MARCO POLO on Netflix

John Fusco:
Creator/Executive Producer/Co-Showrunner

John Fusco has an enduring interest in the spiritual aspects of warrior cultures and acknowledges a common “red thread” that runs through Native American and Eastern philosophy. Before Marco Polo, he was perhaps best known for writing the screenplays for the blockbusters Young Guns (featuring Emilio Estevez as Billy the Kid) and sequel, Young Guns II—which put a modern spin on the classic Western formula. His screenplays aren’t simply inhabited by wholly virtuous good guys and sadistic bad guys. His characters are layered and complex. It’s not just “cowboys and Indians.” Check out Thunderheart, a contemporary Western from 1992, featuring Val Kilmer as an FBI agent of Sioux heritage, investigating a murder on a reservation in South Dakota (at the site of the Wounded Knee massacre). The movie, directed by Michael Apted, is a crime-drama that shows the plight of and discrimination against Native Americans; based on true events, it’s a story told with empathy and verve.

The same sensitive approach to rough and tumble storytelling can be found in Fusco’s screenplay for Hidalgo, a 2004 film based on the legend of American long distance rider Frank Hopkins (Viggo Mortensen) who raced his mustang (Hidalgo) in 1891 Arabia. Hopkins was also a dispatch rider for the US government and is known for delivering a message to the US 7th Cavalry Regiment authorizing the Wounded Knee Massacre of Lakota Sioux. If you think you know the “true story,” Hidalgo will give you a suspenseful history lesson and blow your mind. Fusco is a tireless researcher and eschews the obvious, superficial reading of historical events. His scripts don’t just fly over a particular time and place. They transport you there.

Fusco holds a black belt in Shaolin Kung Fu. Drawing on his background in martial arts (since the age of 12), he wrote the genre bending, time travel epic, The Forbidden Kingdom, starring Jet Li and Jackie Chan. The movie opened in 2008 and broke box office records in China.

In addition to writing and executive producing Season 2 of the Netflix global hit series Marco Polo, Fusco also wrote the script for one of Netflix’s first original movies, the sequel to Ang Lee’s Academy Award winning film, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000). Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon II: The Green Legend, directed by legendary martial arts director Yuen Woo-
ping, will be the first feature film to premiere simultaneously on Netflix and in IMAX theaters in 2016.

Neil Landau: I’d like to start with your transition from historical feature films to epic, long-form TV series. For years, writing big historical movies was considered the gold standard in Hollywood, and many top film directors wouldn’t deign to tell cinematic stories on the small screen. Now, that perspective has shifted, and some of the highest quality writing and storytelling are happening on television.

John Fusco: Yes, and when I was studying screenwriting at NYU—I started in ’82, right through ’85 and then ’86, when I sold my first screenplay—I had some amazing teachers, visiting masters: Waldo Salt, Ring Lardner Jr, Ian McLellan Hunter, Lorenzo Semple Jr., Tad Mosel—and I was just really fortunate to be there at that time. The first three I mentioned were part of the “Hollywood 18” during the McCarthy era, but all of them had worked during the “Golden Age of Television.” And they used to show us their stuff. I remember Tad Mosel showing us a teleplay that he wrote that starred this young, unknown guy named Paul Newman. And it was a brilliant half hour. It was one of the most brilliant things I ever saw. And I was like, “Wow, this was TV?” And he was like, “Yes, sadly, that’s the way it used to be. It’s no more.” And so, movies were where he was at. And now, we’re experiencing this time that some are calling the Second Golden Age of Television.

I started getting excited about it right around 2007. And this kind of perfect storm came together because I’d been thinking a lot about long-form TV. I’m also a novelist, so I was attracted to this kind of novelistic style of some of the long-form shows (Deadwood, The Sopranos, The Wire) and the way these stories unfold in chapters.

With the screenplay, it’s kind of this “stopwatch writing” and shorthand. You have to complete your character arcs in 105 pages, and you don’t have the luxury of going on other creative tangents, exploring other tributaries, letting the story really breathe and getting into textures, like you can in novels. But in these long-form TV shows you could. So I was thinking a lot about a series. And I happened to be in China, shooting a movie and I took a trip to Mongolia with my 13-year-old son. We crossed a large part of Outer Mongolia on horseback, with nomads. And while I was up there, I kept encountering the name Marco Polo.

