

The Documentary-Style “doculogue” and the making of

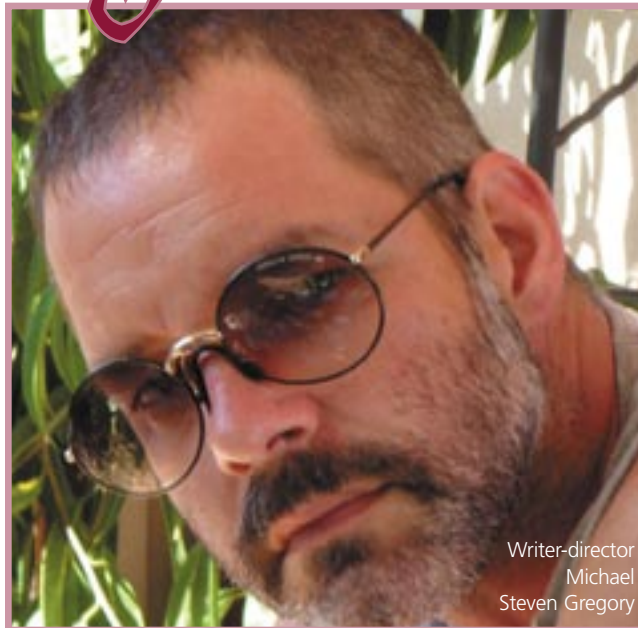
“We, the Screenwriter”

by **Kate McCallum**

“I feel like your responsibility is to try to appeal to the highest common denominator as opposed to the lowest common denominator, which is much easier.”

That quote is scribe Daniel Pyne (*The Sum of All Fears*, *The Manchurian Candidate*) eloquently explaining the role you, the screenwriters, play in the creation of the myriad of content which makes its way to the screen, be it big, small, direct-to-video, webcast or, now, even portably delivered through our cell phones.

As emergent technology continues to create new outlets and formats for writers and content creators to explore and master, there is one thing that is eternal: the art of good storytelling, or provocative narrative in the case of the documentary or non-fiction content. The creation of stories or content that moves us, touches us, entertains us or informs us in compelling, creative and innovative ways is the great challenge writers take on each and every time they are faced with a white page.



Writer-director
Michael
Steven Gregory

This column has traditionally been dedicated to dissecting and tracking the process of creating, selling and writing for the screen, from the spark of an initial idea to the final product. In this issue we will examine a topic close to the bone by featuring the creation of writer-director Michael Steven Gregory’s *We, The Screenwriter*, a highly informative, documentary-style “doculogue” which presents a frenetic, fast-paced portrait of the person, process and profession of screenwriting in today’s Hollywood. Specifically, this film features 16 professional screenwriters who together have combined credits that span features and television, including *Air Bud*; *Any Given Sunday*; *Battlestar Galactica (2004)*; *Cleopatra*; *Constantine*; *Hill Street Blues*; *Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang*; *The Land of Oz*; *Lethal Weapon*; *The Long Kiss Goodnight*; *The Last Boy*

Scout; *Mission: Impossible 2*; *Moby Dick*; *Pacific Heights*; *Perfect Romance*; *Resurrecting The Champ*; *Roswell*; *Role of a Lifetime*; *The Silver Surfer*; *Spawn*; *Spider-Man Unlimited*; *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; *The Sum of All Fears*; *Tales From The Crypt*; *Timeline* and more.

Michael Steven Gregory delves deeply into his own professional experiences in the making of this film. As an independent filmmaker and screenwriter of diverse material ranging from mainstream dramas to biopics to documentaries to animated action-adventures and videogames, he has also been a writer on a variety of TV series for outlets like Fox, UPN and HBO, such as *Spawn*, *Spider-Man Unlimited* and *The Silver Surfer*. He is currently attached as either a writer, director or producer on several projects in development, including *Behind The Badge*, *Spooks* and an untitled mini-series. In 1996 he made the documentary *We, The Writer*, of which best-selling author Gayle Lynds said, “It’s the finest film I’ve seen about the complexity, simplicity, madness and complete logic of writers and writing.” He is also president of The American Academy of Arts; has

written, taught or overseen the production of hundreds of student films; runs the annual Indie Filmmaker's Bootcamp; and is executive director of the Southern California Writers' Conference, which has facilitated nearly \$3 million worth of book and screen deals for new authors over its 20-year history. *We, The Screenwriter* is his latest film.

scr(i)pt: *You started out as a screenwriter and now you are also a director and producer. Why did you chose to make We, The Screenwriter?*

Michael Steven Gregory: Because writers tend to work in isolation from the writing community, screenwriters most of all. You write a book, and you can give the manuscript to your friends or family to read and they get it. You can discuss it. You can critique it. Everybody knows how to read a book. Screenwriters don't have that luxury. Screenwriters have about 80,000 words less to cram the emotional and intellectual breadth of a mainstream novel into your average feature film, even less for an hour or half-hour of television. Few people outside the industry can read a script and assess it from an empirically qualified perspective that takes into account not only the execution, but also the production challenges and everything else that must be factored in to determine its commercial viability. I wanted to empower writers with what I hope is the insight, and often contradictory approaches of working professionals addressing the art, craft and business of what we do and how, and perhaps even more importantly, the who we are and why.

scr(i)pt: *Just who did you discover to be we, the professional screenwriter?*

MSG: We're the Special Forces of the creative writing world! Screenwriters are often exceptionally talented storytellers working in an exceedingly competitive field requiring uniquely honed skills to satisfy very specific objectives on which a great deal of money, talent, faith and passion is invested. But unlike novelists, who have authorial stamp and recognition for their

work, our efforts tend to get upstaged by the contributions of the director, actors or special effects people when it comes to the end realization. Most of us tend to work in excruciating anonymity.

Unlike *We, The Writer*, which I did in 1996 exploring the process and business of primarily book authors who are able to control the end result of their process, *We, The Screenwriter* deals with those of us who rarely can, but still hold out hope that the end result will in some manner resemble the movie in our mind's eye that we first set out to write.

scr(i)pt: *How did you choose which topics to discuss?*

MSG: Interviews with writers are typically the *60 Minutes*, celebrity-oriented type of profile conducted by non-writers asking the same old questions which often fail to get to the real meat and spirit of what we do—the stuff we get excited about. As with *We, The Writer*, the topics resulted from a group of writer colleagues I'd asked to list 10 questions they'd most like to be asked or ask another writer. The objective was to address the issues that nobody was there for us to turn to when we first started out. Given the density of information and the fairly intense style of the movie, my hope is that it'll prove as uniquely valuable to screenwriters, or anybody interested in the creative process, as the first film, which is used in writing and M.F.A. programs across the country.

scr(i)pt: *You call the movie a "doculogue" versus a documentary. What's the difference?*

MSG: When it comes to docs, it's easy for the writer-director to shape the path of the film by going in with an agenda. Michael Moore, for example, is a master at this approach. With me, at least on the *We Write* films, I prefer to let the conversation dictate the shape of the story. I don't use any additional narrative other than what comes from the writers' voices. I love oral history. I love conversation and the rhythm of dialogue and language. I believe that no number of how-to books combined

QUOTES FROM *We, The Screenwriter*

You can usually tell in the first few pages if the writer knows his craft or not.

— Ronald D. Moore (*Battlestar Galactica*; *Mission: Impossible 2*)

When you're a woman, you need to be not only somewhat talented and directed and disciplined, but you also need to convince [them] that you're serious.

— Deborah Serra (*Snow White: A Tale of Terror*; *Going for Broke*)

I think starting from character is not a bad place to go, but I've realized that it takes a lot more than just coming up with a compelling character to create a screenplay.

— Aaron Mendelsohn (*Air Bud*; *Cat Tail*)

[If] an executive puts a roadblock up, you'll just write another [script]. You can always write another story, but what are they going to do?

— Frank Cappello (*Timeline*; *Constantine*)

Because most of the people in power are much younger than they used to be, most of them really don't know their movies.

— Anton Diether (*Cleopatra*; *Moby Dick*)

The only thing I've written that I'm really, really proud of what's on the screen is the movie I directed.

— Allison Burnett (*Autumn in New York*; *Perfect Romance*)

If you have a love affair with language, why not use it in a screenplay as well?

— Shane Black (*Lethal Weapon*; *Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang*)

There are no rules, and they're strictly enforced in Hollywood.

— Sharon Y. Cobb (*On Hostile Ground*; *Lighthouse Hill*)

might reveal to the writer that one crucial bit of information that can make all the difference [between] her work's succeeding or not. Yet a casual talk over a drink in a bar, over a meal or coffee, somebody says something about writing that contains this priceless little morsel of an aside in passing. Suddenly, your world opens up, and the secrets of the universe are unveiled. I love that.

scr(i)pt: *How did you structure or "write" it?*

MSG: Well, *We, The Screenwriter* is constructed very much like a boozy, late-night conversation between writers. It's an organic experience that I trusted would materially reveal itself as we moved along in its making. Each writer profiled was interviewed separately at a different location. I did only four interviews at a time, got into the editing room, and listened to what was discussed in an effort to discover what possible new topics might provide fodder in which to delve deeper; then, I worked them into the next round of interviews. After each four interviews, the process repeated until all 16 were done, the several hundred pages of conversation transcribed, and a structure formulated which best communicated the illusion of a seamless dialogue among them.

scr(i)pt: *I am always impressed and intrigued with all the choices the writer must make. I saw your notebook full of the interview transcriptions. How did you begin to dissect all that information into some kind of story structure?*

MSG: We had 42 different topics to pull from when we got into post—impossible to squeeze in under two hours. Distilling that down to the 30 topics we left in the movie without the benefit of onscreen questions was the challenge since often multiple threads are being discussed simultaneously. That's why I love "big" conversation. Two people at this end of the table are discussing this, three people here discuss that, somebody there picks up on a line here which reminds him of something else to riff on, and suddenly there's another layer.

Who's talking about what and when, and how do we segue from "determining the final draft" to "dealing with studio notes" to "what agents really do for you" without institutionalizing the audience—that's the challenge. So, I start the process like I do with a regular script, constructing the story in broad strokes and major beats; then I connect the dots spanning the three acts, which in this case are categorized as The Person, The Process and The Profession.

scr(i)pt: *You've been involved deeply in the art of writing for 25 years as well as helping others learn the craft, hone their skills and learn the business of writing. What do you think this project explores that brings something new to light, something even seasoned writers would want to know about?*

MSG: There is no single right way to write a screenplay, only an infinite number of wrong ways. Too often, I believe, writers tend to dismiss the perspective of other writers who don't work in the genre they work in, or that have a style they feel bears little resemblance to the type of stories they write themselves. Coupled with this whole "how to write screenplays" cottage industry that's formed over the past decade is all these books and seminars by people "teaching" how to write scripts that they can't seem to make a living at writing themselves. [It is] fueled in part by a lotto-ticket mentality—and I think many screenwriters undermine their potential by latching onto all these ridiculous absolutes circulating that are forged on nothing but

personal profit. "You can't do this." "My way is the only way." "Buy my belief." Sharon Cobb sums it up nicely in the movie: "There are no rules in Hollywood, and they are strictly enforced."

scr(i)pt: *Is that why you don't disclose the identity of each of the screenwriters until the end?*

MSG: Yes, that's a deliberate choice so somebody who writes romantic comedy, for example, doesn't dismiss the weight of what Shane Black (*Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang*), who writes action-thrillers, or Ron Moore, who writes *Battlestar Galactica*, has to say. You get to the end, hopefully, and say, "Geez, I had no idea that writer could offer so much that applies directly to me."

scr(i)pt: *Who else did you interview?*

MSG: Writers Erich Anderson, Allison Burnett, Larry Brody, Frank Cappello, Anton Diether, Dana Fox, Anna Gilson, John Mankiewicz, Aaron Mendelsohn, Gary Phillips, Daniel Pyne, Deborah Serra and Robert Ward. Plus, we did the first four additional interviews for the follow-up film, which we're calling *Volume 2*.

scr(i)pt: *Can you please elaborate on the "lotto-ticket mentality" that you mentioned earlier?*

MSG: The reporting of dollars phenomena, all this box-office tracking online, in the newspapers, on the local news. People can't tell you the number of casualties we've suffered in Iraq, but they sure as hell know how much *Spider-Man 6* grossed its opening weekend. They know so-and-so got paid six figures for that spec script. Such-and-such got a million, yet the movie sucked. What they're supposed to be about, stories that bind and move us, is getting lost in the hype of the commerce surrounding them. Why should I in any way give a shit about how much some mediocre monstrosity that's been pawned off as great and rewarding entertainment grosses when I'm the one putting money into the pockets of the makers who've ultimately delivered unsatisfying, insubstantial and ultimately forgettable commercial crap? If I pay for a movie ticket or turn on the TV and invest my time to watch a show, then I, the audience, have made an investment in the studio's promise to deliver on legitimate expectations roused. Don't disappoint me. Don't waste my time.

Now, unfortunately, given the number of lackluster pictures put out these past few years and the media's obsession with the cult of celebrity, Hollywood and money, too many writers delude themselves into believing that anybody can write a screenplay and every working screenwriter is a millionaire, which they're not. So, instead of writing for the only reason you should write—because you're incapable of not telling the story—they're instead chasing the alleged payday of last year's hit by writing something about nothing other than what they've seen before.

scr(i)pt: *How and why did you move into directing and filmmaking from screenwriting? What advice would you give others who may want to make that leap?*

MSG: My advice? Learn the rules so you can break them successfully and finish what you start. I started out strictly as a screenwriter. I'd optioned and sold a lot of stuff, did rewrites, was getting paid, but after 10 years still didn't have one produced credit. It's like being a pregnant woman stuck in perpetual labor: "You won't deliver my baby? Gimme the knife. I'll do it myself!" There is no

better education for a screenwriter than production experience.

scr(i)pt: *I am absolutely intrigued with the future of technology and how it will affect writers and content creators. What personal experience have you had with that?*

MSG: I've worked on videogames for PCs, PlayStations® and the new Xbox® 360™; developed audio drama for portable delivery systems like Audible and the iPod; created interactive content for cell phones, Web-based virtual programming including shorts and serializations—you name it. New media technology has empowered writers like never before. Digitainment is our future, and videogames are the literature of the 21st Century. It's simply a matter of figuring out how you fit in as a storyteller and how you can adopt your skill sets to the parameters of the medium for which you're writing.

scr(i)pt: *To me, the biggest advance for us as storytellers and content creators has been the democratization of media. How do you, as a writer, see your role in this digital revolution?*

MSG: What's going on today in the entertainment world is the equivalent of desktop publishing in the 80s. Yes, the tools needed to make the movie or TV show you want are accessible, are affordable. In an increasingly niche-oriented marketplace, the ability to target and reach an audience is no longer the exclusive domain of the mainstream distributors. Consequently, more people are producing content. For the writer what that means is there are now greatly expanded opportunities to tell stories that will be seen, to deliver their babies into the world. However, regardless of medium, story must ultimately transcend technology if it's to have any lasting value.

Technology is forcing us to revise traditional storytelling paradigms, even redefine the roles and responsibilities of writers in order to effectively deliver on the expectations of the audience. By that I mean we must provide purposeful, substantive stories extending beyond mere thrill-factor fodder; exploit the limitations of the medium to the story's benefit, or milk its new opportunities of interconnectivity to the nth degree. Take the videogame world, for example. Up until now, the producers and animators have been the ones shaping game stories for the most part. They're game players, not storytellers. Publishers are beginning to recognize now that,

while good gameplay will thrill their audience once or twice before they get bored, good gameplay involving densely woven characters in a solid, viscerally rewarding story will bring the gamer back time and again. It's the equivalent of a movie you watch over and over versus one that you see once and forget about.

scr(i)pt: *What are you doing next? Writing? Directing? Producing?*

MSG: Depends on what happens in the next few weeks. This is a business of good days and bad years. Right now, Anton Diether (*Moby Dick*, *Cleopatra*) and I have a mini-series out to the networks. Should that stick, then the next few months will be devoted to co-writing. Meanwhile, there are a couple of nonfiction pilots I'll be directing shortly, then we're gearing up for a movie for my company, Random Cove, which I'll probably write and direct.

scr(i)pt: *How can people see the wonderfully inspiring film *We*, The Screenwriter?*

MSG: We'll be screening it the opening night at the Southern California Writers' Conference in Los Angeles in October. We begin shopping it to the cable networks that have expressed an interest shortly; then, like *We*, *The Writer*, it goes out to the academic and educational market and eventually becomes available at the usual retailers, as well as through our web site Wethescreenwriter.com. Who knows, you might even find it on your cell phone soon.

For more information about *We*, *The Screenwriter* and the Southern California Writers' Conference "New Paradigm Storytelling for Authors and Media Makers," visit: Writersconference.com (i)

KATE McCALLUM is a Los Angeles-based independent writer/producer/consultant currently working in development with writer/producer Michael Chernuchin at Universal Studios. She has recently founded BRIDGE ARTS MEDIA and has an M.A. in consciousness studies. Kate is especially interested in the creative process, media, the arts and story and their effect on culture and society. Contact her at Bridgartsmedia.com.

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