

S·T·O·R·Y
STORY

S·T·O·R·Y

*Substance, Structure, Style,
and the Principles of Screenwriting*

PART 4

R O B E R T M C K E E



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P A R T 4

THE
WRITER
AT WORK

The first draft of anything is shit.

— ERNEST HEMINGWAY

THE PRINCIPLE OF ANTAGONISM

In my experience, the principle of antagonism is the most important and least understood precept in story design. Neglect of this fundamental concept is the primary reason screenplays and the films made from them fail.

THE PRINCIPLE OF ANTAGONISM: A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them.

Human nature is fundamentally conservative. We never do more than we have to, expend any energy we don't have to, take any risks we don't have to, change *if we don't have to*. Why should we? Why do anything the hard way if we can get what we want the easy way? (The "easy way" is, of course, idiosyncratic and subjective.) Therefore, what will cause a protagonist to become a fully realized, multidimensional, and deeply empathetic character? What will bring a dead screenplay to life? The answer to both questions lies on the negative side of the story.

The more powerful and complex the forces of antagonism opposing the character, the more completely realized character and story *must* become. "Forces of antagonism" doesn't necessarily refer to a specific antagonist or villain. In appropriate genres arch-villains, like the Terminator, are a delight, but by "forces of antagonism" we mean

the sum total of all forces that oppose the character's will and desire.

If we study a protagonist at the moment of the Inciting Incident and weigh the sum of his willpower along with his intellectual, emotional, social, and physical capacities against the total forces of antagonism from within his humanity, plus his personal conflicts, antagonistic institutions, and environment, we should see clearly that he's an underdog. He has a chance to achieve what he wants—but only a chance. Although conflict from one aspect of his life may seem solvable, the totality of all levels should seem overwhelming as he begins his quest.

We pour energy into the negative side of a story not only to bring the protagonist and other characters to full realization—roles to challenge and attract the world's finest actors—but to take the story itself to the end of the line, to a brilliant and satisfying climax.

Following this principle, imagine writing for a super-hero. How to turn Superman into an underdog? Kryptonite is a step in the right direction, but not nearly enough. Look at the ingenious design Mario Puzo created for the first SUPERMAN feature.

Puzo pits Superman (Christopher Reeve) against Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman), who engineers a diabolical plot to launch two nuclear rockets simultaneously in opposite directions, one aimed at New Jersey, the other at California. Superman can't be in two places at once, so he'll have to make the lesser-of-two-evils choice: Which to save? New Jersey or California? He chooses New Jersey.

The second rocket hits the San Andreas Fault and starts an earthquake that threatens to heave California into the ocean. Superman dives into the fault and fuses California back to the continent through the friction of his own body. But . . . the earthquake kills Lois Lane (Margot Kidder).

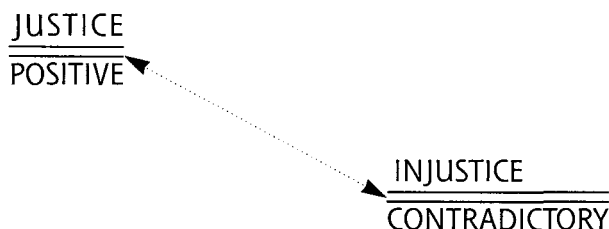
Superman kneels in tears. Suddenly, the visage of Jor-El (Marlon Brando) appears and says: "Thou shalt not interfere with human destiny." A dilemma of irreconcilable goods: his father's sacred rule versus the life of the woman he loves. He violates his father's law, flies around the Earth, reverses the spin of the planet, turns back time, and resurrects Lois Lane—a happily-ever-after fantasy, taking Superman from underdog to a virtual god.

TAKING STORY AND CHARACTER TO THE END OF THE LINE

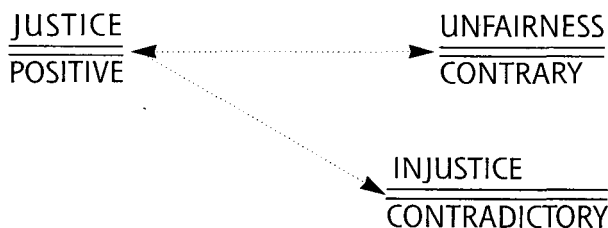
Does your story contain negative forces of such power that the positive side *must* gain surpassing quality? Below is a technique to guide your self-critique and answer that critical question.

Begin by identifying the primary value at stake in your story. For example, Justice. Generally, the protagonist will represent the positive charge of this value; the forces of antagonism, the negative. Life, however, is subtle and complex, rarely a case of yes/no, good/evil, right/wrong. There are degrees of negativity.

First, the *Contradictory* value, the direct opposite of the positive. In this case, Injustice. Laws have been broken.



Between the Positive value and its Contradictory, however, is the *Contrary*: a situation that's somewhat negative but not fully the opposite. The Contrary of justice is unfairness, a situation that's negative but not necessarily illegal: nepotism, racism, bureaucratic delay, bias, inequities of all kinds. Perpetrators of unfairness may not break the law, but they're neither just nor fair.



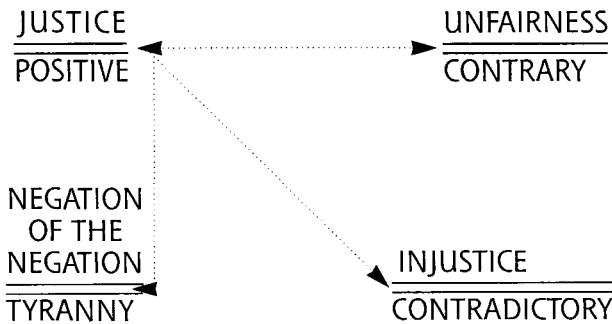
The Contradictory, however, is not the limit of human experience. At the end of the line waits the *Negation of the Negation*, a force of antagonism that's doubly negative.

Our subject is life, not arithmetic. In life two negatives don't make a positive. In English double negatives are ungrammatical, but Italian uses double and even triple negatives so that a statement *feels* like its meaning. In anguish an Italian might say, "Non ho niente mia!" (I don't have nothing never!). Italians know life. Double negatives turn positive only in math and formal logic. In life things just get worse and worse and worse.

A story that progresses to the limit of human experience in depth and breadth of conflict must move through a pattern that includes the Contrary, the Contradictory, and the Negation of the Negation.

(The positive mirror image of this negative declension runs from *Good* to *Better* to *Best* to *Perfect*. But for mysterious reasons, working with this progression is of no help to the storyteller.)

Negation of the Negation means a compound negative in which a life situation turns not just quantitatively but *qualitatively* worse. The Negation of the Negation is at the limit of the dark powers of human nature. In terms of justice, this state is *tyranny*. Or, in a phrase that applies to personal as well as social politics: "Might Makes Right."



Consider TV detective series: Do they go to the limit? The protagonists of *Spenser: For Hire*, *Quincy*, *Columbo*, and *Murder, She Wrote* represent justice and struggle to preserve this ideal. First,

they face unfairness: Bureaucrats won't let Quincy do the autopsy, a politician pulls strings to get Columbo off the case, Spenser's client lies to him. After struggling through gaps of expectation powered by forces of unfairness, the cop discovers true injustice: A crime has been committed. He defeats these forces and restores society to justice. The forces of antagonism in most crime dramas rarely reach beyond the Contradictory.

Compare this pattern to *MISSING*, a fact-based film about American Ed Horman (Jack Lemmon), who searched Chile for a son who disappeared during a coup d'état. In Act One he meets unfairness: The U.S. ambassador (Richard Venture) feeds him half-truths, hoping to dissuade his search. But Horman perseveres. At the *Act Two Climax* he uncovers a grievous injustice: The junta murdered his son . . . with the complicity of the U.S. State Department and the CIA. Horman then tries to right this wrong, but in Act Three he reaches *the end of the line*—persecution without hope of retribution.

Chile is in the grip of tyranny. The generals can make illegal on Tuesday what you did legally on Monday, arrest you for it on Wednesday, execute you on Thursday, and make it legal again Friday morning. Justice does not exist; the tyrant makes it up at his whim. *MISSING* is a searing revelation of the final limits of injustice . . . with irony: Although Horman couldn't indict the tyrants in Chile, he exposed them onscreen in front of the world—which may be a sweeter kind of justice.

The *Black Comedy* . . . *AND JUSTICE FOR ALL* goes one step further. It pursues justice full cycle back to the Positive. In Act One attorney Arthur Kirkland (Al Pacino) struggles against unfairness: the Baltimore Bar Association pressures him to inform against other lawyers while a cruel judge (John Forsythe) uses red tape to block the retrial of Kirkland's innocent client. In Act Two he confronts injustice: The same judge is charged with brutally beating and raping a woman.

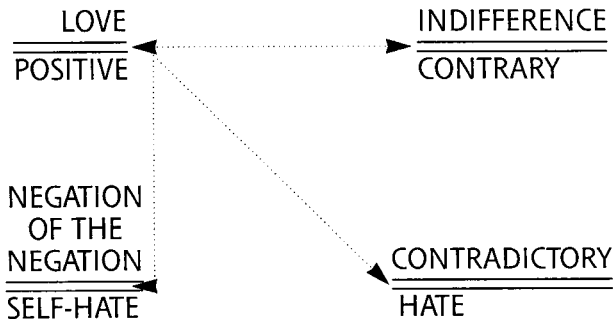
But the judge has a scheme: It's well known that the judge and attorney hate each other. Indeed, the lawyer recently punched the judge in public. So the judge will force this lawyer to represent him

in court. When Kirkland appears to defend him, press and jury will perceive the judge as innocent, believing that no lawyer who hates a man would defend him unless he knew for certain that the accused was innocent, and is there on principle. The lawyer tries to escape this jam but hits the Negation of the Negation, a “legal” tyranny of high-court judges who blackmail him to represent their friend. If he doesn’t, they’ll expose a past indiscretion of his and have him disbarred.

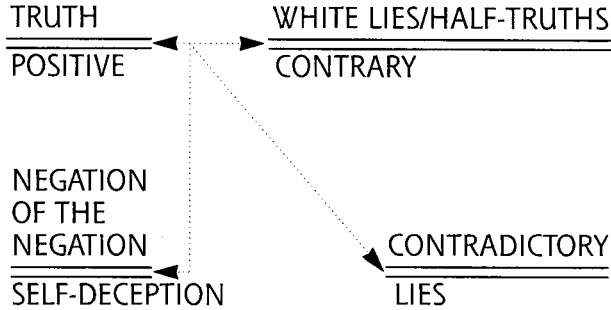
The lawyer, however, battles through unfairness, injustice, and tyranny by breaking the law: He steps in front of the jury and announces that his client “did it.” He knows that his client is the rapist, he says, because his client told him. He destroys the judge in public and wins justice for the victim. And although this stunt ends the lawyer’s career, justice now shines like a diamond, for it isn’t the momentary justice that comes when criminals are put behind bars, but the grand justice that brings down tyrants.

The difference between the Contradictory and the Negation of the Negation of justice is the difference between the relatively limited and temporary power of those who break the law versus the unlimited and enduring power of those who make the law. It’s the difference between a world where law exists and a world where might makes right. The absolute depth of injustice is not criminality, but “legal” crimes committed by governments against their own citizens.

Below are more examples to demonstrate how this declension works in other stories and genres. First, love:

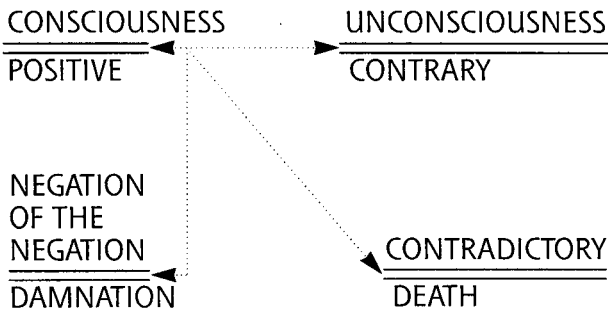


When the primary value is truth:



White lies are the Contrary because they're often told to do good: lovers waking up with pillow creases branded across their faces, telling each other how beautiful they look. The blatant liar knows the truth, then buries it to gain advantage. But when we lie to ourselves and believe it, truth vanishes and we're at the Negation of the Negation: Blanche in *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*.

If the positive were Consciousness, being fully alive and aware:

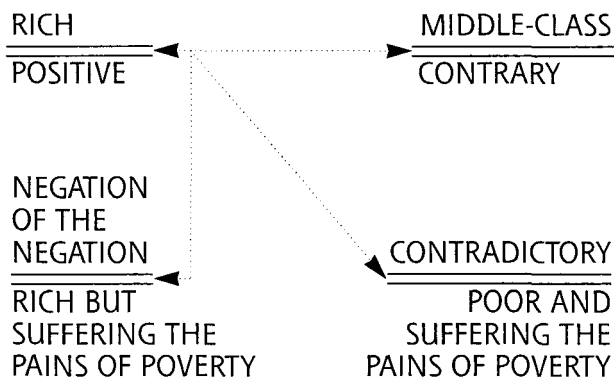


This is the declension of *Horror* films in which the antagonist is supernatural: *DRACULA*, *ROSEMARY'S BABY*. But we don't have to be religious to grasp the meaning of *damnation*. Whether or not hell exists, this world provides its own Infernos, plights in which death would be a mercy and we'd beg for it.

