I don't send the script out any more as a sample, but if someone's read it, I'll still happily talk about my choices.

And finally, this is the important thing: the script met peer standards. Even though I was a newbie screenwriter, I wasn't trying to write for other newbie screenwriters. I was writing as if I were a professional screenwriter, and I wanted people to read it that way.

Second example: Currently I maintain a website, basically a blog, about screenwriting. The little tagline on it is, "A ton of useful information about screenwriting," which is hopefully true. I set up the website because when I was an aspiring screenwriter -- notice, I said "aspiring" not "amateur" -- it was really hard to find good information

about screenwriting and how to do it. I started writing a weekly question-and-answer column for the Internet Movie Database, and ultimately used those columns to form the basis of the site.

I update things about twice a week, and I really take it quite seriously. It's not my job; I don't get paid anything; I don't even have those little Google ads on the site. But I'm really professional on the site, in all five senses of what I mean by professional. I want it to look good. I check my spelling. I check that all the links work. I try to make sure that I'm giving consistent advice from week to week. And as peer standards, I'm not looking at other screenwriter sites, but the most helpful sites in any other discipline. I try to live up to those standards.

And I do that because it has my name on it. I think you need to look at your name as sort of your brand. Just like the Walt Disney Corporation doesn't want Mickey Mouse portrayed with a bloody cleaver in his puffy white hand, I don't want my name associated with bad, unprofessional writing.

All you have is your work. So do your best work. At all times.

In closing, I want to say that my criticisms of Ain't It Cool News, or Us Weekly or crappy blogs aren't meant to be disheartening. I think we're actually living in one of the most exciting times in media history. The barriers to entry have never been lower. You can make a short film with a \$500 camera, and post it on YouTube.com, and be a worldwide sensation the next day. With a blog, you can respond to media in ways you never could before, and your readers can respond back.

I think the closest parallel to where we're at was the early 90's, when you suddenly had laser printers. I was a graphic designer, so I was in heaven. But I think we all remember what happened, don't we? Suddenly, there were a lot of crappy newsletters. And we learned a painful lesson: Just because you can make a newsletter with 50 fonts on the cover, doesn't mean you should.

So I guess what I'm asking, what I'm pleading for, if you can read my subtext, is that we approach these new tools not like amateurs, but like professionals. Unlike that

crappy newsletter, which got recycled, your blog post is going to be around forever. FOREVER. Historians will read it and wonder, "Jesus. Didn't they have spell check?"

No matter what career you end up choosing, you will be a writer for the rest of your life. Make a promise to yourself tonight that you'll always be a professional one.

Thank you.