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**“*Sparks of Life*: A Screenplay About Wilhelm Reich”**

**Presentation at a Fundraiser for  
The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Endowment Fund**

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In July of 1983, several years after graduating from NYU’s Graduate Film School, I moved from New York City to Los Angeles. Among my belongings was a box filled with several original screenplays that I’d written, as well as numerous sample scripts that I’d written for existing network TV shows. And with these materials, I set about to break into Hollywood as a writer.

A little less than two years later, in early 1985, I got my first studio deal at Paramount Pictures. It was an option and rewrite on an original screenplay, a romantic comedy that I had co-written with my girlfriend who was also an aspiring writer. Shortly after that, another producer optioned another script we had co-written. And so, for the next several years, we were working writers on original screenplays, re-write assignments and TV scripts.

None of which ultimately ever got made, by the way, which is the fate of probably 90% of people writing for film and TV. But because we were working, because we were getting deals with studios and producers, we started gaining more credibility as writers, which meant we were expanding our circle of contacts in the industry.

So I thought this might be opportune time for me to try to interest someone in a film project that I was very passionate about, but which I had not yet written: a feature film about Wilhelm Reich, a film that would make Reich’s life and work accessible to a wide, mainstream audience. So the story of *Sparks of Life*, my recently completed screenplay, begins at least 21 years ago in Los Angeles. Although it actually begins even further back than that.

I had begun reading Reich’s books when I was 18 years old, up in Rangeley, Maine during the summer before my sophomore year in college. And after college when I went on to graduate film school at NYU, I had decided that a film about Reich would be one of the projects I’d pursue once I made some inroads into the film business.

And now here I was, in 1985 and 1986 in Los Angeles, finally working as a writer. But the more I thought about it, the more I decided that trying to interest someone in a film about Reich was probably not a good use of my time. Because, as far as I knew, there was already a Hollywood film project about Reich being developed. It was called *Fury on Earth*, a film adaptation of Myron Sharaf’s biography of Reich that was published in early 1983 while I was still living in New York.

At the time, the book drew significant attention to Reich's life and work among people who had never heard of him. And in June of 1983, according to an item that I read in *Publisher's Weekly*, someone had optioned the film rights to the book.

Now once the film rights for any book are optioned or purchased outright, the next step is hiring a screenwriter to write a script. Obviously without a screenplay there can be no film. And in 1985, I logically assumed that at some point in the past two years, *someone* must've been hired to write a screenplay of *Fury on Earth*. Which meant it was pointless for me to compete with a project that was already well into development.

But here's the odd thing: in all the time that I'd been in Los Angeles, I had never seen any mention in the trade papers—in either *Variety* or the *Hollywood Reporter*—about a *Fury on Earth* film project. So I decided to investigate for myself.

I contacted the literary agent who handled the deal and he put me in touch with the people who had optioned the book. And what they all told me was that the project was basically dead, that several screenwriters had been approached to adapt the book, but that no screenplay had ever been written. And so the producers had let the option expire and had gone on to other projects. All of which is business as usual in Hollywood, and should not be misconstrued as any bias or any sinister conspiracy against Reich in the entertainment industry.

What I think happened, quite simply, is that the screenwriters who were approached either didn't feel sufficiently interested or capable of turning the book into a screenplay. Any good screenwriter knows you can't simply read *one* biography of a person and write a screenplay, that writing *any* biographical film requires significant additional research beyond what may be provided in a single book.

But the disturbing part of this story is the phone conversation that I had with the producer, a man named Gene Kirkwood. Now Kirkwood was never one of Hollywood's more prolific producers. And, in fact, he seems to have faded from the scene altogether. But for a while he was involved in a handful of decent films, including his first one in 1976: a low-budget boxing picture called *Rocky*.

And during our phone conversation about *Fury on Earth*, Kirkwood started laughing and in his very distinct New York accent he said that he had envisioned the film as a sex comedy starring Robin Williams as Wilhelm Reich, with scenes of Reich putting people into orgone boxes to increase their sexual prowess. And Kirkwood wasn't kidding when he said this.