Consider THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE. Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey) seems fully alive and aware. Then we learn that he's been brainwashed by posthypnotic suggestion, a form of unconsciousness. Under this power he commits a string of murders, including that of his own wife, but does so with a degree of innocence, for he's a pawn in a vicious conspiracy. But when he recovers his mind and realizes what he's done and what's been done to him, he's taken down to hell.

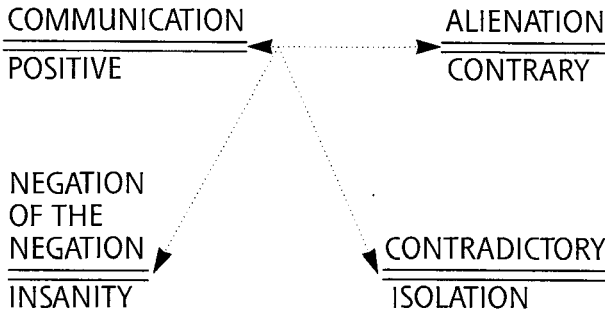
He learns he was brainwashed on the order of his incestuous, power-mad mother, who's using him in a plot to seize control of the White House. Raymond could risk his life to expose his traitorous mother or kill her. He chooses to kill, not only his mother but his stepfather and himself as well, damning the three at once in a shocking climax at the Negation of the Negation.

If the positive were wealth:



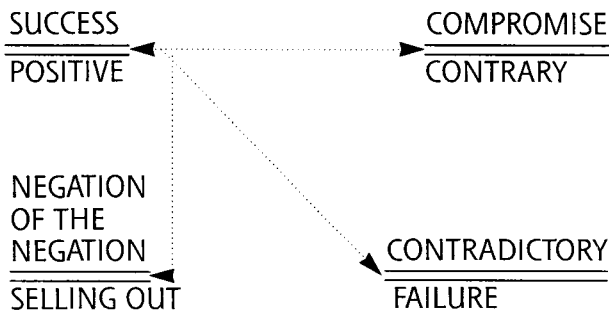
In WALL STREET Gekko feels impoverished because no amount of money is enough. A billionaire, he acts as if he were a starving thief, grasping for money at any illegal opportunity.

If the positive were open communication between people:



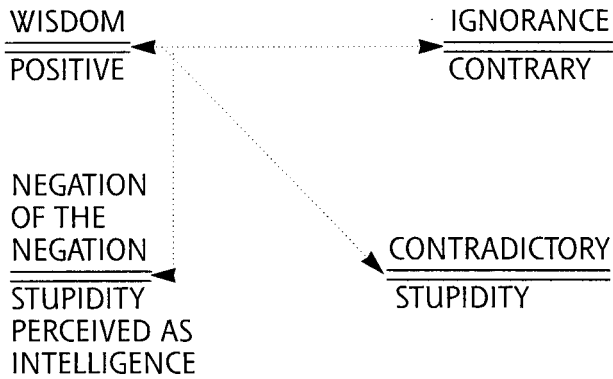
The Contrary has many varieties—silence, misunderstanding, emotional blocks. The all-inclusive term “alienation” means a situation of being with people, but feeling cut off and unable to fully communicate. In isolation, however, there’s no one to talk to except yourself. When you lose this and suffer a loss of communication within your mind, you’re at the Negation of the Negation and insane: Trelkovsky in *THE TENANT*.

Full achievement of ideals or goals:



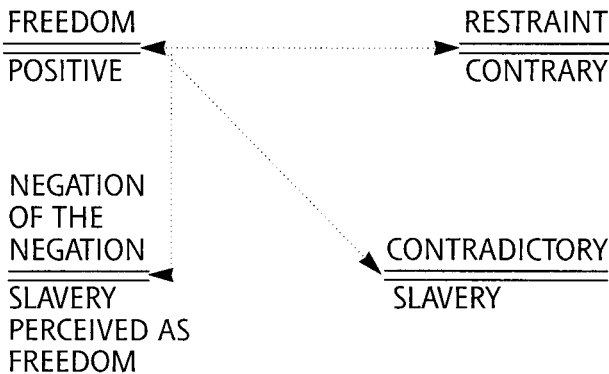
Compromise means “settling for less,” the willingness to fall short of your ideal but not surrender it completely. The Negation of the Negation, however, is something people in show business have to guard against. Thoughts such as: “I can’t make the fine films I’d like to make . . . but there’s money in pornography”: *THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS* and *MEPHISTO*.

Intelligence:



Ignorance is temporary stupidity due to a lack of information, but stupidity is resolute, no matter how much information is given. The Negation of the Negation cuts both ways: inwardly, when a stupid person believes he's intelligent, a conceit of numerous comic characters, or outwardly, when society thinks a stupid person is intelligent: BEING THERE.

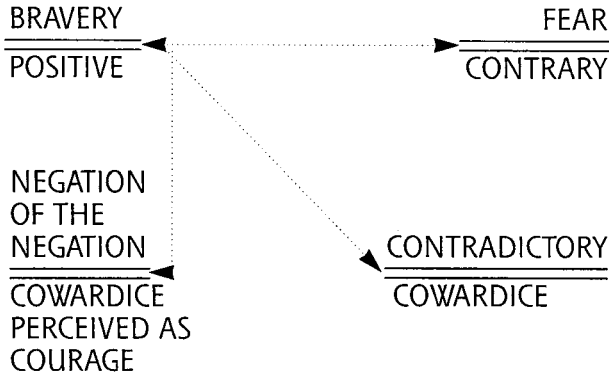
Liberty:



Restraint has many shades. Laws bind us but make civilization possible, while imprisonment is fully negative, although society finds it useful. The Negation of the Negation works two ways. Inwardly: *Selfenslavement* is qualitatively worse than slavery. A slave has his free will and would do all he could to escape. But to corrode your willpower with drugs or alcohol and turn yourself into

a slave is far worse. Outwardly: *Slavery perceived as freedom* impels the novel and films 1984.

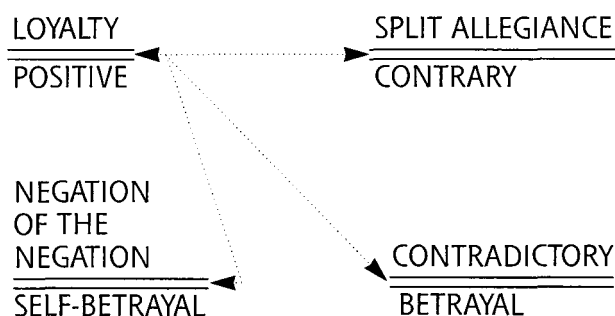
Courage:



A courageous person can be temporarily stifled when fear strikes, but eventually he acts. The coward does not. *The end of the line* is reached, however, when a coward takes an action that outwardly appears courageous: A battle rages around a foxhole. In it a wounded officer turns to a coward and says: “Jack, your buddies are running out of ammo. Take these boxes of shells through the minefield or they’ll be overrun.” So the coward takes out his gun . . . and shoots the officer. At first glance we might think it would take courage to shoot an officer, but we’d soon realize that this was an act at the sheer limit of cowardice.

In *COMING HOME* Captain Boy Hyde (Bruce Dern) shoots himself in the leg to get out of Vietnam. Later, at the Crisis of his subplot Hyde faces the lesser of two evils: life with its humiliation and pain versus death with its dread of the unknown. He takes the easier path and drowns himself. Although some suicides are courageous, such as those of political prisoners on a hunger strike, in most cases the suicide reaches *the end of the line* and takes an action that may appear brave but lacks the courage to live.

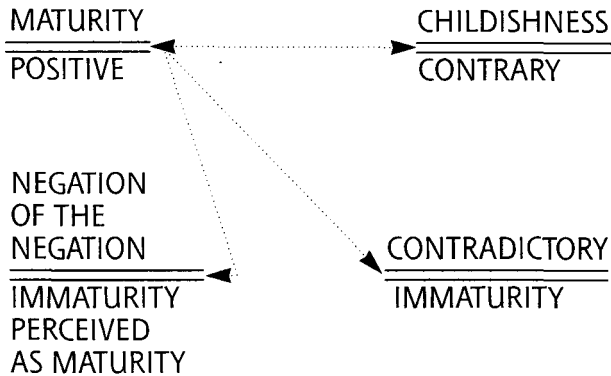
Loyalty:



Contrary: A married woman falls in love with another man, but doesn't act on it. Secretly, she feels loyalty to both men, but when her husband learns of it, he sees her split allegiance as a betrayal. She defends herself, arguing that she didn't sleep with the other man, so she was never disloyal. The difference between feeling and action is often subjective.

In the mid-nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was losing its grip on Cyprus and the island was soon to fall to British rule. In *PASCALI'S ISLAND*, Pascali (Ben Kingsley) spies for the Turkish government, but he's a frightened man whose bland reports go unread. This lonely soul is befriended by a British couple (Charles Dance and Helen Mirren) who offer him a happier life in England. They're the only people who have ever taken Pascali seriously, and he's drawn to them. Although they claim to be archaeologists, in time he suspects they're British spies (split allegiance) and betrays them. Only when they're killed does he discover they were antiquity thieves after an ancient statue. His betrayal tragically betrays his own hopes and dreams.

Maturity:

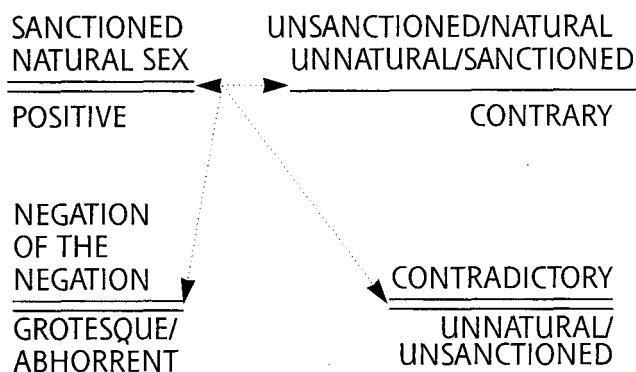


At the Inciting Incident of *BIG* the adolescent Josh Baskin (David Moscow) is transformed into what appears to be a thirty-two-year-old man (Tom Hanks). The film jumps immediately to the Negation of the Negation, then explores the grays and blacks of negativity. When Josh and his boss (Robert Loggia) tap dance on a toy piano at F.A.O. Schwartz, this is childish, but more positive than negative. When Josh and his coworker (John Heard) play “keep away” on the handball court, this is perfectly childish. In fact, we come to realize that the whole adult world is a playground full of children playing corporate “keep away.”

At the Crisis Josh faces irreconcilable goods: an adult life with a fulfilling career and the woman he loves versus a return to adolescence. He makes the mature choice to have his childhood, expressing with a fine irony that he has at last become “big.” For he and we sense that the key to maturity is to have had a complete childhood. But because life has short-changed so many of us in youth, we live, to one degree or another, at the Negation of the Negation of maturity. *BIG* is a very wise film.

Lastly, consider a story in which the positive value is sanctioned natural sex. *Sanctioned* meaning condoned by society; *natural* meaning sex for procreation, attendant pleasure, and an expression of love.

Under the Contrary falls acts of extramarital and premarital sex that, although natural, are frowned on. Society often does more



than frown on prostitution, but it's arguably natural. Bigamy, polygamy, polyandry, and interracial and common-law marriage are condoned in some societies, unsanctioned in others. Chastity is arguably unnatural, but no one's going to stop you from being celibate, while sex with someone who has taken a vow of celibacy, such as a priest or a nun, is frowned on by the Church.

Under the Contradictory, humanity seems to know no limit of invention: voyeurism, pornography, satyriasis, nymphomania, fetishism, exhibitionism, frottage, transvestism, incest, rape, pedophilia, and sadomasochism, to name only a few acts that are unsanctioned and unnatural.

Homosexuality and bisexuality are difficult to place. In some societies they're thought natural, in others, unnatural. In many Western countries homosexuality is sanctioned; in some Third World countries it's still a hanging offense. Many of these designations may seem arbitrary, for sex is relative to social and personal perception.

But common perversions are not the end of the line. They're singular and committed, even with violence, with another human being. When, however, the sexual object is from another species—bestiality—or dead—necrophilia—or when compounds of perversities pile up, the mind revolts.

CHINATOWN: The end of the line of sanctioned natural sex is not incest. It's only a Contradictory. In this film the Negation of the Negation is incest with the offspring of your own incest. This is why Evelyn Mulwray risks her life to keep her child from her

father. She knows he's mad and will do it again. This is the motivation for the murder. Cross killed his son-in-law because Mulwray wouldn't tell him where his daughter by his daughter was hiding. This is what will happen after the Climax as Cross covers the terrified child's eyes and pulls her away from her mother's horrific death.

The principle of the Negation of the Negation applies not only to the tragic but to the comic. The comic world is a chaotic, wild place where actions must go to the limit. If not, the laughs falls flat. Even the light entertainment of Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers films touched the end of the line. They turned on the value of truth as Fred Astaire traditionally played a character suffering from self-deception, telling himself he was in love with the glitzy girl when we knew that his heart really belonged to Ginger.

Fine writers have always understood that opposite values are not the limit of human experience. If a story stops at the Contradictory value, or worse, the Contrary, it echoes the hundreds of mediocrities we suffer every year. For a story that is simply about love/hate, truth/lie, freedom/slavery, courage/cowardice, and the like is almost certain to be trivial. If a story does not reach the Negation of the Negation, it may strike the audience as satisfying—but never brilliant, never sublime.