I’ve always had this fascination with Marco Polo since a very early age. And we were doing the trip because my son had a deep interest in the Mongol Empire, and Genghis Khan. But when I was up there, it kind of rekindled the Marco Polo interest and as I started thinking about it, it all came together. I said, “Oh my god, Marco Polo has just never really been captured [on film] because you can’t do it. You can’t capture the whole story in a feature film, or even a mini
series.” Marco Polo was in China for 17 years. It’s so vast that I felt the perfect format is the long-form series. And so, that’s where it all came together. And I have to credit Harvey Weinstein because he and I have a mutual love for Asian cinema. We were working on some related projects, and then he had been thinking about a Marco Polo project for a while, without me knowing. When we both found out, we decided to team up, and that’s how it all started.

**NL:** Still, it’s such a vast story and quite expensive to produce. I’m sure it was an extremely difficult journey bringing this project to fruition, and make it accessible for contemporary audiences.

**JF:** Yes and no. This was Harvey Weinstein’s first scripted TV experience as well. And he was thinking the same thing at the same time I was out there in Mongolia, thinking about moving into long-form series. After our first phone call I pitched him my take on the series. The next day he had me on the phone with Chris Albrecht [the Head of the Starz network].

**NL:** It would seem, at least on the surface, that Starz would be a good fit, given their success with *Spartacus*.

**JF:** So I pitched it to Starz, on the phone. Two hours later I got a call back from Harvey and we had a deal. And so, and really, it was set up quite quickly with Starz. And though they clearly wanted to be in business with Harvey, they really responded to the idea itself, and I went off and wrote a pilot episode, a 2-hour pilot. Kind of like a movie. And I think Harvey was exploring selling the TV pilot as a movie back in China at one point. So I wrote the 2-hour pilot. They loved it and asked me for proof of concept by writing a third hour, to see how the series could work. I did. They said, “OK, we’re all-in. Let’s do this thing!” And they asked me if I wanted to write them all. And I decided that, because I was new to TV, that that would be a misstep, as much as I loved the idea of it, I really felt that I needed a writers’ room. I needed to bring in experienced TV writers to work with them, to develop the series and to really do it justice. We brought in Dave Erickson from *Sons of Anarchy*, who had done the Kurt Sutter room over there, one of the main writers, and he and I became co-showrunners. And then we had writers come in from *CSI*, and *Law & Order*, different shows, and it was a terrific writers’ room. And we just—and here’s the really interesting thing, Neil—it kind of addresses your question about how to make this story accessible for contemporary audiences who only know about the swimming pool game, and the myths and legends, bringing pasta back...

**NL:** [Laughs] And also the challenge of which part of his life to focus on first, as our connection point.

**JF:** That was a really exciting part of the whole thing, because I just knew what was out there, with the actual material on his incredible accounts, his amazing book, and no one knew any of it. But when it was approached dramatically, the focus always tended to be on the travelogue.
“Marco Polo—the Silk Road,” the great travel, all this time spent getting there, and so few people had any clue about his relationship with Kublai Khan. And so, I really wanted to get him into the court of Kublai Khan as early as possible and focus on that relationship, the theme of fathers and sons, which was palpable in the real story, having been abandoned by his father, not knowing him till he was 17, and then being presented and given to Kublai Khan after traveling across the world with his dad. So, I knew that was going to be the area that we’d focus on, and also, the idea that Marco Polo arrived in China at one of the most turbulent and pivotal times in world history.

Kublai Khan was campaigning to become the first non-Chinese emperor of China, and he was at war with the Song dynasty, which had endured for 300 years, and it was about to fall. And Kublai was trying to take it. And Marco came in right at that significant point, was conscripted into the court as an emissary, had a ringside seat, and according to himself, was an active participant, right down to the trebuchets that took the wall. So I knew that was going to be the arena. But, coming out of features, it was hard for me initially to get a good feel for the “slow burn” of TV storytelling. And so, my 2-hour pilot basically told all of Season 1, as you saw it. We had the entire thing, and so we all—the writers’ room—looked at it, and said, “Where does it go from here?” And decided to dial back, and split the pilot script right down the middle, at hour 1, and stretch it out, and let all of those characters breathe and explore all those multiple storylines and just flesh it out more. So, in essence, my original pilot became the show bible. Everything was contained in it, all the characters, all the language, the tone. And that’s what we used.

**NL:** You were building up to that big battle and taking down the wall. What about the love stories? How much of that was based on historical accounts, and how much of that was invented or teased out of smaller fragments of things that you may have found in your research?

**JF:** Great question. One of the things I learned about Marco was that he was a great lover of women. And when you read his accounts, he would go into these far-flung regions, and come back and give reports to Kublai Khan. It was more often than not about how beautiful the women were. Their forbidden charms in the bathhouses... And I think he and Kublai Khan were kindred spirits.