Now maybe we can all laugh about this 20 years later. But think about it for a moment: what if Gene Kirkwood *had* found a screenwriter and his vision of a sex comedy about Reich had actually been made into a major motion picture? Think of the distortion of Reich's life and legacy that would have been disseminated to millions of moviegoers.

And how, for generations to come, that distorted image of Reich would've supplanted the historic, medical, and scientific facts that are found in Reich's published books, articles, and research journals and bulletins.

But this is precisely the major concern we should all have when we discuss a possible movie about Reich.

Unless such a film is responsibly researched, written and produced, the damage to Reich's legacy could be significant. And unfortunately it's business as usual—even among the best screenwriters, producers and directors—to play fast and loose with the facts of true-life stories if they believe it will make for a better film. Under the twin banners of “artistic license” and “creative freedom”—together with the frequent Hollywood disclaimer that “*This film is suggested or inspired by real-life events*”—someone could legally produce a film in which Reich:

- claims he can cure cancer
- promotes the orgone accumulator as a sexual device
- conducts secret work for the C.I.A
- uses the cloudbuster for mind-control experiments
- and has clandestine meetings with President Eisenhower

*None* of which are true, but *all* of which are stated as fact somewhere in numerous irresponsible articles, books, websites and chat rooms.

Last month, ABC television ran a two-part miniseries called *The Path to 9-11* in which the filmmakers willfully altered the facts, thereby distorting the historic truth about specific individuals and their involvement in specific events.

Now if Hollywood filmmakers are capable of showing little allegiance to the facts about one of the most critical events of our lifetime, what possible allegiance to the facts could a typical Hollywood filmmaker have about an obscure man named Wilhelm Reich who died half a century ago?

Now back to 1985: once I had confirmed that there was no film about Reich being developed, I decided that in my spare time I would continue to read Reich, to research Reich, to put together a screenplay outline for myself. And at some point, when I had the time, to take a few months off and complete a feature-length screenplay about Reich.

In 1991, I completed that screenplay. I'm not talking about *Sparks of Life*, I'm talking about an earlier screenplay that I wrote and spent years trying to sell. In fact, I brought this project to the attention of four Academy Award- winning directors: Richard Attenborough, Milos Forman, the late English director Tony Richardson, and Oliver Stone. As well as to producers in America and Europe.

To make a long story short, when I failed to get a deal on that earlier screenplay, I gradually became disenchanted and disappointed with the screenplay itself.

When I wrote it, it absolutely represented the best I could do at the time. But as the years passed, I realized quite simply that the script wasn't good enough. In retrospect, I think it had a lot of the right notes, but that it lacked a certain melody. I felt that the script badly needed a major rewrite, perhaps even what's known in the business as a "page one rewrite" which is a complete overhaul. But I had neither the creative energy nor the stomach to re-think and rewrite the entire screenplay.

Until 1999, when two important things happened.

First, I had begun to work with Mary Higgins on what would become the Museum's biographical video about Reich entitled *Man's Right to Know*. Which forced me once again to immerse myself in all kinds of primary materials and resources about Reich's life and work. And second, and probably more important, was the publication of *American Odyssey*, Reich's letters and journals from 1940 to 1947.

*American Odyssey* was really the single most significant factor in drawing me back into this film project, because it provided new information and new insights that allowed me to completely re-imagine my film story about Reich.

The first time I read the book, I quickly started to imagine not only brand new film scenes, but entire film sequences: multiple scenes strung together chronologically with both historic accuracy and cinematic drama. The book also deepened my appreciation of Reich's relationships with his colleagues and with his daughter Eva. And I began to imagine new scenes to dramatize those relationships, based on material from the book.

And while *American Odyssey* covers only eight years of Reich's life, the material in the book inspired me to re-imagine the middle of the film—literally the center of the film—from which I could then expand out in both directions to re-think the rest of the film story. And so, with the exception of maybe 12 pages from that first script, *Sparks of Life* is essentially a "page one rewrite," a complete overhaul.

