

» The 6+1 Commandments of Storytelling

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Man has had the need to create stories from the beginning of time, even before the development of a language, through rock paintings that were placed on the walls of the caves in which they lived. Man developed various ways to convey these stories through the use of pictures, words and scrolls and was able to write stories and plays thanks to the printing press. Man invented cinema, radio and TV to continue conveying these stories. And now, in the 21st Century, thanks to the Internet and the mobile revolution the most popular contents on the network are once again... good stories.

But, what are the commandments of a good storytelling? What principles should be applied in order to achieve compelling stories, stories that move us and are important for us as an audience?

The bestselling book in the last 50 years, with 3,900 million copies, is not the Harry Potter series (400 million copies), but the Bible. A thorough analysis shows that, particularly as regards the New Testament, the story has engaged believers, agnostics and even atheists for over two thousand years.



This universal storytelling takes place in a specific historical **context**: during the rule of the Roman Empire in Judea, Jewish leaders did not want any political and religious changes. A story whose first **audience** was comprised of the Apostles, those who would ultimately travel around the world to teach the stories they shared with the main protagonist, Jesus of Nazareth. A role model **protagonist**, who embodies the values that everybody seeks to represent and whose mission on earth was to solve a great **conflict** for humankind: saving the world from its sins. The way in which the story is told has a clear **structure**: it begins with the classical "once upon a time, a child was born in a manger" and proceeds to portray his life until he is sentenced to death. The main **Idea** behind this story is the very essence of Christianity: love thy neighbor. At the end of the story, when we see the protagonist suffering and dying on the cross, the magical or **amazing** moment arrives, the resurrection of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins.

But the best part of the story, the most amazing element, is the fact that it is now being conveyed exactly in the same manner as two thousand years ago. A similar **context** marked by a Church that needs a political, economic and religious change to meet the challenges of the new era. A **protagonist**: the Pope – the representative of God on Earth – who seeks to restore the values of Jesus (the Son of God). An **audience** to whom the daily messages and the story are not only conveyed from the pulpit but also from Twitter – 11 million Spanish followers, 7.5 in English and even 400,000 followers do it in... Latin –. A **conflict** based on the unstoppable fall in the number of Christian believers and their detachment towards Christianity. A similar storytelling **structure**: "There was once a humble man who had no intention of ruling on Earth... and one day... he expelled the money changers (pedophiles) from the temple... and one day he claimed: Who am I to judge the prostitutes (homosexuals)?" This new story to restore Christianity revolves around the same main **Idea**: love thy neighbor. And the most magical, the most **amazing** thing is that we all are excited to see how this story will unfold.

If we want to mirror the success of this narrative formula, we need to thoroughly analyze the 6+1 commandments of Storytelling.

I. CONTEXT

In his theory of **Narrative Paradigm**¹, **Walter Fisher** explains the reasons for which we choose certain stories over others in our daily lives and mentions two concepts: coherence and

¹ Fisher, Walter R., Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

fidelity. Coherence relates to the internal context of the story. If a naturalist novel written by Émile Zola starred a character who was always followed by yellow butterflies, we readers would reject the idea, as the internal context of the work collides with the aforementioned situation. However, if the same situation took place in a magical realism work, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, its very internal context would make the situation coherent and, thus, integrate it into as a part of the storytelling. Nevertheless, there is a further contextual dimension that influences the relation between the story and the socio-historical context in which it takes place. This external context is directly related to another concept that Fisher defined: fidelity, which refers to whether people will feel as if the story were true (not whether it is actually true); a key element to understand phenomena such as propaganda. In this sense, Nazism, and particularly Hitler, are a clear example on how to use the context (or even how to create one) for the storytelling to be frighteningly effective, in this case, for the German society of the aforementioned era.

2. AUDIENCE

Picturing an audience is incredibly difficult. An abstract mass of potential viewers that will capture our storytelling, handle it, digest it and, in many cases, send it back almost untouched. And yet, we cannot create any story without first considering who will be our potential target audience. It is here, in the definition of the audiences, where a theory developed for another purpose becomes particularly relevant, as it has a direct use for the issue at hand. The approach in question is the theory on participation inequality – **Jakob Nielsen**², developed in 2006 to explain the behavior of online communities. According to Nielsen, in most online communities 90 % of the members merely act as “voyeurs”; 9 % make scarce contributions to the online conversation and 1 % are responsible for most of the activity registered within the community. This theory of participation inequality also helps us better understand how to face the problem of abstract audiences in order to build a sound storytelling.