All other factors of talent, craft, and knowledge being equal, greatness is found in the writer's treatment of the negative side.

If your story seems unsatisfying and lacking in some way, tools are needed to penetrate its confusions and perceive its flaws. When a story is weak, the inevitable cause is that forces of antagonism are weak. Rather than spending your creativity trying to invent likable, attractive aspects of protagonist and world, build the negative side to create a chain reaction that pays off naturally and honestly on the positive dimensions.

The first step is to question the values at stake and their progression. What are the positive values? Which is preeminent and turns the Story Climax? Do the forces of antagonism explore all shades of negativity? Do they reach the power of the Negation of the Negation at some point?

Generally, progressions run from the Positive to the Contrary in Act One, to the Contradictory in later acts, and finally to the Negation of the Negation in the last act, either ending tragically or going back to the Positive with a profound difference. *BIG*, on the other hand, leaps to the Negation of the Negation, then illuminates all degrees of immaturity. *CASABLANCA* is even more radical. It opens at the Negation of the Negation with Rick living in fascist tyranny, suffering self-hatred and self-deception, then works to a positive climax for all three values. Anything is possible, but *the end of the line* must be reached.

15

EXPOSITION

SHOW, DON'T TELL

Exposition means facts—the information about setting, biography, and characterization that the audience needs to know to follow and comprehend the events of the story.

Within the first pages of a screenplay a reader can judge the relative skill of the writer simply by noting how he handles exposition. Well-done exposition doesn't guarantee a superb story, but it does tell us that the writer knows the craft. Skill in exposition means making it *invisible*. As the story progresses, the audience absorbs all it needs to know effortlessly, even unconsciously.

The famous axiom "Show, don't tell" is the key. Never force words into a character's mouth to *tell* the audience about world, history, or person. Rather, *show* us honest, natural scenes in which human beings talk and behave in honest, natural ways . . . yet at the same time indirectly pass along the necessary facts. In other words, *dramatize exposition*.

Dramatized exposition serves two ends: Its primary purpose is to further the immediate conflict. Its secondary purpose is to convey information. The anxious novice reverses that order, putting expositional duty ahead of dramatic necessity.

For example: Jack says, "Harry, how the hell long have we known one another? What? About twenty years, huh? Ever since we were at college together. That's a long time, isn't it, Harry? Well, how the hell are ya this morning?" Those lines have no purpose

except to tell the eavesdropping audience that Jack and Harry are friends, went to school together twenty years ago, and they haven't had lunch yet—a deadly beat of unnatural behavior. No one ever tells someone something they both already know unless saying the obvious fills another and compelling need. Therefore, if this information is needed, the writer must create a motivation for the dialogue that's greater than the facts.

To dramatize exposition apply this mnemonic principle: *Convert exposition to ammunition*. Your characters know their world, their history, each other, and themselves. Let them use what they know as ammunition in their struggle to get what they want. Converting the above to ammunition: Jack, reacting to Harry's stifled yawn and bloodshot eyes, says, "Harry, look at you. The same hippie haircut, still stoned by noon, the same juvenile stunts that got you kicked out of school twenty years ago. Are you ever gonna wake up and smell the coffee?" The audience's eye jumps across the screen to see Harry's reaction and indirectly hears "twenty years" and "school."

"Show, don't tell," by the way, doesn't mean that it's all right to pan the camera down a mantelpiece on a series of photographs that take Harry and Jack from their university days to boot camp to the double wedding to opening their dry cleaning business. That's telling, not showing. Asking the camera to do it turns a feature film into a home movie. "Show, don't tell" means that characters *and camera* behave truthfully.

Dealing with the knotty problems of exposition so intimidates some writers that they try to get it all out of the way as soon as possible, so the studio script analyst can concentrate on their stories. But when forced to wade through an Act One stuffed with exposition, the reader realizes that this is an amateur who can't handle the basic craft, and skims to the last scenes.

Confident writers parse out exposition, bit by bit, through the entire story, often revealing exposition well into the Climax of the last act. They follow these two principles: Never include anything the audience can reasonably and easily assume has happened. Never pass on exposition unless the missing fact would cause con-

fusion. You do not keep the audience's interest by giving it information, but by *withholding* information, except that which is absolutely necessary for comprehension.

Pace the exposition. Like all else, exposition must have a progressive pattern: Therefore, the least important facts come in early, the next most important later, the critical facts last. And what are the critical pieces of exposition? Secrets. The painful truths characters do not want known.

In other words, don't write "California scenes." "California scenes" are scenes in which two characters who hardly know each other sit down over coffee and immediately begin an intimate discussion of the deep, dark secrets of their lives: "Oh, I had a rotten childhood. To punish me my mother used to flush my head in the toilet." "Huh! You think you had a bad childhood. To punish me my father put dog shit in my shoes and made me to go to school like that."

Unguardedly honest and painful confessions between people who have just met are forced and false. When this is pointed out to writers, they will argue that it actually happens, that people share very personal things with total strangers. And I agree. But only in California. Not in Arizona, New York, London, Paris, or anywhere else in the world.

A certain breed of West Coaster carries around prepared deep dark secrets to share with one another at cocktail parties to validate themselves one to the other as authentic Californians—"centered" and "in touch with their inner beings." When I'm standing over the tortilla dip at such parties and somebody tells me about dog shit in his Keds as a child, my thought is: "Wow! If that's the prepared deep dark secret he tells people over the guacamole, what's the real stuff?" For there's always something else. Whatever is said hides what cannot be said.

Evelyn Mulwray's confession, "She's my sister and my daughter" is nothing she would share over cocktails. She tells Gittes this to keep her child out of her father's hands. "You can't kill me, Luke, I'm your father" is a truth Darth Vader never wanted to tell his son, but if he doesn't, he'll have to kill or be killed by his child.

These are honest and powerful moments because the pressure of life is squeezing these characters between the lesser of two evils. And where in a well-crafted story is pressure the greatest? At *the end of the line*. The wise writer, therefore, obeys the first principle of temporal art: *Save the best for last*. For if we reveal too much too soon, the audience will see the climaxes coming long before they arrive.

Reveal only that exposition the audience absolutely needs and wants to know and no more.

On the other hand, since the writer controls the telling, he controls the need and desire to know. If at a certain point in the telling, a piece of exposition must be known or the audience wouldn't be able to follow, create the desire to know by arousing curiosity. Put the question "Why?" in the filmgoer's mind. "Why is this character behaving this way? Why doesn't this or that happen? Why?" With a hunger for information, even the most complicated set of dramatized facts will pass smoothly into understanding.

One way to cope with biographical exposition is to start the telling in the protagonist's childhood and then work through all the decades of his life. *THE LAST EMPEROR*, for example, covers over sixty years in the life of Pu Yi (John Lone). The story strings together scenes from his infancy when he's made Emperor of China, his teenage years and youthful marriage, his Western education, his fall into decadence, his years as a Japanese stooge, life under the Communists, and his last days as a laborer in Peking's Botanical Gardens. *LITTLE BIG MAN* spans a century. *CARNAL KNOWLEDGE*, *FAREWELL*, *MY CONCUBINE*, and *SHINE* all start in youth and leapfrog through the key events of the protagonists' lives into middle age or beyond.

However, as convenient as that design may be in terms of exposition, the vast majority of protagonists cannot be followed from birth to death for this reason: Their story would have no Spine. To tell a story that spans a lifetime a Spine of enormous power and persistence must be created. But for most characters, what single, deep desire, aroused out of an Inciting Incident in childhood, would go unquenched for decades? This is why nearly all tellings pursue the protagonist's Spine over months, weeks, even hours.

If, however, an elastic, endurable *Spine* can be created, then a story can be told over decades without being episodic. Episodic does not mean “covering long stretches of time” but rather “sporadic, irregular intervals.” A story told over twenty-four hours could well be episodic if everything that happens in that day is unconnected to everything else that happens. On the other hand, *LITTLE BIG MAN* is unified around a man’s quest to prevent the genocide of Native Americans by the whites—an atrocity that spanned generations, therefore a century of storytelling. *CARNAL KNOWLEDGE* is driven by a man’s blind need to humiliate and destroy women, a soul-poisoning desire he never fathoms.

In *THE LAST EMPEROR* a man spends his life trying to answer the question: Who am I? At age three Pu Yi is made Emperor but has no idea what that means. To him a palace is a playground. He clings to his childhood identity until as a teenager he’s still nursing from the breast. The Imperial officials insist he act like an emperor, but he then discovers there is no empire. Burdened with a false identity, he tries on one personality after another but none fit: first English scholar and gentleman; then sex athlete and hedonist; later international bon vivant doing Sinatra imitations at posh parties; next a statesman, only to end up a puppet to the Japanese. Finally, the Communists give him his last identity—gardener.

FAREWELL, MY CONCUBINE tells of Dieyi’s (Leslie Cheung) fifty-year quest to live in the truth. When he is a child, the masters of the Peking Opera ruthlessly beat, brainwash, and force him to confess that he has a female nature—when he does not. If he did, torture wouldn’t be necessary. He’s effeminate, but like many effeminate men he is at heart male. So, forced to live a lie, he hates all lies, personal and political. From that point on all the conflicts in the story stem from his desire to speak the truth. But in China only liars survive. Finally realizing that truth is an impossibility, he takes his own life.

Because lifelong *Spines* are rare, we take Aristotle’s advice to begin stories *in medias res*, “in the midst of things.” After locating the date of the climactic event of the protagonist’s life, we begin

as close in time to it as possible. This design compresses the telling's duration, and lengthens the character's biography before the Inciting Incident. For example, if the Climax occurs on the day a character turns thirty-five, instead of starting the film when he's a teenager, we open the film perhaps a month before his birthday. This gives the protagonist thirty-five years of living to build the maximum value into his existence. As a result, when his life goes out of balance, he is now at risk and the story is filled with conflict.

Consider, for example, the difficulties of writing a story about a homeless alcoholic. What has he to lose? Virtually nothing. To a soul enduring the unspeakable stress of the streets, death may be a mercy, and a change in the weather might give him that. Lives with little or no value beyond their existence are pathetic to witness, but with so little at stake, the writer is reduced to painting a static portrait of suffering.

Rather, we tell stories about people who have something to lose—family, careers, ideals, opportunities, reputations, realistic hopes and dreams. When such lives go out of balance, the characters are placed at jeopardy. They stand to lose what they have in their struggle to achieve a rebalancing of existence. Their battle, risking hard-won values against the forces of antagonism, generates conflict. And when story is thick with conflict, the characters need all the ammunition they can get. As a result, the writer has little trouble dramatizing exposition and facts flow naturally and invisibly into the action. But when stories lack conflict, the writer is forced into “table dusting.”

Here, for example, is how many playwrights of the nineteenth century handled exposition: The curtain comes up on a living room set. Enter two domestics: One who's worked there for the last thirty years, the other the young maid just hired that morning. The older maid turns to the newcomer and says, “Oh, you don't know about Dr. Johnson and his family, do you? Well, let me tell you . . .” And as they dust the furniture the older maid lays out the entire life history, world, and characterizations of the Johnson family. That's “table dusting,” unmotivated exposition.

And we still see it today.

OUTBREAK: In the opening sequence, Colonel Daniels (Dustin Hoffman) flies to West Africa to halt an outbreak of the Ebola virus. On board is a young medical assistant. Daniels turns to him and says, in effect, “You don’t know about Ebola, do you?” and lays out the pathology of the virus. If the young assistant is untrained to fight a disease that threatens all human life on the planet, what’s he doing on this mission? Any time you find yourself writing a line of dialogue in which one character is telling another something that they both already know or should know, ask yourself, is it dramatized? Is it exposition as ammunition? If not, cut it.

If you can thoroughly dramatize exposition and make it invisible, if you can control its disclosure, parsing it out only when and if the audience needs and wants to know it, saving the best for last, you’re learning your craft. But what’s a problem for beginning writers becomes an invaluable asset to those who know the craft. Rather than avoiding exposition by giving their characters an anonymous past, they go out of their way to salt their biographies with significant events. Because what is the challenge that the storyteller faces dozens of times over in the telling? How to turn the scene. How to create Turning Points.

THE USE OF BACKSTORY

We can turn scenes only one of two ways: on action or on revelation. There are no other means. If, for example, we have a couple in a positive relationship, in love and together, and want to turn it to the negative, in hate and apart, we could do it on action: She slaps him across the face and says, “I’m not taking this anymore. It’s over.” Or on revelation: He looks at her and says, “I’ve been having an affair with your sister for the last three years. What are you going to do about it?”

Powerful revelations come from the BACKSTORY—previous significant events in the lives of the characters

that the writer can reveal at critical moments to create Turning Points.

CHINATOWN: “She’s my sister and my daughter” is exposition, saved to create a stunning revelation that turns the second act Climax and sets up a spiraling Act Three. THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: “You can’t kill me, Luke, I’m your father” is exposition from the Backstory of STAR WARS saved to create the greatest possible effect, to turn the Climax and set up an entire new film, RETURN OF THE JEDI.

Robert Towne could have exposed the Cross family incest early in CHINATOWN by having Gittes unearth this fact from a disloyal servant. George Lucas could have exposed Luke’s paternity by having C3PO warn R2D2, “Don’t tell Luke, he’d really be upset to hear this, but Darth’s his dad.” Rather, they used Backstory exposition to create explosive Turning Points that open the gap between expectation and result, and deliver a rush of insight. With few exceptions, scenes cannot be turned on nothing but action, action, action. Inevitably we need a mix of action and revelation. Revelations, in fact, tend to have more impact, and so we often reserve them for the major Turning Points, act climaxes.