Ultimately, then, this screenplay is a culmination of over three decades of reading and research, with a focus on studying primary materials and resources. These include:

- all 21 book titles by Reich currently available in English
- all issues of Reich's *International Journal of Sex-Economy and Orgone Research*, *Annals of the Orgone Institute*, *Orgone Energy Bulletin*, *C.O.R.E.*, *Orgonomic Medicine*, *Orgonomic Functionalism*
- *The Einstein Affair*
- *The Oranur Experiment*
- All available court transcripts and legal documents
- The FBI files on Reich
- The FDA files on Reich
- Audiotapes of Reich
- Personal interviews and additional research in Washington D.C., New York City, and in Portland, Farmington and Rangeley, Maine

- Including the thousands of hours that I've spent at Orgonon
- Plus numerous secondary materials, including several Reich biographies

The real challenge, of course, was how to distill all of this research into a coherent and accessible screenplay. And to address that point, I need to talk a little bit about the screenplay format itself.

What I call the "modern screenplay" is a relatively recent literary form. Poetry, for example, goes back thousands of years, with its roots in an even more ancient tradition of oral storytelling. We can trace playwriting back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, hundreds of years before Christ. And the novel is several hundred years old, with its beginnings in the 17th or 18th century, depending on what country you're talking about.

But what I call the "modern screenplay" has its beginnings around 1927 when sound, when talking pictures first came to a motion picture industry that itself was barely 30 years old. So what we have here is a form of writing that is approximately 80 years old. But in this brief period of time, the crafts of screenwriting and of feature filmmaking have revealed a series of patterns and consistencies that allow us to make the following assertions:

- A film story, like other forms of storytelling, has a beginning, middle and an end.
- In a film the beginning, the middle and the end actually translate into a definable 3-Act Structure, a structure that is largely invisible to moviegoers even as they are responding to it.
- In terms of screen time, this 3-Act Structure corresponds closely to specific page numbers in the screenplay
- In general, when you average it out, one page of a screenplay translates into one minute of screen time. And I emphasize the words "In general."
- In general, the approximate length of a film can be estimated by the length of the screenplay.

In other words, a screenplay for a 100 to 120 minute film—which is the average length of most feature films—will generally be anywhere from 100 to 125 pages. So a writer working on a film of this length does not write a 200 page script or a 60 page script. That would indicate a writer who doesn't know the basics of screenwriting.

What's significant about these observations is that they allow us to identify a specific paradigm, a specific model, in terms of screenplay structure and length. So while a poem can be 2 lines, 200 lines or 2000 lines, and a novel can be 100 pages or 1000 pages; a screenplay is bound by a more rigorous set of parameters.

This, then, is the standard paradigm for a traditional 100 to 120 minute feature film.

### **ACT ONE - SET UP**

**(i.e. Beginning)**

Approximate page numbers: pages 1- 30

Approximate screen time: 20 – 30 minutes

With a climactic or “inciting incident”  
toward the end of Act I which  
propels the story into Act II

### **ACT TWO – RISING ACTION**

**(i.e. Middle)**

Approximate page numbers: pages 31 - 90

Approximate screen time: 60 minutes

With a climactic or “inciting incident”  
toward the end of Act II which  
propels the story into Act III

### **ACT THREE – RESOLUTION**

**(i.e. End)**

Approximate page numbers: pages 90 - 120

Approximate screen time: 20 – 30 minutes

Now these pages numbers can vary a bit, depending on the film story itself. But not significantly, for the most part. This is, in fact, a valuable paradigm that works.

And to anyone here who might be thinking, “What a mechanistic way to approach storytelling,” I would strongly disagree by emphasizing this point: this paradigm is not a series of rules and regulations and constraints that are imposed arbitrarily on the craft of screenwriting and the craft of feature filmmaking. Rather it is a paradigm that revealed itself, that became self-evident from observations over long periods of time about what film audiences actually respond to.

