

Bridging practical screenwriting craft with academic concepts in the Short experimental film *Wild Camping*.

Wild Camping (King: 2025) is a ten minute short micro-budget film I wrote and produced, inspired by the idea that “Screen-writing research is facing a dichotomy of the screenwriter who embodies both the role of a narrative specialist and that of a visual storytelling poet“ (Reinola, 2023 p.69). Avoiding sync dialogue relying on voice over, allows the images to ‘speak’ to facilitate an underlying Emotional Rhythm that conveys audiences or readers on an imaginative journey. Emotional Rhythm is the ghost in the narrative machine.” (David, 2024 p.1)

“Contemporary screenwriting theory concentrated its analysis and methodology on plot, character and story.” (Crawford, 2016 p.5). Although my short film has a defined narrative plot supported by an insight into the main character’s thoughts, the intended objective is to make clear the emotional arc of her journey from denial of agency to committing to environmental action, which is why my focus was to root the story in what I describe as a ‘*poetic theme*’, to elicit emotional and psychological responses that are habitually associated with a sense of the cinematic.

The central character Alice’s decision to defy Kali and move from an apologist for our modern dependency on oil to becoming an eco-activist is a psychological/emotional shift rather than a ‘plot twist’.

Theme

Waldeback states that the structure of screenplays involves two levels: ‘order of events (plot); [and] emotional character arc (story)’ (2006, 21). On a similar vein, Batty writes: “A screenplay can come alive when it has a strong thematic spine, guided by what I call the protagonist’s emotional journey” (Batty 2011).

Could it be, that it is in fact those elements of the story/emotional arc *that relate directly to the universal theme* of the work, that builds and creates the emotion?

This is what I assume Batty is alluding to when he writes: “The invisible hand of the screenwriter thus physically guides the audience through an emotional journey, where action is used to orchestrate feeling, resulting in thematic resonance.” (Batty, 2015 p.116)

To be clear, a theme in this context is not ‘Love vs Hate’ but instead the more tangible ‘Can love overcome hate?’ - as this is a specific dramatic question that unites an audience through a shared experience, creating empathy, simply because most of us have asked that question, and lived that question. We feel it. And when we relate to a character’s experience of grappling with that dramatic argument/theme, especially when that evokes fear, then we have empathy.

This may be why we can care about reprehensible characters like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. We understand and feel his guilt and torment even if we have never murdered anyone, because his emotional pain is relatable.

Poetic Theme

I suspected that the power lies not in the theme itself, but in our ability to innately connect emotional to a universal theme. Therefore, *Poetic Theme* is simply the use of theme that both manifests a dramatic argument through the narrative, but that also “contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature”. (Shelley, 2009)

I contend that the emotive impact of the script was influenced by the fact that I chose a political eco-satire as my genre along with in the familiar horror genre. Theme can often incorporate elements of social change and activism, which can provide an additional layer of emotional and psychological connection with an audience. These are on one level universal themes, but they also impact the audience on a personal individual level. They are concrete, not abstract.

This duality of poetic theme - the universal and the personal combined - is part of it's power. “The creation of actions, according to the unchangeable forms of human nature.” (Shelley, 2009)

“Like all works of art, a film is a unity in which every object relates to every other image or object.” (McKee 2003 p.401) Thus the visual images in *Wild Camping* of the dead mother's body connect to her skull not just to show she has died, but to emotionally connect the audience to her influence on her daughter as if speaking from the grave. The fantasy nature of the film - where humans addicted to oil consume petro-laden everyday products - allows those images to also take on a symbolic meaning.

The use of incongruent sound (the lively music played over the rabbit in the blender scene) is another way to play upon the concept of poetic theme. Chion's writing on didactic counterpoint vs anempathetic music, where anempathetic music, "is put to an intentionally emotional use and works in immediate, profound, and archaic ways, by passing "reading" or interpretation." (Chion 2009, p.432) is at work here. Apart from 'shock value', this scene cements that Kali is the villain in this story who we want Alice to reject, emotionally charging Alice's thematic arc from acceptance/denial to rejection/action. The incongruence of the music pushes the audience into a more reflective place, where "the term 'I hear' is no longer strictly appropriate. Nor 'I see' for the visual. For both we introduce a new uniform formula: 'I feel'....(Eisenstein, 1988 p.186).

But we also want the audience to 'think' - as the intended impact of a poetic thematic narrative is closely tied with the core dramatic question combining feeling with thought, enhancing the "perceptual-emotional conflict that incongruent film music forces us to endure" by analysing "how audio-visual incongruence works on our multi-modal cognitive processing, interpretation and emotional evaluation." (Willemsen and Kiss, 2015 p.104)

The short film *Wild Camping* utilises a combination of incongruent/anempathetic sound, images and voice over in service to a thematically-driven narrative that combined I refer to as '*poetic theme*', with the aim to drive an Emotional Rhythm - "the ghost in the narrative machine." (David, 2024 p.1).

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