FLASHBACKS

The *flashback* is simply another form of exposition. Like all else, it’s done either well or ill. In other words, rather than boring the audience with long, unmotivated, exposition-filled dialogue passages, we could bore it with unwanted, dull, fact-filled flashbacks. Or we do it well. A flashback can work wonders if we follow the fine principles of conventional exposition.

First, dramatize flashbacks.

Rather than flashing back to flat scenes in the past, interpolate a minidrama into the story with its own Inciting Incident, progressions, and Turning Point. Although producers often claim that

flashbacks slow a film's pace, and indeed badly done they do, a well-done flashback actually accelerates pace.

CASABLANCA: The Paris Flashback comes at the opening of Act Two. Rick is crying in his whiskey, drunk and depressed, the film's rhythm deliberately retarding to relieve the tension of the Act One Climax. But as Rick remembers his affair with Ilsa, the flashback to the tale of their love affair while the Nazis invade Paris sweeps the film into an ever swifter pace that peaks around a sequence Climax as Ilsa runs out on Rick.

RESERVOIR DOGS: The Inciting Incident of a *Murder Mystery* combines two events: A murder is committed; the protagonist discovers the crime. Agatha Christie, however, opens her stories with only the second half—a closet door opens and a body falls out. By starting with the discovery of the crime, she arouses curiosity in two directions: Into the past, how and why was the murder committed? Into the future, which of the many suspects did it?

Tarantino's design simply reworks Agatha Christie. After introducing his characters, Tarantino launched the film by skipping over the first half of the Inciting Incident—the botched heist—and cut immediately to the second half—the getaway. With one of the thieves wounded in the backseat of the getaway car we instantly realize the robbery has gone bad and our curiosity runs into the past and future. What went wrong? How will it turn out? Having created the need and desire to know both answers, whenever pace in the warehouse scenes flagged, Tarantino flashed back to the high-speed action of the heist. A simple idea, but no one had ever done it with such daring, and what could have been a less than energetic film had solid pace.

Second, do not bring in a flashback until you have created in the audience the need and desire to know.

CASABLANCA: The Act One Climax is also the Central Plot's Inciting Incident as Ilsa suddenly reappears in Rick's life and they share a powerful exchange of looks over Sam's piano. There follows a scene of cocktail chat, double entendres, and subtext that hint at a

past relationship and a passion still very much alive. As Act Two opens, the audience is burning with curiosity, wondering what went on between these two in Paris. Then and only then, when the audience needs and wants to know, do the writers flash back.

We must realize that a screenplay is not a novel. Novelists can directly invade the thoughts and feelings of characters. We cannot. Novelists, therefore, can indulge the luxury of free association. We cannot. The prose writer can, if he wishes, walk a character past a shop window, have him look inside and remember his entire childhood: "He was walking through his hometown that afternoon when he glanced over at the barbershop and remembered the days when his father would take him there as a boy and he'd sit among the old-timers as they smoked cigars and talked about baseball. It was there that he first heard the word 'sex' and ever since he's unable to sleep with a woman without thinking he was hitting a home run."

Exposition in prose is relatively easy, but the camera is an X-ray machine for all things false. If we try to force exposition into a film through novel-like free associative editing or semisubliminal flutter cuts that "glimpse" a character's thoughts, it strikes us as contrived.

DREAM SEQUENCES

The *Dream Sequence* is exposition in a ball gown. Everything said above applies doubly to these usually feeble efforts to disguise information in Freudian clichés. One of the few effective uses of a dream opens Ingmar Bergman's *WILD STRAWBERRIES*.

MONTAGE

In the American use of this term, a montage is a series of rapidly cut images that radically condenses or expands time and often employs optical effects such as wipes, irises, split screens, dissolves, or other multiple images. The high energy of such sequences is used to mask their purpose: the rather mundane task of conveying information. Like the Dream Sequence, the montage

is an effort to make undramatized exposition less boring by keeping the audience's eye busy. With few exceptions, montages are a lazy attempt to substitute decorative photography and editing for dramatization and are, therefore, to be avoided.

VOICE-OVER NARRATION

Voice-over narration is yet another way to divulge exposition. Like the Flashback, it's done well or ill. The test of narration is this: Ask yourself, "If I were to strip the voice-over out of my screenplay, would the story still be well told?" If the answer is yes . . . keep it in. Generally, the principle "Less is more" applies: the more economical the technique, the more impact it has. Therefore, anything that can be cut should be cut. There are, however, exceptions. If narration can be removed and the story still stands on its feet well told, then you've probably used narration for the only good reason—as counterpoint.

Counterpoint narration is Woody Allen's great gift. If we were to cut the voice-over from *HANNAH AND HER SISTERS* or *HUSBANDS AND WIVES* his stories would still be lucid and effective. But why would we? His narration offers wit, ironies, and insights that can't be done any other way. Voice-over to add nonnarrative counterpoint can be delightful.

Occasionally, brief telling narration, especially at the opening or during transitions between acts, such as in *BARRY LYNDON*, is inoffensive, *but the trend toward using telling narration throughout a film threatens the future of our art*. More and more films by some of the finest directors from Hollywood and Europe indulge in this indolent practice. They saturate the screen with lush photography and lavish production values, then tie images together with a voice droning on the soundtrack, turning the cinema into what was once known as *Classic Comic Books*.

Many of us were first exposed to the works of major writers by reading *Classic Comics*, novels in cartoon images with captions that told the story. That's fine for children, but it's not cinema. The art of cinema connects Image A via editing, camera, or lens

movement with Image B, and the effect is meanings C, D, and E, *expressed without explanation*. Recently, film after film slides a steady-cam through rooms and corridors, up and down streets, panning sets and cast while a narrator talks, talks, talks voice-over, telling us about a character's upbringing, or his dreams and fears, or explaining the politics of the story's society—until the film becomes little more than multimillion-dollar books-on-tape, illustrated.

It takes little talent and less effort to fill a soundtrack with explanation. “Show, don't tell” is a call for artistry and discipline, a warning to us not to give in to laziness but to set *creative limitations* that demand the fullest use of imagination and sweat. Dramatizing every turn into a natural, seamless flow of scenes is hard work, but when we allow ourselves the comfort of “on the nose” narration we gut our creativity, eliminate the audience's curiosity, and destroy narrative drive.

More importantly, “Show, don't tell” means respect the intelligence and sensitivity of your audience. Invite them to bring their best selves to the ritual, to watch, think, feel, and draw their own conclusions. Do not put them on your knee as if they were children and “explain” life, for the misuse and overuse of narration is not only slack, it's patronizing. And if the trend toward it continues, cinema will degrade into adulterated novels and our art will shrivel.

To study the skillful design of exposition, I suggest a close analysis of JFK. Obtain Oliver Stone's screenplay and/or the video and break the film down, scene by scene, listing all the facts, indisputable or alleged, it contains. Then note how Stone splintered this Mount Everest of information into its vital pieces, dramatized each bit, pacing the progression of revelations. It is a masterpiece of craftsmanship.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

This chapter examines eight enduring problems, from how to hold interest, to how to adapt from other media, to how to cope with holes in logic. For each problem the craft provides solutions.

THE PROBLEM OF INTEREST

Marketing may entice an audience into the theatre, but once the ritual begins, it needs compelling reasons to stay involved. A story must capture interest, hold it unswervingly through time, then reward it at Climax. This task is next to impossible unless the design attracts both sides of human nature—intellect and emotion.

Curiosity is the intellectual need to answer questions and close open patterns. Story plays to this universal desire by doing the opposite, posing questions and opening situations. Each Turning Point hooks curiosity. As the protagonist is put at increasingly greater risk, the audience wonders, “What’s going to happen next? And after that?” And above all, “How will it turn out?” The answer to this will not arrive until the last act Climax, and so the audience, held by curiosity, stays put. Think of all the bad films you’ve sat through for no other reason than to get the answer to that nagging question. We may make the audience cry or laugh, but above all, as Charles Reade noted, we make it wait.

Concern, on the other hand, is the emotional need for the positive values of life: justice, strength, survival, love, truth, courage.

Human nature is instinctively repelled by what it perceives as negative, while drawn powerfully toward positive.

As a story opens, the audience, consciously or instinctively, inspects the value-charged landscape of world and characters, trying to separate good from evil, right from wrong, things of value from things of no value. It seeks the *Center of Good*. Once finding this core, emotions flow to it.

The reason we search for the Center of Good is that each of us believes that we are good or right and want to identify with the positive. Deep inside we know we're flawed, perhaps seriously so, even criminal, but somehow we feel that despite that, our heart is in the right place. The worst of people believe themselves good. Hitler thought he was the savior of Europe.

I once joined a gym in Manhattan not knowing it was a mafia hangout and met an amusing, likable guy whose nickname was Mr. Coney Island, a title he'd won as a bodybuilder in his teens. Now, however, he was a "button man." "To button up" means to shut up. A button man "puts the button on" or shuts people up . . . forever. One day in the steam room he sat down and said, "Hey, Bob, tell me something. Are you one of the 'good' people?" In other words, did I belong to the mob?

Mafia logic runs like this: "People want prostitution, narcotics, and illicit gambling. When they're in trouble, they want to bribe police and judges. They want to taste the fruits of crime, but they're lying hypocrites and won't admit it. We provide these services but we're not hypocrites. We deal in realities. We are the 'good' people." Mr. Coney Island was a conscienceless assassin, but inside he was convinced he was good.

No matter who's in the audience, each seeks the Center of Good, the positive focus for empathy and emotional interest.

At the very least the Center of Good must be located in the protagonist. Others may share it, for we can empathize with any number of characters, but we *must* empathize with the protagonist. On the other hand, the Center of Good doesn't imply "niceness." "Good" is defined as much by what it's not as by what it is. From the audience's point of view, "good" is a judgment made in rela-

tionship to or against a background of negativity, a universe that's thought or felt to be "not good."

THE GODFATHER: Not only is the Corleone family corrupt, but so too are the other mafia families, even the police and judges. Everyone in this film is a criminal or related to one. But the Corleones have one positive quality—loyalty. In other mob clans gangsters stab one another in the back. That makes them the bad bad guys. The loyalty of the Godfather's family makes them the *good* bad guys. When we spot this positive quality, our emotions move toward it and we find ourselves in empathy with gangsters.

How far can we take the Center of Good? With what kind of monsters will an audience empathize?

WHITE HEAT: Cody Jarrett (James Cagney), the film's Center of Good, is a psychopathic killer. But the writers design a masterful balancing act of negative/positive energies by first giving Jarrett attractive qualities, then landscaping around him a grim, fatalistic world: His is a gang of weak-willed yes-men, but he has leadership capacities. He's pursued by an FBI squad of lackluster dullards, whereas he's witty and imaginative. His "best friend" is an FBI informant, while Cody's friendship is genuine. No one shows affection for anyone in this film, except Cody, who adores his mother. This moral management draws the audience into empathy, feeling, "If I had to lead a life of crime, I'd want to be like Cody Jarrett."

THE NIGHT PORTER: In a Backstory of dramatized flashbacks, protagonists and lovers (Dirk Bogarde and Charlotte Rampling) met in this fashion: He was the sadistic commandant of a Nazi death camp, she a teenage prisoner of masochistic nature. Their passionate affair lasted for years inside the death camp. With the war's end, they went their separate ways. The film opens in 1957 as they eye each other in the lobby of a Viennese hotel. He's now a hotel porter, she a guest traveling with her concert pianist husband. Once up in their room she tells her husband she's ill, sends him on ahead to his concert, then stays behind to resume her affair with her former lover. This couple is the Center of Good.

Writer/director Liliana Cavani manages this feat by encircling the lovers with a depraved society of malevolent SS officers in

hiding. Then she lights one little candle to blaze at the heart of this cold, dark world: Despite how the lovers met and the nature of their passion, in the deepest and truest sense, their love is real. What's more, it's tested to the limit. When SS officers tell their friend he must kill the woman because she may expose them, he replies, "No, she's my baby, she's my baby." He'd sacrifice his life for his lover and she for him. We feel a tragic loss when at Climax they choose to die together.

SILENCE OF THE LAMBS: The writers of novel and screenplay place Clarice (Jodie Foster) at the positive focal point, but also shape a second Center of Good around Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and draw empathy to both. First, they assign Dr. Lecter admirable and desirable qualities: massive intelligence, a sharp wit and sense of irony, gentlemanly charm, and most importantly, calmness. How, we wondered, could someone who lives in such a hellish world remain so poised and polite?

Next, to counterpoint these qualities the writers surround Lecter with a brutish, cynical society. His prison psychiatrist is a sadist and publicity hound. His guards are dimwits. Even the FBI, which wants Lecter's help on a baffling case, lies to him, trying to manipulate him with false promises of an open-air prison on a Carolina island. Soon we're rationalizing: "So he eats people. There are worse things. Off-hand I can't think what, but. . . ." We fall into empathy, musing, "If I were a cannibalistic psychopath, I'd want to be just like Lecter."

Mystery, Suspense, Dramatic Irony

Curiosity and *Concern* create three possible ways to connect the audience to the story: *Mystery*, *Suspense*, and *Dramatic Irony*. These terms are not to be mistaken for genres; they name story/audience relationships that vary according to how we hold interest.