For example, if characters and plot are not set up in a timely fashion in Act One, the audience is bored and the film suffers. If conflict and plot and character development are not effectively worked out in a timely fashion in Act Two, the same thing.

So I would argue, to borrow Reich's terminology, that this paradigm reflects a *functional* approach and not a mechanistic one. Because, as I said, it is based on observations over long periods of time, and consequently can be a very valuable tool. And within this paradigm, there are endless opportunities for creative flexibility, variation and innovation in terms of plot, characters, dialogue and visuals. Just as in music we see an infinite number of possibilities from a relatively small collection of musical notes.

So my challenge, obviously, was how to outline and structure a film story about Reich within this paradigm. Which brought me to my first creative dilemma: “Did I feel that I could tell a good film story about Reich in just two hours? Was two hours sufficient time to do justice to Reich’s life and work?”

And my answer almost immediately was “No.” For me, two hours was *not* long enough to tell the film story that I wanted to tell. And there were several reasons for this.

First, ever since I started reading Reich’s books, certain episodes in his life would leap off the pages as movie scenes, as potentially great cinema.

For example, Reich in one of his hygiene clinics in Europe, attending to the emotional and practical needs of working-class people is a unique movie scene. Reich speaking in front of hundreds of people in his Sex-Pol organization in Europe is a movie scene. Reich at the Berlin train station, dressed as a tourist on a ski holiday to flee Germany when Hitler consolidates his power, is a movie scene. The bio-electrical experiments in Oslo, the discovery of orgone energy in bion cultures, Reich meeting with Einstein—one of the most famous personalities of the 20th century—these are all movie scenes.

And we’re only up to January 1941. We still have 16 years left to go in man’s life. Reich treating terminal cancer patients with the orgone energy accumulator, the FBI arresting Reich as an enemy alien at 2:00 a.m. and taking him out to Ellis Island, discovering a motor force in orgone energy, the Oranur Experiment, Reich’s weather experiments with the cloudbuster, a U.S. marshal arriving at Orgonon to serve Reich with a Complaint for Injunction, the government-ordered burning of Reich’s literature at Orgonon and in New York City—these are all movie scenes.

So instinctively two hours didn’t seem sufficient.

Secondly, my practical experience as a writer only reinforced this. For years the screenplays that I was writing were all traditional two hour scripts, that were anywhere from 100 to 120 pages long. And with that experience came a sense of what was possible and not possible within the traditional two-hour format. So, again, two hours just didn’t seem long enough.

And my final reason for wanting to write a longer film was this: there have been literally dozens of excellent historical and biographical feature films that exceed two hours in length. So why couldn’t this be one of them?

- *Amadeus*, directed by Milos Forman, 158 minutes
- *The Insider*, the true story of a tobacco company whistleblower, directed by Michael Mann, 157 minutes
- *Cinderella Man*, about the boxer James Braddock, 144 minutes
- *A Beautiful Mind*, about mathematician John Nash, 135 minutes
- *Ray*, about singer Ray Charles, 152 minutes
- *Bird*, about jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, 161 minutes

- *Catch Me If You Can*, Spielberg's film about a con man, 141 minutes
- *The Aviator*, Scorsese's film about Howard Hughes, 170 minutes
- *Henry and June*, Philip Kaufman's film about Henry Miller, 136 minutes
- *Out of Africa*, about author Isak Dinesen—who was not exactly a household name in the 1980s—150 minutes
- *The Last Emperor*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, 160 minutes

The list goes on and on and on.

So why not a two-and-half hour film about Wilhelm Reich? Which would mean a screenplay that is approximately 150 pages long, instead of 120.

So having settled on the length—with the luxury now of 150 pages—I began to outline the film story, using the 3-Act paradigm as a general guideline.

*(Two charts showing a detailed script breakdown  
were projected onscreen for the audience)*

The movie's opening titles would be played over an impressionistic sequence of Reich's literature being burned, in which I would introduce words and photographs pertaining to orgone energy and Reich's numerous discoveries and inventions.

