Exploring the Big Idea in Film

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> The big idea isn't the plot. It is the story, it's what you're trying to say. The big idea is something that encapsulates the vision of your film in a very simple way, the reason that you are fascinated.

The "big idea" in a film is the overarching message that the filmmaker is trying to convey. (This is not to be confused with the plot of a movie.) A big idea isn't static—it may evolve and change throughout your process.

Examples of the big idea include:

- ***The Piano*** (1993), directed by Jane Campion. The character intentionally cuts the rope and gasps at the end of the film in order to convey that she wants to live.
- ***Taxi Driver*** (1976), directed by Martin Scorsese. Robert DeNiro's line "You talkin' to me?" reflects his character—a man coming back from the war and feeling out of place—and is emblematic of the 1970s.
- ***Money Monster***, directed by Jodie Foster. Kyle is afraid that he is disappointing the women in his life. The idea is crystalized in a scene with his girlfriend, in which he expects her to talk him down, and instead she berates him. This public confrontation confirms that he has failed her.

However, it's not necessary to crystalize the big idea of your film the big idea of your film before you set out to make it or even while you're making it. The big idea will undoubtedly present itself to you along the way, trust your own individual process!

FILM STUDIES EXERCISE:
One way to develop your understanding of the big idea is to practice identifying big ideas in other films. Return to your list of directors and films that you made in Chapter 2: Finding Your Personal Story. For each film on that list, try to identify the big idea of the film. If a friend asked you what the film was about, how would you describe it in a few words? (Remember: the goal is *not* to describe the plot.) Then notate the moment that you feel expresses it best. This can be a line, like Robert De Niro's in *Taxi Driver*, or a scene, as in *Money Monster*.

CREATIVITY EXERCISE:
Big ideas are related to themes. A theme is a broad concept, whereas a big idea is a specific, personal idea within that theme. To begin to cultivate a better understanding of your big ideas, start by identifying three themes that you are drawn to. Reference this list if you need inspiration:

Man vs. nature
Man vs. himself
Loss of innocence
Revenge
Death
Battle / War
Sacrifice
Individual vs. society
Justice
Triumph over adversity
Love
Good vs. evil
Redemption
Resurrection
Prodigal son
Transformation
Jealousy
Friendship
Fate

Free write on each of your three themes for about five minutes. From this free writing, do you see a possible big idea emerge for that theme? (Keep in mind Jodie's *Money Monster* example: From the theme of failure, the big idea emerged: "Men are so afraid of failure that they manifest that fear and end up disappointing people in their lives.")

> You go into a film and you say, 'How could I have done that so that it feels like me?' It's not better. Not, 'How could I have made that movie better?' But, 'How could I make that movie fit some of the things that I want to say?

CREATIVE EXERCISE::
Watch a film—one you either love or hate— and reimagine it so that it resonates more personally with you. What would you change to make the film say what you want it to say? Note that this is not a qualitative judgment—you're not changing it to make it "better." You're asking yourself what you would change to make it feel like *you*. Refer to the example Jodie offers in the video lesson for guidance.

- ***The Martian*** (2015): Instead of making it a movie about a man trapped in space and trying to get home, Jodie is more interested in examining the spiritual crisis he might be going through—and what makes him want to keep living. She would want to explore this from Matt Damon's character's perspective, rather than the omniscient perspective used in the film. The exploration of a character's psyche is much more aligned with the themes that Jodie is usually drawn to.