In Mystery the audience knows less than the characters.

Mystery means gaining interest through curiosity alone. We create but then conceal expositional facts, particularly facts in the

Backstory. We arouse the audience's curiosity about these past events, tease it with hints of the truth, then deliberately keep it in the dark by misleading it with "red herrings," so that it believes or suspects false facts while we hide the real facts.

"Red herrings" has an amusing etymology: As peasant poachers of deer and grouse made off with their booty through medieval forests, they would drag a fish, a red herring, across the trail to confuse the lord of the manor's bloodhounds.

This technique of compelling interest by devising a guessing game of red herrings and suspects, of confusion and curiosity, pleases the audience of one and only one genre, the *Murder Mystery*, which has two subgenres, the *Closed Mystery* and the *Open Mystery*.

The *Closed Mystery* is the Agatha Christie form in which a murder is committed unseen in the Backstory. The primary convention of the "Who done it?" is multiple suspects. The writer must develop at least three possible killers to constantly mislead the audience to suspect the wrong person, the red herring, while withholding the identity of the real killer to Climax.

The *Open Mystery* is the *Columbo* form in which the audience sees the murder committed and therefore knows who did it. The story becomes a "How will he catch him?" as the writer substitutes multiple clues for multiple suspects. The murder must be an elaborate and seemingly perfect crime, a complex scheme involving a number of steps and technical elements. But the audience knows by convention that one of these elements is a fatal flaw of logic. When the detective arrives on the scene he instinctively knows who did it, sifts through the many clues searching for the telltale flaw, discovers it, and confronts the arrogant perfect-crime-committer, who then spontaneously confesses.

In the *Mystery* form the killer and detective know the facts long before Climax but keep it to themselves. The audience runs from behind trying to figure out what the key characters already know. Of course, if we could win the race, we'd feel like losers. We try hard to guess the who or how, but we want the writer's master detective to be just that.

These two pure designs may be mixed or satirized. CHINA-TOWN starts *Closed* but then turns *Open* at the Act Two Climax. THE USUAL SUSPECTS parodies the *Closed Mystery*. It starts as a “Who done it?” but becomes a “Nobody done it” . . . whatever “it” may be.

In Suspense the audience and characters know the same information.

Suspense combines both Curiosity and Concern. Ninety percent of all films, comedy and drama, compel interest in this mode. In Suspense, however, curiosity is not about fact but outcome. The outcome of a *Murder Mystery* is always certain. Although we don't know who or how, the detective will catch the killer and the story will end “up.” But the Suspense story could end “up” or “down” or in irony.

Characters and audience move shoulder to shoulder through the telling, sharing the same knowledge. As the characters discover expositional fact, the audience discovers it. But what no one knows is “How will this turn out?” In this relationship we feel empathy and identify with the protagonist, whereas in pure Mystery our involvement is limited to sympathy. Master detectives are charming and likable, but we never identify with them because they're too perfect and never in real jeopardy. *Murder Mysteries* are like board games, cool entertainments for the mind.

In Dramatic Irony the audience knows more than the characters.

Dramatic Irony creates interest primarily through concern alone, eliminating curiosity about fact and consequence. Such stories often open with the ending, deliberately giving away the outcome. When the audience is given the godlike superiority of knowing events before they happen, its emotional experience switches. What in Suspense would be anxiety about outcome and fear for the protagonist's well-being, in Dramatic Irony becomes dread of the moment the character discovers what we already know and compassion for someone we see heading for disaster.

SUNSET BOULEVARD: In the first sequence the body of Joe Gillis (William Holden) floats facedown in Norma Desmond's (Gloria Swanson) swimming pool. The camera goes to the bottom of the pool, looks up at the corpse, and in voice-over Gillis muses that we're probably wondering how he ended up dead in a swimming pool, so he'll tell us. The film becomes a feature-length flashback, dramatizing a screenwriter's struggle for success. We're moved to compassion and dread as we watch this poor man heading toward a fate we already know. We realize that all of Gillis's efforts to escape the clutches of a wealthy harridan and write an honest screenplay will come to nothing and he'll end up a corpse in her swimming pool.

BETRAYAL: The Antiplot device of telling a story in reverse order from end to beginning was invented in 1934 by Phillip Kaufman and Moss Hart for their play *Merrily We Roll Along*. Forty years later Harold Pinter used this idea to exploit the ultimate use of Dramatic Irony. **BETRAYAL** is a *Love Story* that opens with former lovers, Jerry and Emma (Jeremy Irons and Patricia Hodge) meeting privately for the first time in the years since their breakup. In a tense moment she confesses that her husband "knows," her husband being Jerry's best friend. As the film proceeds it flashes back to scenes of the breakup, then follows with the events that brought about the breakup, back farther to cover the golden days of the romance, then ends on boy-meets-girl. As the eyes of the young lovers glitter with anticipation, we're filled with mixed emotions: We want them to have their affair, for it was sweet, but we also know all the bitterness and pain they'll suffer.

Placing the audience in the position of Dramatic Irony does not eliminate all curiosity. The result of showing the audience what will happen is to cause them to ask, "How and why did these characters do what I already know they did? Dramatic Irony encourages the audience to look more deeply into the motivations and causal forces at work in the characters' lives. This is why we often enjoy a fine film more, or at least differently, on second viewing. We not only flex the often underused emotions of compassion and dread, but freed from curiosity about facts and outcome, we now concentrate on inner lives, unconscious energies, and the subtle workings of society.

However, the majority of genres do not lend themselves to either pure Mystery or pure Dramatic Irony. Instead, within the Suspense relationship writers enrich the telling by mixing the other two. In an overall Suspense design, some sequences may employ Mystery to increase curiosity about certain facts, others may switch to Dramatic Irony to touch the audience's heart.

CASABLANCA: At the end of Act One we learn that Rick and Ilsa had an affair in Paris that ended in breakup. Act Two opens with a flashback to Paris. From the vantage of Dramatic Irony, we watch the young lovers head for tragedy and feel a special tenderness for their romantic innocence. We look deeply into their moments together, wondering why their love ended in heartbreak and how they'll react when they discover what we already know.

Later, at the climax of Act Two, Ilsa is back in Rick's arms, ready to leave her husband for him. Act Three switches to Mystery by showing Rick make his Crisis decision but not letting us in on what he's chosen to do. Because Rick knows more than we, curiosity is piqued: Will he run off with Ilsa? When the answer arrives, it hits us with a jolt.

Suppose you were working on a *Thriller* about a psychopathic axe murderer and a female detective, and you're ready to write the Story Climax. You've set it in the dimly lit corridor of an old mansion. She knows the killer is near and clicks the safety off her gun as she moves slowly past doors left and right extending into the dark distance. Which of the three strategies to use?

Mystery: Hide a fact known to the antagonist from the audience.

Close all the doors so that as she moves down the hall the audience's eyes search the screen, wondering, Where is he? Behind the first door? The next door? The next? Then he attacks by crashing through . . . the ceiling!

Suspense: Give the audience and characters the same information.

At the end of the hall a door is ajar with a light behind it casting a shadow on the wall of a man holding an axe. She sees the shadow and stops. The shadow retreats from the wall. **CUT TO:** Behind the door a man, axe in hand, waits: He knows that she's there and he

knows that she knows that he's there because he heard her footsteps stop. CUT TO: The hallway where she hesitates: She knows that he's there and she knows that he knows that she knows that he's there because she saw his shadow move. We know that she knows that he knows, but what no one knows is how will this turn out? Will she kill him? Or will he kill her?

Dramatic Irony: Employ Hitchcock's favorite device and hide from the protagonist a fact known to the audience.

She slowly edges toward a closed door at the end of the hall.

CUT TO: Behind the door a man waits, axe in hand. CUT TO: The hallway as she moves closer and closer to the closed door. The audience, knowing what she doesn't know, switches its emotions from anxiety to dread: "Don't go near that door! For God's sake, don't open that door! He's behind the door! Look out!"

She opens the door and . . . mayhem.

On the other hand, if she were to open the door and embrace the man. . . .

MAN WITH AXE

(rubbing sore
muscles)

Honey, I've been chopping
wood all afternoon.
Is dinner ready?

. . . this would not be Dramatic Irony, but *False Mystery* and its dim-witted cousin, *Cheap Surprise*.

A certain amount of audience curiosity is essential. Without it, Narrative Drive grinds to a halt. The craft gives you the power to conceal fact or outcome in order to keep the audience looking ahead and asking questions. It gives you the power to mystify the audience, if that's appropriate. But you must not abuse this power. If so, the audience, in frustration, will tune out. Instead, reward the filmgoer for his concentration with honest, insightful answers to his questions. No dirty tricks, no Cheap Surprise, no False Mystery.

False Mystery is a counterfeit curiosity caused by the artificial concealment of fact. Exposition that could and should have been

given to the audience is withheld in hope of holding interest over long, undramatized passages.

FADE IN: The pilot of a crowded airliner battles an electrical storm. Lightning strikes the wing and the plane plunges toward a mountainside. CUT TO: Six months earlier, and a thirty-minute flashback that tediously details the lives of the passengers and crew leading up to the fatal flight. This tease or *cliff-hanger* is a lame promise made by the writer: "Don't worry, folks, if you stick with me through this boring stretch, I'll eventually get back to the exciting stuff."

THE PROBLEM OF SURPRISE

We go to the storyteller with a prayer: "Please, let it be good. Let it give me an experience I've never had, insights into a fresh truth. Let me laugh at something I've never thought funny. Let me be moved by something that's never touched me before. Let me see the world in a new way. Amen." In other words, the audience prays for surprise, the reversal of expectation.

As characters arrive onscreen, the audience surrounds them with expectations, feeling "this" will happen, "that" will change, Miss A will get the money, Mr. B will get the girl, Mrs. C will suffer. If what the audience expects to happen happens, or worse, if it happens the *way* the audience expects it to happen, this will be a very unhappy audience. We must surprise them.

There are two kinds of surprise: cheap and true. True surprise springs from the sudden revelation of the Gap between expectation and result. This surprise is "true" because it's followed by a rush of insight, the revelation of a truth hidden beneath the surface of the fictional world.

Cheap Surprise takes advantage of the audience's vulnerability. As it sits in the dark, the audience places its emotions in the storyteller's hands. We can always shock filmgoers by smash cutting to something it doesn't expect to see or away from something it expects to continue. By suddenly and inexplicably breaking the narrative flow we can always jolt people. But as Aristotle complained, "To be about to act and not to act is the worst. It is shocking without being tragic."

In certain genres—*Horror, Fantasy, Thriller*—cheap surprise is a convention and part of the fun: The hero walks down a dark alley. A hand shoots in from the edge of the screen and grabs his shoulder, the hero spins around—and it's his best friend. Outside these genres, however, cheap surprise is a shoddy device.

MY FAVORITE SEASON: A woman (Catherine Deneuve) is married but not happily. Her possessive brother agitates his sister's marriage, until finally convinced she cannot be happy with her husband, she leaves and moves in with her brother. Brother and sister share a top-floor apartment. He comes home one day feeling uncertain qualms. As he enters, he sees a window open, curtains billowing. He rushes to look down. In his POV we see his sister smashed on the cobbles far below, dead, surrounded by a pool of blood. CUT TO: The bedroom and his sister waking up from a nap.

Why, in a serious *Domestic Drama*, would a director resort to horrific shock images from the brother's nervous imagination? Perhaps because the previous thirty minutes were so unbearably boring, he thought it was time to kick us in the shins with a trick he learned in film school.

THE PROBLEM OF COINCIDENCE

Story creates meaning. Coincidence, then, would seem our enemy, for it is the random, absurd collisions of things in the universe and is, by definition, meaningless. And yet coincidence is a part of life, often a powerful part, rocking existence, then vanishing as absurdly as it arrived. The solution, therefore, is not to avoid coincidence, but to dramatize how it may enter life meaninglessly, but in time gain meaning, how the antilogic of randomness becomes the logic of life-as-lived.

First, bring coincidence in early to allow time to build meaning out of it.

The Inciting Incident of *JAWS*: a shark, by random chance, eats a swimmer. But once in the story the shark doesn't leave. It stays and gathers meaning as it continuously menaces the innocent

until we get the feeling that the beast is doing it on purpose and, what's more, enjoying it. Which is the definition of evil: Doing harm to others and taking pleasure in it. We all hurt people inadvertently but instantly regret it. But when someone purposely seeks to cause pain in others and takes pleasure from it, that's evil. The shark then becomes a powerful icon for the dark side of nature that would love to swallow us whole and laugh while doing it.

Coincidence, therefore, must not pop into a story, turn a scene, then pop out. Example: Eric desperately seeks his estranged lover, Laura, but she's moved. After searching in vain, he stops for a beer. On the stool next to him sits the real estate agent who sold Laura her new house. He gives Eric her exact address. Eric leaves with thanks and never sees the salesman again. Not that this coincidence couldn't happen, but it's pointless.

On the other hand, suppose that the salesman can't remember the address, but does recall that Laura bought a red Italian sports car at the same time. The two men leave together and spot her Maserati on the street. Now they both go up to her door. Still angry with Eric, Laura invites them in and flirts with the salesman to annoy her ex-lover. What was meaningless good luck now becomes a force of antagonism to Eric's desire. This triangle could build meaningfully through the rest of the story.

As a rule of thumb do not use coincidence beyond the midpoint of the telling. Rather, put the story more and more into the hands of the characters.