The film story itself would begin with Reich in America in December of 1940, writing a letter to Albert Einstein and then meeting him the following month. As Reich speaks with Einstein, the rest of Act One is devoted to a flashback to Reich's years in Europe, culminating with his discovery of orgone energy radiation in the bions in 1939 and his subsequent emigration to America on the eve of World War II. So this is Act One, the first half hour of the movie.

I think most screenwriters would agree that Act Two is always the most difficult to write and that most films ultimately succeed or fail based on the strength of their second act. In this case, because I'm writing a longer film, Act Two is approximately 90 minutes long, instead of 60 minutes.

I decided that Act Two would *begin* with Reich being introduced to Ilse Ollendorff at his home in Forest Hills in 1939, and that Act Two would *conclude* with Reich being served with a Complaint for Injunction against his work in February 1954. The challenge here was to shape the material and structure a storyline that dealt with 15 years of Reich's life between these two events.

And, as I said earlier, this is where *American Odyssey* was so crucial to this project. What I ended up doing was organizing Reich's life from October 1939 to February 1954 into three 30-minute segments.

The first 30 minutes of Act Two—pages 30 through 60—cover Reich’s first meeting with Ilse, to the first time he sees the abandoned farm in Rangeley, Maine, which will become his permanent home, laboratory and research center known as Orgonon.

The next 30 minutes—pages 61 to 90—begin with a scene in Reich’s newly-built Student Laboratory at Orgonon, and cover events up to his permanent move to Maine in 1950, including the beginning of the FDA’s seven-year campaign against him, starting in 1947.

And the last 30 minutes of Act Two—pages 90 to 120—cover Reich’s life from the Oranur Experiment in 1951 at Orgonon, to the Complaint for Injunction against his work in 1954.

Act Three would begin with Reich and his colleagues debating how Reich should legally respond to the Complaint. And the film concludes with Reich’s literature being burned at Orgonon and in New York, and Reich’s subsequent incarceration at the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary.

Now I didn’t always hit these exact page numbers when I actually wrote the screenplay. Usually I was off by a few pages either way, but this paradigm was valuable because it kept me on track as a constant reminder of the importance of page numbers and actual screen time.

Now I’d like to say just a few words about artistic license and distortion.

As I said earlier, anyone could legally produce a film about Reich and significantly distort the facts of his life and work. A disclaimer at the start of the film would absolve the filmmakers of most legal issues, while, on a professional level, the filmmakers would cite "artistic license" and "creative freedom" to justify the altering or distorting of facts.

But because Reich's life and work were subjected to such destructive distortion and slander during his lifetime, and because we continue to hear these same distortions and slanders 50 years after his death, what good could possibly come from a film that does not rigorously and honestly aspire to the facts about Reich? What good could possibly come from a film that plays fast and loose with the facts, purely in the interest of entertainment?

Obviously no screenplay based on true events can adhere completely to the facts. The constraints and demands of any screenplay require constant creative choices and, in the case of true-life stories, constant ethical and moral choices as well. But there’s a huge difference between honest, justifiable and *necessary* creative choices, and what is simply outright distortion that unfairly and unnecessarily ignores documented facts.

That’s not to say that there are, or could ever be, some standardized guidelines to decide what is or is not distortion in film and TV. These are decisions left to individuals—to individual writers, directors and producers—who we can only hope will make their decisions honestly and in good faith.

I have no idea exactly how long it took me to actually write *Sparks of Life* once I had finished my outline. Working off and on, maybe three or four years. But I do know that the reason it took so long was because I had to justify to myself—in the interest of accuracy and truth—every choice that I was making in terms of characterization, dialogue, action, visuals and the portrayal of Reich's work.

And during this process, I informally came up with my own set of guidelines about the creative decisions I was making. Which admittedly are somewhat vague, general and subjective. But they provided me with at least some basic moral parameters:

- Based on my extensive research, I would not knowingly write anything that would misrepresent or distort the facts of Reich's life and work.
- Based on my extensive research, I would not knowingly write anything that would misrepresent or distort the facts about certain real-life individuals.
- Wherever possible and dramatically appropriate—in dialogue and descriptions—I would use Reich's own words from his books, research journals, bulletins, diaries, audiotapes, legal papers, and other documents.
- In situations where I honestly felt I had no choice but to exercise artistic license with certain facts, I would do so in a manner that would not result in the distortion of the basic truths of Reich's life and work.