**NL:** Is this your personal opinion or did you find any specific documentation?

**JF:** It’s in his own writings, but there was also a very intriguing oral history that I got from a man who claims to be the last descendant of Marco Polo. In the oral history that survived, there’s a story of a woman in Kublai Khan’s court who Marco fell in love with—and he actually claimed that there was a section of a wooden tombstone taken from Hangzhou, China, that had some inscription from Marco Polo about this woman. It said: “I leave my heart here behind.” It’s kind of cryptic, oral history, but it really got me thinking. And then, there was the
historical character of Kokachin, the Blue Princess of the Bayaut, who ultimately in the Marco Polo history, after 17 years, she was his ticket home. Because after all of these years of Marco’s father and uncle asking the Khan if they could leave, he finally told them it was OK for them to go if they could deliver this Mongolian princess to her betrothed, who was a Khan cousin. And it was a good political move for him. The queen had died, and Marco was charged with delivering her.

It took a lot of hunting down, but when we were shooting in Venice I located and gained access to Marco Polo’s Last Will and Testament, which was translated from the Latin. It was an amazing experience. I got to see an inventory of what he brought back from China. And one of the things was a beaded, Mongolian headdress. I talked to some of my historian contacts and they said, “We believe that Princess Kokachin likely gave it to him on that return trip.”

And that’s why he had it with him, and that got me thinking about how to put all those elements together. I felt that would be a really compelling, forbidden romance in the story. So, that’s where it originated.

NL: When you were in the writers’ room, was it the kind of thing where you had your whiteboards and you made lists of all of your main characters, figured out their arcs for the first 10 episodes, and then it was a process of breaking down what would happen with each of those characters in each of the episodes?

JF: Yes, it was really amazing because it was new for me. And for the first few weeks of the room, it was just David Erickson and I. And he would stand up at the whiteboard with a sharpie, and I’d talk him through the history. And he’d ask me about a character in my pilot, and we’d talk about it—and fill in, “Oh yes, no, actually what happened was, this one was poisoned and...” And he’d jump up and jot something down, under the heading “Episode 5,” and then, he’d come back around to that, he’d move it, move it over to #4, and then latch onto these threads, and then I got the hang of it with him. We loosely broke the first 10 hours before we brought other writers into the room. We had this original pilot, which served as the bible, so it was all there. But we ripped it apart and dug deeper into certain characters, and connected all these through lines. But, of course, once the whole team of writers entered the room, we pulled it all apart again, put it back up, and eventually assigned different writers for different episodes.

I went off and wrote an entirely new pilot, and at that point we were still thinking a 2-hour pilot. Ultimately, we split it in half and it became hours 1 and 2. So, I wrote those 2 along with the tenth hour finale. While I was doing that they continued breaking the episodes, and whoever was going to write hour 3 would then peel off, write an outline, and the outline would go to Starz. We’d get the notes on the outline, and then that writer would compose what we call a “weave” and it just fleshed out the outline more fully. So it was kind of a step between outline and script—a lot of sections of dialogue, almost novelistic. So we’d all have a
look at the weave, discuss it, and then that writer would go off and write. And the process would go on and on. And then I would get each finished script and do a pass to keep the voice consistent, and that kind of thing.

**NL:** Now, I would imagine that the biggest use of dramatic license was around the timelines. You have all these great events, and yet they need to be happening simultaneously for different characters. So, real or invented, the timelines kind of have to line up, just to tell the story, so that it can actually cut together and make sense that these things were all happening at the same time.

**JF:** We had this wonderful luxury in the Marco Polo mythology and that was, on his deathbed, in 1324, he was back in Venice, surrounded by his family, his relatives, and his priest. And as he was fading, they said, “You know, you’ve suffered this experience back here in Venice of being called a liar, and that you’ve made up all these stories about your travels. You’re Milioni, the teller of a million lies. You’re leaving the world now. This is your chance to set the record straight. You have nothing to lose. You can go to the Creator with a pure heart. And you can recant these tales now, or tell us at least what you made up.” And the story is that Marco is reputed to have sat up, with his last dying breath, angry, and said, “I haven’t told half of what I saw.” I put that story on the wall of the writers’ room: “I have not told half of what I saw.” And I said, “You know, we’re going to dramatize the accounts that Marco left us, and wrote about. But we’re also going to explore what he might have seen, that half he didn’t tell about.”

But always keeping it in Marco’s voice and in his spirit—and we held to that. For example, Marco talks a bit about the legend of the Hashshashin, about the Persian assassins. He tells these amazing stories about how they were out there. We put him into it, taking the idea of Marco being the special emissary of Kublai Khan, a kind of special agent, and sent him into this world that he simply talked about in the peripheral parts of his book.

**NL:** I’m sure there are also characters that you made up from whole cloth in service of story. There’s a difference between knowing what’s absolutely historically accurate, and saying, “All right, we know this isn’t exactly how it happened, but it serves story.” And then there’s, “Well, we don’t know exactly what happened, so we have a lot of latitude here.” Where do you think you stood in that, in figuring out the first season?

**JF:** Almost every character is based on history, a few come from footnotes and that’s something I’ve always loved.

*I like the nooks and crannies and footnotes of history, and looking for intriguing characters who are only referenced. And in the case of Marco Polo, it’s Mei Lin, the concubine.*
When I was researching Jia Sidao, the chancellor, I found this really interesting 2 or 3 sentences, about how he ascended in the Song Dynasty court, only because his sister was an imperial concubine. And that's how he got up there. And I thought, “So, that's fascinating. That's a really interesting psychology of the sister who got him there.” And I just built this character out of Mei Lin, just from this footnote. He resents her, but he needed her, so it was an opportunity for him to use her because concubines were notorious for being double agents and spies.

So she's rooted in history, but only a footnote. And coming from that same research into Jia Sidao, his own favorite concubine betrayed him, and he forced her to commit suicide. And that was another little footnote. That's all we had. But then we took that idea of his favorite concubine, building up to that betrayal and death dance with a tai chi sword. So, we're looking for those little historical footnotes that you can build on, and flesh out.

**NL:** What about “Hundred Eyes”?

**JF:** Hundred Eyes is a character who I created out of whole cloth, but I took his name from Mongolian history, from the court of Kublai Khan. I just couldn't resist. Hundred Eyes was the nickname of a fierce Mongolian general, but the truth behind that was, his name was Bayan of the Baarin, in Mongolian. However, in Chinese Bai Yan means Hundred Eyes and that's what the Chinese began to call this martial leader. I was working on this blind monk character and I kept coming across the name Hundred Eyes in the histories and thought, “That can be an intriguing name for my blind martial arts master. That's who he's going to be. That's the perfect name for him.” And incredibly, Hundred Eyes has become the most popular character in the series.

**NL:** At what point and how did you segue from Starz to Netflix? Did they think they were getting something more like *Spartacus* and reverse course?

**JF:** We were cranking away in the writers’ room, and going wonderfully. Every script that we turned in, the network was just so supportive of and we started prep. We started casting. We were putting together our business and production plans. I traveled to China with a line producer and applied for a permit. Unfortunately, our production plan did not line up with the production plan that Starz had in mind—which I think kind of circles right back around to what you were saying about *Spartacus*.

**NL:** Yeah, much less expensive, lots of green screen.

**JF:** Yeah, exactly. And an exec came back with concerns about the scope. We said, “This is Marco Polo, a name synonymous with epic. I mean, it's got to be big, and sumptuous, and this is how Harvey and I envision it.”
So although it stalled, everyone was so high on the project, I just didn’t believe it was going to stall forever. I just thought it was a hiccup. We had 8 scripts completed. We were at the 5-yard line. But it completely stalled. It almost killed me because I was so fired up about the show. Harvey [Weinstein] contacted me, and he said, “Look, you and I both come out of movies anyway. Why don’t we go back to your original 2-hour script, and go shoot a great Marco Polo movie?” I reminded him of our first conversation about it, and said, you know, “One cannot do the Marco Polo story in 2 hours. We’ve got a great series here. This is the kind of long-form historical show that’s getting made, that needs to get made, we’ve got to find another way.” I didn’t hear from Harvey for quite a long time. And the next I heard from him was that he had “something cooking” in TV, and he asked me to come back to LA—I was in Hawaii at the time, working.

Back in LA, I was taken over to Netflix. We walked into a room with all the Original Content execs. They all had the 8 scripts in front of them, and they were smiling—which was an encouraging sign. We sat down, and they basically said, right then and there, “We love this show. It’s the kind of show that we’ve been looking for, and we’re going to make it! And we want to support you every way we can, to go make your show as you envision it.”

NL: Netflix to the rescue. They’re risk takers. How has the experience been with them throughout production? Any substantive changes since they came on board?

JF: They’ve been great. The biggest change was the production plan and Harvey, David Glasser and Collin Creighton of TWC engineered that in a brilliant way. They found a more advantageous situation shooting in Malaysia at the new Pinewood Studios being carved out of a jungle. At the time, Marco Polo was their maiden voyage production, and we got government incentives and tax rebates.

But then veteran HBO director Dan Minahan [Deadwood, Game of Thrones] joined the team, and pushed for shooting in Kazakhstan, so we could get the wide, open steppe. And then we were able to shoot right in Venice, in the canals. And so, with incredibly epic, exotic locations, and an amazing studio lot with brand new soundstages, we were off to the races.

NL: And because at this point, you had all 10 scripts, you were able to save even more money by shooting it like a 10-hour movie, cross-boarding and block shooting?

JF: Exactly. The preparation we had: measure twice, cut once. We had the scripts written and then we had all this prep time, while we were in Malaysia, just working on each and every script, and rewriting to the sets that we had, just shaping and tightening and working with the actors. We hit the ground running. Still, it was the “run and gun” approach that makes TV so different from film. It was wild and exhilarating and we were running sometimes 3 units at once, two units and an action unit, and I was covering sets and ping ponging around. But having the scripts ready to go did really make a huge difference.
**NL:** Season 1 begins in 1271, and yet you have these themes that are so relevant today. History just keeps repeating itself. And we’re looking at a Jeb Bush versus Hillary Clinton showdown most likely in 2016. We have these recurrent themes of imperialism and dynasties. Did that perspective inform your original pitch?

**JF:** Not at the outset. But I think as we developed the season in the writers’ room, I think the writers were really aware of that, and that would come up. You know, talking about Kublai Khan and the empire and the family business behind the walls. You know the father, and it’s his sons, and the outsider coming in. One of the things that really emerged for me through the process was the theme of globalization—how topical that was. And how the Silk Road—I mean it was this interchange of political, cultural, spiritual, and technological ideas. Marco Polo was one of the early pioneers of globalization, and this bridge between east and west, and our relationship with China, and trade, and cultures, and religious tolerance.

**NL:** I was surprised by how much power some women had at that time. It wasn’t widespread, but very potent.

**JF:** Kublai Khan was a trendsetter in creating public education. Mongolian women were equal in the society with the men. I have to say that doing the research, early on, whenever I read about Chabi, the Joan Chen character, that I felt, “Wow. Man, she’s just such a surprising character for that place and time.” Kublai had advisors from all these different cultures—he had these Persian think tanks, and these Chinese Confucianists and Taoists and Buddhists. And he’d bring everyone in, and he had his minister of wars and his Hall of Invention. But at the end of the day, it was behind closed doors with Chabi, and she would guide him. She was known for really helping to run the empire, and from within. And she was also an environmentalist who would set up these drives to collect discarded bowstrings, to recycle into clothing. She ran all kinds of charities. No one went homeless, and no one went hungry. And she was a warrior. She was raised on the steppe. So the Mongolian women were really tough.

Khutulun, the wrestling princess, she’s right out of history and a fascinating character. Marco wrote half a chapter about her and her father, Kaidu. She was a fierce warrior in the tradition of Genghis Khan’s daughters. And there’s an amazing history book written by Jack Weatherford, called *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*. And what he was trying to do was restore the pages that had been torn out of *The Secret History of the Mongols* —which he believes was all about the power of their women at that time.

With the Song Dynasty, the Chinese woman, the Empress Dowager was known for being this strong and noble character, and trying to do the right thing. While Jia Sidao was bumping heads with the Mongols and refusing to work with them, she was trying to explore peaceful ways. Mei Lin, as a concubine, survived by way of wit, resourcefulness and intelligence. A few
people have said, “A woman would never be like that in those times,” but it's true—especially with the Mongolian women.

**NL:** Marco’s primary goal, and the theme of Season 1 seems to be stated as: “I want to become the man I wish my father was.” Do you and the writers approach each season with an overarching theme?

**JF:** We do, yes.

**NL:** Will that theme change or expand in Season 2?

**JF:** Yes. Even in structuring Season 1, you’re hopefully looking forward, and loosely have an overview of—this is the long, long arc of the show. And we know where it goes historically, so breaking that down, taking a step back and looking at each character, what is that journey and how does that speak to a theme for the next season? So yes, things definitely turn a corner and expand in Season 2.

**NL:** Would you say that, ideally, the DNA of that overarching theme is contained in every scene?

**JF:** Yes. Hopefully. For the viewer it's subliminal; for the writer, it's instinctual.