Second, never use coincidence to turn an ending. This is *deus ex machina*, the writer's greatest sin.

Deus ex machina is a Latin phrase taken from the classical theatres of Greece and Rome, meaning "god from machine." From 500 B.C. to A.D. 500 theatre flourished throughout the Mediterranean. Over those centuries hundreds of playwrights wrote for these stages but only seven have been remembered, the rest mercifully forgotten, due primarily to their propensity to use *deus ex machina* to get out of story problems. Aristotle complained about

this practice, sounding much like a Hollywood producer: “Why can’t these writers come up with endings that work?”

In these superb, acoustically perfect amphitheatres, some seating up to ten thousand people, at the far end of a horseshoe-shaped stage was a high wall. At the bottom were doors or arches for entrances and exits. But actors who portrayed gods would be lowered down to the stage from the top of the wall standing on a platform attached to ropes and pulley. This “god from machine” device was the visual analogy of the deities coming down from Mount Olympus and going back up to Mount Olympus.

Story climaxes were as difficult twenty-five hundred years ago as now. But ancient playwrights had a way out. They would cook a story, twist Turning Points until they had the audience on the edge of their marble seats, then if the playwright’s creativity dried up and he was lost for a true Climax, convention allowed him to dodge the problem by cranking a god to the stage and letting an Apollo or Athena settle everything. Who lives, who dies, who marries who, who is damned for eternity. And they did this over and over.

Nothing has changed in twenty-five hundred years. Writers today still cook up stories they can’t end. But instead of dropping a god in to get an ending, they use “acts of god”—the hurricane that saves the lovers in *HURRICANE*, the elephant stampede that resolves the love triangle in *ELEPHANT WALK*, the traffic accidents that end *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE* and *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING*, the T-Rex that hops in just in time to devour the velociraptors in *JURASSIC PARK*.

Deus ex machina not only erases all meaning and emotion, it’s an insult to the audience. Each of us knows we must choose and act, for better or worse, to determine the meaning of our lives. No one and nothing coincidental will come along to take that responsibility from us, regardless of the injustices and chaos around us. You could be locked in a cell for the rest of your life for a crime you did not commit. But every morning you would still have to get up and make meaning. Do I bludgeon my brains against this wall or do I find some way to get through my days with value? Our lives are ultimately in our own hands. Deus ex machina is an insult because it is a lie.

The one exception is Antistructure films that substitute coincidence for causality: WEEKEND, CHOOSE ME, STRANGERS IN PARADISE, and AFTER HOURS begin by coincidence, progress by coincidence, end on coincidence. When coincidence rules story, it creates a new and rather significant meaning: Life is absurd.

THE PROBLEM OF COMEDY

Comedy writers often feel that in their wild world the principles that guide the dramatist don't apply. But whether coolly satiric or madly farcical, comedy is simply another form of storytelling. There are, however, important exceptions that begin in the deep division between the comic and tragic visions of life.

The dramatist admires humanity and creates works that say, in essence: Under the worst of circumstances the human spirit is magnificent. Comedy points out that in the best of circumstances human beings find some way to screw up.

When we peek behind the grinning mask of comic cynicism, we find a frustrated idealist. The comic sensibility wants the world to be perfect, but when it looks around, it finds greed, corruption, lunacy. The result is an angry and depressed artist. If you doubt that, ask one over for dinner. Every host in Hollywood has made that mistake: "Let's invite some comedy writers to the party! That'll brighten things up." Sure . . . till the paramedics arrive.

These angry idealists, however, know that if they lecture the world about what a rotten place it is, no one will listen. But if they trivialize the exalted, pull the trousers down on snobbery, if they expose society for its tyranny, folly, and greed, and get people to laugh, then maybe things will change. Or balance. So God bless comedy writers. What would life be like without them?

Comedy is pure: If the audience laughs, it works; if it doesn't laugh, it doesn't work. End of discussion. That's why critics hate comedy; there's nothing to say. If I were to argue that CITIZEN KANE is a bloated exercise in razzle-dazzle spectacle, populated by stereotypical characters, twisted with manipulative storytelling,

stuffed full of self-contradictory Freudian and Pirandellian clichés, made by a heavy-handed showoff out to impress the world, we might bicker forever because the CITIZEN KANE audience is silent. But if I were to say A FISH CALLED WANDA is not funny, you'll pity me and walk away. In comedy laughter settles all arguments.

The dramatist is fascinated by the inner life, the passions and sins, madness and dreams of the human heart. But not the comedy writer. He fixes on the social life—the idiocy, arrogance, and brutality in society. The comedy writer singles out a particular institution that he feels has become encrusted with hypocrisy and folly, then goes on the attack. Often we can spot the social institution under assault by noting the film's title.

THE RULING CLASS attacks the rich; so too TRADING PLACES, A NIGHT AT THE OPERA, MY MAN GODFREY. M*A*S*H assaults the military, as do PRIVATE BENJAMIN and STRIPES. *Romantic Comedies*—HIS GIRL FRIDAY, THE LADY EVE, WHEN HARRY MET SALLY—satirize the institution of courtship. NETWORK, POLICE ACADEMY, ANIMAL HOUSE, THIS IS SPINAL TAP, PRIZZI'S HONOR, THE PRODUCERS, DR. STRANGELOVE, NASTY HABITS, and CAMP NOWHERE strike at television, school, fraternities, rock 'n' roll, the mafia, the theatre, Cold War politics, the Catholic Church, and summer camp, respectively. If a film genre grows thick with self-importance, it too is ripe for mockery: AIRPLANE, YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN, NAKED GUN. What was known as *Comedy of Manners* has become the sitcom—a satire of middle-class behavior.

When a society cannot ridicule and criticize its institutions, it cannot laugh. The shortest book ever written would be the history of German humor, a culture that has suffered spells of paralyzing fear of authority. Comedy is at heart an angry, antisocial art. To solve the problem of weak comedy, therefore, the writer first asks: What am I angry about? He finds that aspect of society that heats his blood and goes on an assault.

Comic Design

In drama the audience continuously grabs handfuls of the future, pulling themselves through, wanting to know the outcome. But *Comedy* allows the writer to halt *Narrative Drive*, the forward projecting mind of the audience, and interpolate into the telling a scene with no story purpose. It's there just for the yucks.

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS: Masochistic patient (Bill Murray) visits sadistic dentist (Steve Martin), and as he cuddles up in the chair, says: "I want a long, slow root canal." It's drop-dead funny but has nothing to do with the story. If cut, no one would notice. But should it be cut? Hell no, it's hysterical. How little story can be told and how much pure comedy worked into a film? Watch the Marx Brothers. A sharp story, complete with Inciting Incident, first, second, and third act climaxes, always holds a Marx Brothers film together . . . for a total screentime of about ten minutes. The other eighty minutes are surrendered to the dizzying genius of Marx Brothers shtick.

Comedy tolerates more coincidence than drama, and may even allow a *deus ex machina* ending . . . if two things are done: First, the audience is made to feel that the comic protagonist has suffered enormously. Second, that he never despairs, never loses hope. Under these conditions the audience may think: "Oh, hell, give it to him."

THE GOLD RUSH: At Climax the Little Chap (Charlie Chaplin) is nearly frozen to death when a blizzard rips his cabin off the ground, blows it and Chaplin across Alaska, then drops him smack on a gold mine. CUT TO: He's rich, dressed to the nines, smoking a cigar, heading back to the States. A comic coincidence that leaves the audience thinking, "This guy ate his shoes, was almost cannibalized by other miners, devoured by a grizzly bear, rejected by the dance hall girls—he walked all the way to Alaska. Give 'im a break."

The incisive difference between comedy and drama is this: Both turn scenes with surprise and insight, but in comedy, when the Gap cracks open, the surprise explodes the great belly laughs of the night.

A FISH CALLED WANDA: Archie takes Wanda to a borrowed love nest. Panting with anticipation, she watches from the sleeping loft as Archie pirouettes around the room, stripping buck naked,

intoning Russian poetry that makes her writhe. He puts his underwear on his head and declares himself free of the fear of embarrassment . . . the door opens and in walks an entire family. A killer Gap between expectation and result.

Simply put, a *Comedy* is a funny story, an elaborate rolling joke. While wit lightens a telling, it doesn't alone make it a true *Comedy*. Rather, wit often creates hybrids such as the *Dramedy* (ANNIE HALL), or the *Crimedey* (LETHAL WEAPON). You know you've written a true comedy when you sit an innocent victim down and pitch your story. Just tell him what happens, without quoting witty dialogue or sight gags, and he laughs. Every time you turn the scene, he laughs; turn it again and he laughs again; turn, laugh, until by the end of the pitch you have him collapsed on the floor. That's a *Comedy*. If you pitch your story and people don't laugh, you've not written a *Comedy*. You've written . . . something else.

The solution, however, is not found in trying to devise clever lines or pie in the face. Gags come naturally when the comic structure calls for them. Instead, concentrate on Turning Points. For each action first ask, "What's the opposite of that?" then take it a step farther to "What's off-the-wall from that?" Spring gaps of comic surprise—write a funny *story*.

THE PROBLEM OF POINT OF VIEW

For the screenwriter *Point of View* has two meanings. First, we occasionally call for POV shots. For example:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack sips coffee, when suddenly he hears a SCREECH OF BRAKES and a CRASH that shakes the house. He rushes to the window.

JACK'S POV

out the window: Tony's car crumpled against the garage door and his son staggering across the lawn, giggling drunk.

ON JACK

throwing open the window in a rage.

The second meaning, however, applies to the writer's vision. From what Point of View is each scene written? From what Point of View is the story as a whole told?

POV WITHIN A SCENE

Each story is set in a specific time and place, yet scene by scene, as we imagine events, where do we locate ourselves *in space* to view the action? This is Point of View—the physical angle we take in order to describe the behavior of our characters, their interaction with one another and the environment. How we make our choices of Point of View has enormous influence on how the reader reacts to the scene and how the director will later stage and shoot it.

We can imagine ourselves anywhere 360 degrees around an action or at the center of the action looking out in 360 different degrees—high above the action, below it, anywhere globally. Each choice of POV has a different effect on empathy and emotion.

For example, continuing the father/son scene above, Jack calls Tony to the window and they argue. The father demands to know why a son in medical school is drunk and learns that the university has expelled him. Tony wanders off, distraught. Jack races through the house to the street and consoles his son.

There are four distinctively different POV choices in this scene: One, put Jack exclusively at the center of your imagination. Follow him from table to window, seeing what he sees and his reactions to it. Then move with him through the house to the street as he chases after Tony to embrace him. Two, do the same with Tony. Stay with him exclusively as he weaves his car up the street, across the lawn, and into the garage door. Show his reactions when he stumbles out of the wreck to confront his father at the window. Take him down the street, then suddenly turn him as his father

runs up to hug him. Three, alternate between Jack's POV and Tony's POV. Four, take a neutral POV. Imagine them, as a comedy writer might, at a distance and in profile.

This first encourages us to empathize with Jack, the second asks empathy for Tony, the third draws us close to both, the fourth with neither and prompts us to laugh at them.

POV WITHIN THE STORY

If in the two hours of a feature film you can bring audience members to a complex and deeply satisfying relationship with just one character, an understanding and involvement they will carry for a lifetime, you have done far more than most films. Generally, therefore, it enhances the telling to style the whole story from the protagonist's Point of View—to discipline yourself to the protagonist, make him the center of your imaginative universe, and bring the whole story, event by event, to the protagonist. The audience witnesses events only as the protagonist encounters them. This, clearly, is the far more difficult way to tell story.

The easy way is to hopscotch through time and space, picking up bits and pieces to facilitate exposition, but this makes story sprawl and lose tension. Like limited setting, genre convention, and Controlling Idea, shaping a story from the exclusive Point of View of the protagonist is a creative discipline. It taxes the imagination and demands your very best work. The result is a tight, smooth, memorable character and story.

The more time spent with a character, the more opportunity to witness his choices. The result is more empathy and emotional involvement between audience and character.

THE PROBLEM OF ADAPTATION

The conceit of adaptation is that the hard work of story can be avoided by optioning a literary work and simply shifting it into a

screenplay. That is almost never the case. To grasp the difficulties of adaptation we look again at story complexity.

In the twentieth century we now have three media for telling story: prose (novel, novella, short story), theatre (legit, musical, opera, mime, ballet), and screen (film and television). Each medium tells complex stories by bringing characters into simultaneous conflict on all three levels of life; however, each has a distinctive power and innate beauty at *one* of these levels.

The unique strength and wonder of the novel is the dramatization of inner conflict. This is what prose does best, far better than play or film. Whether in first- or third-person, the novelist slips inside thought and feeling with subtlety, density, and poetic imagery to project onto the reader's imagination the turmoil and passions of inner conflict. In the novel extra-personal conflict is delineated through description, word pictures of characters struggling with society or environment, while personal conflict is shaped through dialogue.

The unique command and grace of the theatre is the dramatization of personal conflict. This is what the theatre does best, far better than novel or film. A great play is almost pure dialogue, perhaps 80 percent is for the ear, only 20 percent for the eye. Non-verbal communication—gestures, looks, lovemaking, fighting—is important, but, by and large, personal conflicts evolve for better or worse through talk. What's more, the playwright has a license screenwriters do not—he may write dialogue in a way no human being has ever spoken. He may write, not just poetic dialogue, but, like Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, and Christopher Frye, use poetry itself as dialogue, lifting the expressivity of personal conflict to incredible heights. In addition, he has the live voice of the actor to add nuances of shading and pause that take it even higher.

In the theatre inner conflict is dramatized through subtext. As the actor brings the character to life from the inside, the audience sees through the sayings and doings to the thoughts and feelings underneath. Like a first-person novel, the theatre can send a character to the apron in soliloquy to speak intimately with the audience. In direct address, however, the character isn't necessarily telling the truth, or if sincere, isn't able to understand his inner life

and tell the whole truth. The theatre's power to dramatize inner conflict through unspoken subtext is ample but, compared to the novel, limited. The stage can also dramatize extra-personal conflicts, but how much of society can it hold? How much environment of sets and props?

The unique power and splendor of the cinema is the dramatization of extra-personal conflict, huge and vivid images of human beings wrapped inside their society and environment, striving with life. This is what film does best, better than play or novel. If we were to take a single frame from *BLADE RUNNER* and ask the world's finest prose stylist to create the verbal equivalent of that composition, he would fill page after page with words and never capture its essence. And that is only one of thousands of complex images flowing through the experience of an audience.

Critics often complain about chase sequences, as if they were a new phenomenon. The first great discovery of the Silent Era was the chase, enlivening Charlie Chaplin and the Keystone Cops, thousands of Westerns, most of D. W. Griffith's films, *BEN HUR*, *THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*, *STORM OVER ASIA*, and the beautiful *SUNRISE*. The chase is a human being pursued by society, struggling through the physical world to escape and survive. It's pure extra-personal conflict, pure cinema, the most natural thing to want to do with a camera and editing machine.

To express personal conflict the screenwriter must use plain-spoken dialogue. When we use theatrical language on screen the audience's rightful reaction is: "People don't talk like that." Other than the special case of filmed Shakespeare, screenwriting demands naturalistic talk. Film, however, gains great power in nonverbal communication. With close-up, lighting, and nuances of angle, gestures and facial expressions become very eloquent. Nonetheless, the screenwriter cannot dramatize personal conflict to the poetic fullness of the theatre.

The dramatization of inner conflict on screen is exclusively in the subtext as the camera looks through the face of the actor to thoughts and feelings within. Even the personal direct-to-camera narration in *ANNIE HALL* or Salieri's confession in *AMADEUS* is

layered with subtext. The inner life can be expressed impressively in film, but it cannot reach the density or complexity of a novel.

That is the lay of the land. Now imagine the problems of adaptation. Over the decades hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to option the film rights to literary works that are then tossed into the laps of screenwriters who read them and go running, screaming into the night, "Nothing's happens! The whole book is in the character's head!"

Therefore, the first principle of adaptation: **The purer the novel, the purer the play, the worse the film.**

"Literary purity" does not mean literary achievement. Purity of novel means a telling located exclusively at the level of inner conflict, employing linguistic complexities to incite, advance, and climax story with relative independence of personal, social, and environmental forces: Joyce's *Ulysses*. Purity of theatre means a telling located exclusively at the level of personal conflict, employing the spoken word in poetic excess to incite, advance, and climax story with relative independence of inner, social, and environmental forces: Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*.

Attempts to adapt "pure" literature fail for two reasons: One is aesthetic impossibility. Image is prelinguistic; no cinematic equivalences or even approximations exist for conflicts buried in the extravagant language of master novelists and playwrights. Two, when a lesser talent attempts to adapt genius, which is more likely? Will a lesser talent rise to the level of genius, or will genius be dragged down to the level of the adaptor?

The world's screens are frequently stained by pretentious filmmakers who wish to be regarded as another Fellini or Bergman, but unlike Fellini and Bergman cannot create original works, so they go to equally pretentious funding agencies with a copy of Proust or Woolf in hand, promising to bring art to the masses. The bureaucrats grant the money, politicians congratulate themselves to their constituents for bringing art to the masses, the director gets a paycheck, the film vanishes over a weekend.

If you must adapt, come down a rung or two from "pure" literature and look for stories in which conflict is distributed on all three

levels . . . with an emphasis at the extra-personal. Pierre Boullé's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* won't be taught alongside Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka in postgraduate seminars, but it's an excellent work, populated with complex characters driven by inner and personal conflicts and dramatized primarily at extrapersonal level. Consequently, Carl Foreman's adaptation became, in my judgment, David Lean's finest film.

To adapt, first read the work over and over without taking notes until you feel infused with its spirit. Do not make choices or plan moves until you've rubbed shoulders with its society, read their faces, smelled their cologne. As with a story you're creating from scratch, you must achieve a godlike knowledge and never assume that the original writer has done his homework. That done, reduce each event to a one- or two-sentence statement of what happens and no more. No psychology, no sociology. For example: "He walks into the house expecting a confrontation with his wife, but discovers a note telling him she's left him for another man."

That done, read through the events and ask yourself, "Is this story well told?" Then brace yourself, for nine times out of ten you'll discover it's not. Just because a writer got a play to the stage or a novel into print doesn't mean that he has mastered the craft. Story is the hardest thing we all do. Many novelists are weak storytellers, playwrights even weaker. Or you'll discover that it's beautifully told, a clockwork of perfection . . . but four hundred pages long, three times as much material as you can use for a film, and if a single cog is taken out, the clock stops telling time. In either case, your task will not be one of adaptation but of reinvention.

The second principle of adaptation: **Be willing to reinvent.**

Tell the story in filmic rhythms while keeping the spirit of the original. To reinvent: No matter in what order the novel's events were told, reorder them in time from first to last, as if they were biographies. From these create a step-outline, using, where valuable, designs from the original work, but feeling free to cut scenes and, if necessary, to create new ones. Most testing of all, turn what is mental into the physical. Don't fill characters' mouths with self-explanatory dialogue but find visual expression for their inner conflicts. This is

where you'll succeed or fail. Seek a design that expresses the spirit of the original yet stays within the rhythms of a film, ignoring the risk that critics may say, "But the film's not like the novel."

The aesthetics of the screen often demand reinvention of story, even when the original is superbly told and of feature-film size. As Milos Foreman told Peter Shaffer while adapting *AMADEUS* from stage to screen, "You're going to have to give birth to your child a second time." The result is that the world now has two excellent versions of the same story, each true to its medium. While struggling with an adaptation bear this in mind: If reinvention deviates radically from the original—*PELLE THE CONQUEROR*, *DANGEROUS LIAISONS*—but the film is excellent, critics fall silent. But if you butcher the original—*THE SCARLET LETTER*, *THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES*—and do not put a work as good or better in its place, duck.

To learn adaptation study the work of Ruth Praver Jhabvala. She is, in my view, the finest adapter of novel to screen in film history. She's a Pole born in Germany who writes in English. Having reinvented her nationality, she's become the master reinventer for film. Like a chameleon or trance-medium, she inhabits the colors and spirit of other writers. Read *Quartet*, *A Room with a View*, *The Bostonians*, pull a step-outline from each novel, then scene by scene compare your work to Jhabvala. You'll learn a lot. Notice that she and director James Ivory restrict themselves to the social novelists—Jean Rhys, E. M. Forster, Henry James—knowing that the primary conflicts will be extra-personal and camera attractive. No Proust, no Joyce, no Kafka.

Although the natural expressivity of cinema is extra-personal, it shouldn't inhibit us. Rather, the challenge that great filmmakers have always accepted is to start with images of social/environmental conflict and lead us into the complexities of personal relationships, to begin on the surface of what's said and done and guide us to a perception of the inner life, the unspoken, the unconscious—to swim upstream and achieve on film what the playwright and novelist do most easily.

By the same token, playwright and novelist have always understood that their challenge is to do on stage or page what film does

best. Flaubert's famous cinematic style was developed long before there was cinema. Eisenstein said he learned to cut film by reading Charles Dickens. Shakespeare's stunning fluidity through time and space suggests an imagination hungry for a camera. Great storytellers have always known that "Show, don't tell" is the ultimate creative task: to write in a purely dramatic and visual way, to show a natural world of natural human being behavior, to express the complexity of life *without telling*.

THE PROBLEM OF MELODRAMA

To avoid the accusation "This script is melodramatic," many avoid writing "big scenes," passionate, powerful events. Instead, they write minimalist sketches in which little if anything happens, thinking they're subtle. This is folly. Nothing human beings do in and of itself is melodramatic, and human beings are capable of anything. Daily newspapers record acts of enormous self-sacrifice and cruelty, of daring and cowardliness, of saints and tyrants from Mother Teresa to Saddam Hussein. Anything you can imagine human beings doing, they have already done and in ways you cannot imagine. None of it is melodrama; it's simply human.

Melodrama is not the result of overexpression, but of under motivation; not writing too big, but writing with too little desire. The power of an event can only be as great as the sum total of its causes. We feel a scene is melodramatic if we cannot believe that motivation matches action. Writers from Homer to Shakespeare to Bergman have created explosive scenes no one would call melodrama because they knew how to motivate characters. If you can imagine high drama or comedy, write it, but lift the forces that drive your characters to equal or surpass the extremities of their actions and we'll embrace you for taking us to the end of the line.

THE PROBLEM OF HOLES

A "hole" is another way to lose credibility. Rather than a lack of motivation, now the story lacks logic, a missing link in the chain of

cause and effect. But like coincidence, holes are a part of life. Things often happen for reasons that cannot be explained. So if you're writing about life, a hole or two may find its way into your telling. The problem is how to handle it.

If you can forge a link between illogical events and close the hole, do so. This remedy, however, often requires the creation of a new scene that has no purpose other than making what's around it logical, causing an awkwardness as annoying as the hole.

In which case ask: Will they notice? You know it's a jump in logic because the story sits still on your desk with its hole glaring up at you. But onscreen the story flows in time. As the hole arrives, the audience may not have sufficient information at that point to realize that what just happened isn't logical or it may happen so quickly, it passes unnoticed.

CHINATOWN: Ida Sessions (Diane Ladd) impersonates Evelyn Mulway and hires J. J. Gittes to investigate Hollis Mulway for adultery. After Gittes discovers what appears to be an affair, the real wife shows up with her lawyer and a lawsuit. Gittes realizes that someone is out to get Mulway, but before he can help the man is murdered. Early in Act Two Gittes gets a phone call from Ida Sessions telling him that she had no idea that things would lead to murder and wants him to know she's innocent. In this call she also gives Gittes a vital clue to the motivation for the killing. Her words, however, are so cryptic he's only more confused. Later, however, he pieces her clue to other evidence he unearths and thinks he knows who did it and why.

Early in Act Three he finds Ida Sessions dead and in her wallet discovers a Screen Actors Guild card. In other words, Ida Sessions couldn't possibly have known what she said over the phone. Her clue is a crucial detail of a citywide corruption run by millionaire businessmen and high government officials, something they would never have told the actress they hired to impersonate the victim's wife. But when she tells Gittes, we have no idea who Ida Sessions is and what she could or could not know. When she's found dead an hour and a half later, we don't see the hole because by then we've forgotten what she said.

So maybe the audience won't notice. But maybe it will. Then what? Cowardly writers try to kick sand over such holes and hope the audience doesn't notice. Other writers face this problem manfully. They expose the hole to the audience, then deny that it is a hole.

CASABLANCA: Ferrari (Sidney Greenstreet) is the ultimate capitalist and crook who never does anything except for money. Yet at one point Ferrari helps Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) find the precious letters of transit and wants nothing in return. That's out of character, illogical. Knowing this, the writers gave Ferrari the line: "Why I'm doing this I don't know because it can't possibly profit me . . ." Rather than hiding the hole, the writers admitted it with the bold lie that Ferrari might be impulsively generous. The audience knows we often do things for reasons we can't explain. Complimented, it nods, thinking, "Even Ferrari doesn't get it. Fine. On with the film."

THE TERMINATOR doesn't have a hole—it's built over an abyss: In 2029 robots have all but exterminated the human race, when the remnants of humanity, lead by John Connor, turn the tide of the war. To eliminate their enemy, the robots invent a time machine and send the Terminator back to 1984 to kill the mother of John Connor before he's born. Connor captures their device and sends a young officer, Reese, back to try to destroy the Terminator first. He does this knowing that indeed Reese will not only save his mother but get her pregnant, and therefore his lieutenant is his father. What?

But James Cameron and Gail Anne Hurd understand Narrative Drive. They knew that if they exploded two warriors from the future into the streets of Los Angeles and sent them roaring in pursuit of this poor woman, the audience wouldn't be asking analytical questions, and bit by bit they could parse out their setup. But respecting the intelligence of the audience, they also knew that after the film over coffee the audience might think: "Wait a minute . . . if Connor knew Reese would . . .," and so on, and the holes would swallow up the audience's pleasure. So they wrote this resolution scene.

The pregnant Sarah Connor heads for the safety of remote mountains in Mexico, there to give birth and raise her son for his future mission. At a gas station she dictates memoirs to her

unborn hero into a tape recorder and she says in effect: “You know, my son, I don’t get it. If you know that Reese will be your father . . . then why . . . ? How? And does that mean that this is going to happen again . . . and again . . . ?” Then she pauses and says, “You know, you could go crazy thinking about this.” And all over the world audiences thought: “Hell, she’s right. It’s not important.” With that they happily threw logic into the trash.