And just a final note here. I've always felt that the basic facts of Reich's life and work are so dramatic, unique, compelling and cinematic that there's absolutely no reason to significantly alter them in the interest of telling a good film story.

And now I'd like to conclude by reading a few excerpts.

I'll begin with the first three pages—the first three minutes—of the film, which are a description of the title sequence, followed by the opening scene. In the title sequence, what I attempt to do is immediately introduce some of the ideas, themes and visuals that will be played out during the film. And the opening scene itself is the audience's introduction to Wilhelm Reich as a natural scientist.

*(Pages 1, 2, 3 of the screenplay were projected onscreen and read aloud.)*

So Reich met Einstein in January 1941. Einstein initially showed some interest in Reich's scientific work, but shortly afterwards he essentially gave Reich the brush-off. Reich continued to mail Einstein materials pertaining to his scientific and medical research.

And as Reich anxiously waited to hear back from Einstein, he began one of the most important and dramatic phases of his research: he began using large orgone energy accumulators to treat terminal cancer patients.

These case histories are documented in *The Cancer Biopathy*, while Reich's contemporaneous accounts of some of them can be found in *American Odyssey*. I used the facts of his first case history to write this next scene.

I also decided to use digital special effects—which are commonplace today in film, TV and even pharmaceutical commercials—to visualize the physical aspects and movement of orgone energy.

This excerpt begins with Reich's first terminal cancer patient using an orgone energy accumulator in Reich's second-floor treatment room in Forest Hills, and segues into Reich's presentation of this case study at a seminar.

*(Pages 51, 52, 53 of the screenplay were projected onscreen and read aloud.)*

This next scene takes place in late summer of 1945, outside of Reich's lakeside cabin at Orgonon in Rangeley, Maine. And is based on material from *American Odyssey*.

Reich is playing with his infant son Peter, as his daughter Eva—now in her 20s—looks on. World War II has just ended. And Eva has begun to confide in her father about all of the things that her mother and her mother's friends had told her for years about Reich.

*(Pages 67 and 68 of the screenplay were projected onscreen and read aloud.)*

The last scene that I'll read is what can only be described as Reich's big "Courtroom Scene." The problem is, Reich never really had a big courtroom moment during his trial for contempt of court in 1956.

The trial itself was a rather mundane affair that did not allow Reich to articulate his position that courts of law cannot have jurisdiction over matters of natural science and research. So for me, Reich's trial for contempt-of-court fails as cinematic drama. And yet the film story cries out for a courtroom confrontation.

But it would've been unconscionable for me, or for anyone, to write a trial sequence that distorts the facts. It would've been unconscionable, for example, to show Reich in court trying to prove the existence of orgone energy to a judge and jury—which is exactly what he *refused* to do when he was first served with the Complaint for Injunction in 1954.

And yet any filmmaker could produce a sequence like that, and justify it as "artistic license." But as I say, the film cries out for a big courtroom moment.

So I kept reading the legal documents to see if I could find one. And as I looked over the transcripts of several preliminary hearings to Reich's trial, I saw that, in fact, Reich did have several very eloquent moments in the courtroom in which he confronted Joseph Maguire (the FDA lawyer) and Peter Mills, Reich's former attorney who was now the prosecutor for the case.

I took what I felt were Reich's most powerful statements from two or three preliminary hearings and melded them together with just a little of my own writing so that the scene largely comprises Reich's own words. Consequently, in the screenplay Reich's big courtroom moment takes place at a preliminary hearing and I dispensed completely with the trial itself.

*(Pages 146 and 147 of the screenplay  
were projected onscreen and read aloud.)*

*Kevin Hinchey  
The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust*