
FOREWORD

HOWARD SUBER WOULD, in all certainty, warn you against accepting at face value any of the plaudits and accolades that accompany forewords to books. And it isn't false modesty or curmudgeonly cynicism that would drive this response (although he is uncommonly self-deprecating for a man of his accomplishments). Instead, he has always exhibited an extremely persistent aversion to the empty cacophony of hype, of academic self-congratulatory grandiosity, and of meaningless film industry bullshit. So it is with a strong degree of trepidation that I attempt to avoid these pitfalls and seek to reflect and comment on this book and its author.

Howard Suber is not necessarily a name you would know as an author or critic (although I think that will change once this book is published), nor is he part of some film industry elite. He is, however, a man with many admirers inside that industry, and countless former students lavish praise on him — many of whom are among the biggest names in film and television.

Suber has spent most of his life tearing down the walls that define the traditional university and creating something else. Let me briefly list for you just some of Suber's accomplishments: He is responsible for starting the UCLA Critical Studies Program, for founding the UCLA Film Archive, and for developing and forging the UCLA Film and Television Producers Program. He drastically reformed the Society for Cinema Studies, the most important association of film teachers, theorists, and historians in the nation, and he led the campaign to establish the School of Theater, Film and

Television at UCLA. He was largely responsible for recruiting much of that department's estimable roster of talent, including its present Dean and Chairperson. In short, he transformed the UCLA Film School.

Companies in the film and television industry have frequently hired Suber as a consultant and expert witness on issues involving authorship, creative control, the creative process, and copyright. Other corporations have asked him to advise them on strategic business plans and to explain to their employees the structure of the film business. The diversity of these various academic and professional activities has given him a perspective that brings together the artistic and business aspects of film storytelling in an unparalleled way.

But these are not his most significant accomplishments. His most enduring legacy is his impact on students.

Howard Suber is one of the foremost teachers of film in the world. He has taught sixty-five different courses in every arena of the UCLA film program (except animation), including screenwriting, direction, production, film history, theory, and criticism. He is clearly a man of incredibly restless, eclectic intellect and creative energy.

Which leads me from the man to the work.

The book you are holding is neither a standard work of criticism nor some foolish arbitrary set of rules for the nascent screenwriter or writer/director. It is, instead, a remarkably rich compilation of concepts, ideas, and observations accrued from years of teaching. This volume will give you at least an idea of why Howard Suber is so admired and valued, not only in the academic world, but by some of the most important creative people in the film industry.

To summarily encapsulate *The Power of Film* is difficult, for it has a profound scope and many dimensions, and operates

on multiple levels of comprehension that makes any reductive summary woefully inadequate.

That said, the task — the voyage through popular film culture — that Suber has set out for himself is no less than a basic understanding of why film “works.” “It works” is a phrase that is often used by buyers, distributors, and others in the film industry to describe the effect of a film on an audience, differentiating the film that succeeds versus one that doesn’t. Suber tells us *why* certain elements “work” in films and why others do not.

Suber’s examples are all from “memorable popular films.” As he explains, these are two separate qualities: the films must have been extremely popular in their own day, and they must also have *remained* in our cultural memory. Given Hollywood’s enormous popularity over the past seventy-five years, it is not surprising that the films he cites are mainstream American classics. But the vast majority of Suber’s insights apply equally well to independent films and to filmmaking around the world that aspires to appeal to an international audience.

This book does not try to categorize audiences or to provide simplistic “rules” for screenwriting and filmmaking. (In fact, true to his always skeptical spirit, Suber debunks a good portion of the so-called rules.) Instead, Suber genuinely helps us understand “the power of film” — why it has been the predominant art form for more than a century, and why it continues to have such power over the lives we all lead.

One of the joys of reading this book is Suber’s ability to state things with breathtaking simplicity and elegance. This book is provocative and insightful, and whether or not you agree with a particular observation or point that Suber has made, you will find yourself time after time being

transported to a higher level of sophistication than most people ever bring to film.

By pointing out contradictions, popular misunderstandings and misapprehensions, and by making the kind of distinctions that create insight, Suber merges the analysis of film culture with a very broad base of knowledge of other areas of modern life, leading us to truths and even, at times, to revelations that transcend film itself.

Suber's text moves freely among its nearly three hundred entries, connecting, for example, a discussion of Character to Disaster films, Aristotle and Happiness, Film Noir and Structure, the "Willing Suspension of Disbelief" and a discourse on Love.

One cannot, and probably should not even try, to read this book as a whole from cover to cover in one sitting. It is far too encompassing, far too complex — and yet condensed — for anyone to attempt to absorb it all quickly. It must be savored, slowly, and repeatedly.

Suber's writing has such a fluidity of style and incessant thoughtfulness that the best way to take it all in is like a hiker walking through a fertile and varied forest, where the pleasure lies in discovery, not merely in reaching a destination.

All of us who have had him as a teacher have been given a gift. For those who have not, this work richly demonstrates why Howard Suber has always been such a pleasure to spend serious time with, and why for forty years he has been so highly esteemed as a mold of lives.

Geoffrey Gilmore
Director, Sundance Film Festival