Based on the 1/9/90 structure, and without disregarding the 9 and 90 groups, our storytelling needs to mainly focus on the 1%. Contrary to what it may seem, it is not about creating niche stories. Certainly, our stories need to work on all three levels, but if the 1 % responsible for the creation of most contents are not moved by it, our messages will hardly penetrate into the next 9 %, much less the 90% domain. In traditional advertising, this was solved by purchasing as many potential audience spaces as possible, trying to increase the exposure points of the 90 % and, often, dismissing the importance of the 9 and 1 groups. The truth is that for YouTube audiences, for those who openly express themselves on the network, the aforementioned approach is no longer viable, since they are ready to ignore everything we convey and which they find uninteresting.

3. PROTAGONIST

The protagonist of a story – whether real or fictional – is based on a triumvirate similar to the Holy Trinity, three and one at a time. **Identity, values and motivation** are the three main elements in the creation of a solid protagonist for the storytelling. As viewers, we permanently need to understand the origin of the characters, how their identities evolve from the original specific values (hero) or lack thereof (antihero). These values are the basis of the fundamental motivation of the protagonist which needs to attract the attention of the audiences. As an example, let us analyze the movie *Up*³ (Pixar, 2009). In a remarkable silent sequence, we witness the life of Carl, the protagonist, from the moment in which Ellie becomes his wife. In under 5 minutes, the movie tells us everything we

need to know about the protagonist, preparing us for our epic journey along Carl travelling in his house by using inflatable balloons in order to reach the furthestmost corner of the world and land his home at a specific mountain. Without establishing the identity of the character, that is, showing his values of commitment to the love of his life and his obstinacy, Carl would be just another grumpy old man who does incomprehensible things. As audiences we feel identified, above all, with the protagonists who seek and not necessarily with those who find.

On the other hand, our need to understand the protagonist is so important, that when the creator explicitly plays around the concept of origin and hides information, we feel compelled to come up with something. This is the case of *The Joker* in **The Dark Knight** (Christopher Nolan, 2008). Whenever the Joker talks about the story behind his scars (the storytelling of his origin) he tells a different story, which generates an intentional feeling of discomfort in the viewer, who does not understand his motivations and thus feels uneasy. This fact, coupled with our need to understand the motivations of the protagonist, has turned the Internet into a huge library of theories and urban legends about the origin of Nolan's Joker, even to the point of suggesting that he may be the narrator of *The Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999). This example brings us back to the concept of values: the Joker is an abstraction, the absolute rejection of values, the human representation of primal chaos and, as such, a perfect character to develop a story.

Many current protagonists of American TV series are, above everything, antiheroes, characters that are not only in conflict with their values, but in many cases have none at all. Walter White, Don Draper and, particularly, Tony Soprano have ambiguous and captivating stances in relation to their values. Since the very credits of *The Sopranos*, through which we accompany Tony from New York to New Jersey inside of his car, we become partners of the mafia leader and will be part of everything he does, including murders, abductions and violations. Something similar happens in *The Privileges*, written by Jonathan Dee, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. In this work, from the very first pages, the author puts us next to a lovely couple who, at the end, will transform into a duo with questionable morals (and so will we) in the pre-economic crisis context. We need to feel close to the protagonists of the storytelling, either cheering for or against them, or otherwise none of the elements will make sense.

4. CONFLICT

It is often said that without conflict there is no drama. But, what is really the conflict in a story? Can it be understood without analyzing it in a specific structure? The conflict is the element of the storytelling which “stresses” the story, creating a tension that needs to be solved. The conflict level depends on the context in which the story takes place. It might be a fire in a disaster movies, the betrayal of Jesus Christ in the New Testament or missing a train in a romantic movie; but, without conflict, the story becomes loose like the broken string of a violin. The best stories are challenges shared by the audience and the protagonist and, without conflict, stories become mere speeches and lose their captivating power. In the game of balance between order and chaos that storytelling always represents, conflict is the element that gives it a meaning.

The conflict usually takes place at a specific moment of the story (which will be analyzed in the section below), but some creators also use it as a mechanism to attract attention. From the very first frame of *Touch of Evil*⁵, by Orson Welles, we are surprised to see how a character places a bomb (or the icon of a bomb with dynamite and a timer) in the trunk of a car. The

² Nielsen, Jakob, *Participation Inequality: Encouraging more users to contribute*.

³ *Up*, (Pete Docter y Bob Peterson, 2009).

⁴ Dee, Jonathan. *The Privileges*. Editorial Anagrama, 2013.

⁵ Welles, Orson. *Touch of Evil*, 1958.

opening sequence shot is the perfect definition of a conflict and also the best illustration of what **Hitchcock** defended, suspense implies providing information to the viewer that the protagonist is unaware of. After witnessing how the bomb is placed, we follow the convertible carrying the explosive device through the city. The camera no longer focuses on the car but starts following a couple (the protagonists, as we will find out later), and makes us forget what we already know. Then it goes back to the car, then to the couple and the bomb goes off while the latter kiss. Some creators have turned conflict into a genre in itself, as illustrated by two American mainstream cinema figures such as Christopher Nolan and Michael Bay. As regards the former, he has sometimes gilded the lily by successfully creating movies that link looped conflicts (something like a slapstick thriller). The latter represents the opposite, a creator who abuses conflict and discards the rest of the structure, breaking any possible connection with the most sophisticated audience, unable to feel connected with the motivations of one-dimensional characters lost in a storm of conflicts.

“A story is an absolute potentiality, a mystery full of possibilities”

discoveries. When Don Draper –Mad Men– announces his idea to sell a machine to project slides⁸, the story he conveys becomes a great bridge towards the concept of “nostalgia” as the overarching element. When Obama talks about the story of a young U.S. entrepreneur who set out to rescue the miners of Chile, he is actually describing a protagonist with whom we can empathize in a specific context. He is starting a journey, marked by an epic classical structure which slowly leads towards a specific idea while the story unfolds: “**We do big things**”⁹. As regards the famous speech made by Obama, storytelling makes us accomplices of a story we thought revolved around a specific character, when it actually talked about the supposed nature of the population of a country and, consequently,

its leader. We have already mentioned before that the most effective political propaganda is pure storytelling and, as such, in order to convey its messages it plays with our emotions and our willingness to listen to these stories.

+1: AMAZEMENT

Once the six commandments of storytelling have been analyzed and understood, we need to emphasize that they merely exist to be broken, torn and manipulated. Creating implies ignoring the marked standards, but we will only be able to ignore them if we first know them. The truth is there is a bonus track that can neither be analyzed nor controlled. A specific mystery that could be defined, from the perspective of the audience, as the “surprise”.

A story can meet all the aforementioned steps and, yet, be unable to move its audiences, generate that feeling that is closely related to the mystery of what is being told. A story is an absolute potentiality, a mystery full of possibilities. **J.J. Abrams**, one of the greatest contemporary storytelling creators, explained it in his Ted Talk¹⁰ “The Mystery Box”, in which he compared conveying messages with a magic mystery box that has been kept closed for years and whose contents are unknown to us. From the perspective of the audience, this is what the online video **The Spielberg Face**¹¹ describes by showing that all characters in the films of Steven Spielberg share the same look at least once in all of his stories when they feel absorbed by what they are seeing and stare in wordless wonder at something that they do not quite understand. A look that is similar to that of the audiences moved by the storytelling of Spielberg.

We began this paper with a 6+1 sum and shall conclude with another one: 2+2. In his Ted Talk on storytelling, **Andrew Stanton**¹², director of marvelous works such as Wall-e or Finding Nemo, states that all great storytellers build their storytelling based on 2+2 equations, i.e., not directly providing the answer – 4 – to audiences. The decision to carry out the aforementioned sum to complete the journey shall lie in the hands of the viewer/reader/audiences.

5. STRUCTURE

In the 19th Century **Gustav Freytag**⁶ developed his famous theory on the basic structure of dramatic tension which would later become the Freytag's pyramid. According to this theory, dramatic tension is structured as follows: exposition, incident (conflict in our list), climax, falling action, resolution and the end. While Freytag based his theory on the analysis of Greek drama and Shakespeare's tragedies, contemporary theorists have identified these structural elements in Pixar's movies. Freytag's pyramid always appears in Pixar's⁷ movies as follows:

Once upon a time ... every day ..., one day ... because of that, ... because of that, ... until finally ...

The “once upon a time” is the introduction of our hero, the protagonist of the story who we already know and to whom we will need to relate. The “every day” is essential, both to increase empathy with the protagonist and to prepare for the arrival of the conflict, marked by the “one day”. From there on, a proper storytelling does not merely connect events and actions, but is marked by a random event which entails both “because of that”, “until finally” the action is solved and a transformation takes place. The structure of a good story is a journey towards the resolution that somehow transforms both the protagonist and the audience.

6. IDEA

This transformative resolution that a storytelling always has is connected to the need of an idea. Beyond the delight of telling or listening to a story is the fact that, in reality, we tell stories to convey ideas. In this sense, storytelling promotes ideas that, if well-connected to the rest of the elements, become shining

⁶ Freytag, Gustav. *Die Technik des dramas*, 1983.

⁷ Pixar Storytelling Rules: Essence of Structure. Bloop Animation, 2014.

⁸ Mad Men. Season 1, Episodio 13. “The Wheel”.

⁹ Obama, Speech in the State of the Union Debate. January 25, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oct_MoNY2H0

¹⁰ Abrams, J. J. *The Mystery Box*. Ted Talk 2008 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpjVgF5JDq8>

¹¹ Keyframe: *The Spielberg Face*. Fandor, 2001. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS5W4RxGv4s>

¹² Stanton, Andrew. *The clues to a great story*. Ted Talk, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxDwieKpawg>



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