17

CHARACTER

THE MIND WORM

As I traced the evolution of story through the twenty-eight centuries since Homer, I thought I'd save a thousand years and skip from the fourth century to the Renaissance because, according to my undergrad history text, during the Dark Ages all thinking stopped while monks dithered over such questions as "How many angels dance on the head of a pin?" Skeptical, I looked a little deeper and found that in fact intellectual life in the medieval epoch went on vigorously . . . but in poetic code. When the metaphor was deciphered, researchers discovered that "How many angels dance on the head of pin?" isn't metaphysics, it's physics. The topic under discussion is atomic structure: "How small is small?"

To discuss psychology, medieval scholarship devised another ingenious conceit: the *Mind Worm*. Suppose a creature had the power to burrow into the brain and come to know an individual completely—dreams, fears, strength, weakness. Suppose that this Mind Worm also had the power to cause events in the world. It could then create a specific happening geared to the unique nature of that person that would trigger a one-of-a-kind adventure, a quest that would force him to use himself to the limit, to live to his deepest and fullest. Whether a tragedy or fulfillment, this quest would reveal his humanity absolutely.

Reading that I had to smile, for the writer is a Mind Worm. We too burrow into a character to discover his aspects, his potential.

then create an event geared to his unique nature—the Inciting Incident. For each protagonist it's different—for one perhaps finding a fortune, for another losing a fortune—but we design the event to fit the character, the precise happening needed to send him on a quest that reaches the limits of his being. Like the Mind Worm, we explore the inscape of human nature, expressed in poetic code. For as centuries pass, nothing changes within us. As William Faulkner observed, human nature is the only subject that doesn't date.

Characters Are Not Human Beings

A character is no more a human being than the Venus de Milo is a real woman. A character is a work of art, a metaphor for human nature. We relate to characters as if they were real, but they're superior to reality. Their aspects are designed to be clear and knowable; whereas our fellow humans are difficult to understand, if not enigmatic. We know characters better than we know our friends because a character is eternal and unchanging, while people shift—just when we think we understand them, we don't. In fact, I know Rick Blaine in *CASABLANCA* better than I know myself. Rick is always Rick. I'm a bit iffy.

Character design begins with an arrangement of the two primary aspects: *Characterization* and *True Character*. To repeat: Characterization is the sum of all the observable qualities, a combination that makes the character unique: physical appearance coupled with mannerisms, style of speech and gesture, sexuality, age, IQ, occupation, personality, attitudes, values, where he lives, how he lives. True Character waits behind this mask. Despite his characterization, at heart who is this person? Loyal or disloyal? Honest or a liar? Loving or cruel? Courageous or cowardly? Generous or selfish? Willful or weak?

TRUE CHARACTER can only be expressed through choice in dilemma. How the person chooses to act under pressure is who he is—the greater the pressure, the truer and deeper the choice to character.

The key to True Character is desire. In life, if we feel stifled, the fastest way to get unstuck is to ask, “What do I want?,” listen to the honest answer, then find the will to pursue that desire. Problems still remain, but now we’re in motion with the chance of solving them. What’s true of life is true of fiction. A character comes to life the moment we glimpse a clear understanding of his desire—not only the conscious, but in a complex role, the unconscious desire as well.

Ask: What does this character want? Now? Soon? Overall? Knowingly? Unknowingly? With clear, true answers comes your command of the role.

Behind desire is motivation. Why does your character want what he wants? You have your ideas about motive, but don’t be surprised if others see it differently. A friend may feel that parental upbringing shaped your character’s desires; someone else may think it’s our materialist culture; another may blame the school system; yet another may claim it’s in the genes; still another thinks he’s possessed by the devil. Contemporary attitudes tend to favor mono-explanations for behavior, rather than the complexity of forces that’s more likely the case.

Do not reduce characters to case studies (an episode of child abuse is the cliché in vogue at the moment), for in truth there are no definitive explanations for anyone’s behavior. *Generally, the more the writer nails motivation to specific causes, the more he diminishes the character in the audience’s mind.* Rather, think through to a solid understanding of motive, but at the same time leave some mystery around the whys, a touch of the irrational perhaps, room for the audience to use its own life experience to enhance your character in its imagination.

In *King Lear*, for example, Shakespeare cast one of his most complex villains, Edmund. After a scene in which astrological influences, yet another mono-explanation of behavior, are blamed for someone’s misfortune, Edmund turns in soliloquy and laughs, “I should have been what I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardy.” Edmund does evil for the pure pleasure of it. Beyond that, what matters? As Aristotle observed, why a man does a

thing is of little interest once we see the thing he does. A character is the choices he makes to take the actions he takes. Once the deed is done his reasons why begin to dissolve into irrelevancy.

The audience comes to understand your character in a variety of ways: The physical image and setting say a lot, but the audience knows that appearance is not reality, characterization is not true character. Nonetheless, a character's mask is an important clue to what may be revealed.

What other characters say about a character is a hint. We know that what one person says of another may or may not be true, given the axes people have to grind, but that it's said and by whom is worth knowing. What a character says about himself may or may not be true. We listen, but then put it in our pockets.

In fact, characters with lucid self-knowledge, those reciting self-explanatory dialogue meant to convince us that they are who they say they are, are not only boring but phony. The audience knows that people rarely, if ever, understand themselves, and if they do, they're incapable of complete and honest self-explanation. There's always a subtext. If, by chance, what a character says about himself is actually true, we don't *know* it's true until we witness his choices made under pressure. Self-explanation must be validated or contradicted in action. In *CASABLANCA* when Rick says, "I stick my neck out for no man," we think, "Well, not yet, Rick, not yet." We know Rick better than he knows himself, for indeed he's wrong; he'll stick his neck out many times.

Character Dimension

"Dimension" is the least understood concept in character. When I was an actor, directors would insist on "round, three-dimensional characters," and I was all for that, but when I asked them what exactly is a dimension and how do I create one, let alone three, they'd waffle, mumble something about rehearsal, then stroll away.

Some years ago a producer pitched me what he believed to be a "three-dimensional" protagonist in these terms: "Jessie just got out of prison, but while he was in the slammer he boned up on finance

and investment, so he's an expert on stocks, bonds, and securities. He can also break dance. He's got a black belt in karate and plays a mean jazz saxophone." His "Jessie" was as flat as a desktop—a cluster of traits stuck on a name. Decorating a protagonist with quirks does not open his character and draw empathy. Rather, eccentricities may close him off and keep us at a distance.

A favorite academic tenet argues that, instead, fine characters are marked by one dominant trait. Macbeth's ambition is frequently cited. Overweening ambition, it's claimed, makes Macbeth great. This theory is dead wrong. If Macbeth were merely ambitious, there'd be no play. He'd simply defeat the English and rule Scotland. Macbeth is a brilliantly realized character because of the contradiction between his ambition on one hand and his guilt on the other. From this profound inner contradiction springs his passion, his complexity, his poetry.

Dimension means contradiction: either within deep character (guilt-ridden ambition) or between characterization and deep character (a charming thief). These contradictions must be *consistent*. It doesn't add dimension to portray a guy as nice throughout a film, then in one scene have him kick a cat.

Consider Hamlet, the most complex character ever written. Hamlet isn't three-dimensional, but ten, twelve, virtually uncountably dimensional. He seems spiritual until he's blasphemous. To Ophelia he's first loving and tender, then callous, even sadistic. He's courageous, then cowardly. At times he's cool and cautious, then impulsive and rash, as he stabs someone hiding behind a curtain without knowing who's there. Hamlet is ruthless and compassionate, proud and self-pitying, witty and sad, weary and dynamic, lucid and confused, sane and mad. His is an innocent worldliness, a worldly innocence, a living contradiction of almost any human qualities we could imagine.

Dimensions fascinate; contradictions in nature or behavior rivet the audience's concentration. Therefore, the protagonist must be the most dimensional character in the cast to focus empathy on the star role. If not, the Center of Good decenters; the fictional universe flies apart; the audience loses balance.

BLADE RUNNER: Marketing positioned the audience to empathize with Harrison Ford's Rick Deckard, but once in the theatre, filmgoers were drawn to the greater dimensionality of the replicant Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer). As the Center of Good shifted to the antagonist, the audience's emotional confusion diminished its enthusiasm, and what should have been a huge success became a cult film.

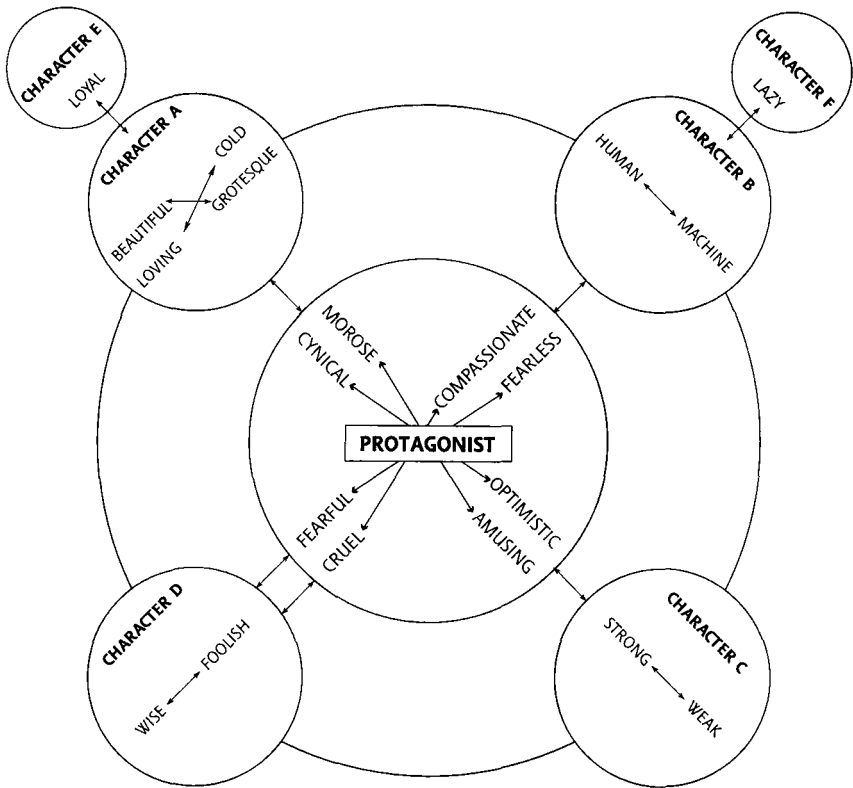
Cast Design

In essence, the protagonist creates the rest of the cast. All other characters are in a story first and foremost because of the relationship they strike to the protagonist and the way each helps to delineate the dimensions of the protagonist's complex nature. Imagine a cast as a kind of solar system with the protagonist as the sun, supporting roles as planets around the sun, bit players as satellites around the planets—all held in orbit by the gravitational pull of the star at the center, each pulling at the tides of the others' natures.

Consider this hypothetical protagonist: He's amusing and optimistic, then morose and cynical; he's compassionate, then cruel; fearless, then fearful. This four-dimensional role needs a cast around him to delineate his contradictions, characters toward whom he can act and react in different ways at different times and places. These supporting characters must round him out so that his complexity is both consistent and credible.

Character A, for example, provokes the protagonist's sadness and cynicism, while Character B brings out his witty, hopeful side. Character C inspires his loving and courageous emotions, while Character D forces him first to cower in fear, then to strike out in fury. The creation and design of characters A, B, C, and D is dictated by the needs of the protagonist. They are what they are principally to make clear and believable, through action and reaction, the complexity of the central role.

Although supporting roles must be scaled back from the protagonist, they too may be complex. Character A could be two-dimensional: outwardly beautiful and loving/inwardly grotesque as choices under pressure reveal cold, mutated desires. Even one



dimension can create an excellent supporting role. Character B could, like the Terminator, have a single yet fascinating contradiction: machine versus human. If the Terminator were merely a robot or a man from the future, he might not be interesting. But he's both, and his machine/human dimension makes a superb villain.

The physical and social world in which a character is found, his or her profession or neighborhood, for example, is an aspect of characterization. Dimension, therefore, can be created by a simple counterpoint: Placing a conventional personality against an exotic background, or a strange, mysterious individual within an ordinary, down-to-earth society immediately generates interest.

Bit parts should be drawn deliberately flat . . . but not dull. Give each a freshly observed trait that makes the role worth playing for the moment the actor's onscreen, but no more.

For example, suppose your protagonist is visiting New York City for the first time, and as she steps out of Kennedy Airport, she can't wait for her first ride with a New York taxi driver. How to write that role? Do you make him a philosophizing eccentric with a baseball cap sideways on his head? I hope not. For the last six decades every time we get in a cab in a New York movie, there he is, the kooky New York cab driver.

Perhaps you create the screen's first silent New York cab driver. She tries to start New York conversations about the Yankees, the Knicks, the mayor's office, but he just straightens his tie and drives on. She slumps back, her first New York disappointment.

On the other hand, the cab driver to end all cab drivers: a gravel-voiced but wonderfully obliging oddball who gives her a definitive tutorial in big-city survival—how to wear her purse strap across her chest, where to keep her mace can. Then he drives her to the Bronx, charges her a hundred and fifty bucks and tells her she's in Manhattan. He comes on helpful, turns into a thieving rat—a contradiction between characterization and deep character. Now we'll be looking all over the film for this guy because we know that writers don't put dimensions in characters they're not going to use again. If this cabby doesn't show up at least once more, we'll be very annoyed. Don't cause false anticipation by making bit parts more interesting than necessary.

The cast orbits around the star, its protagonist. Supporting roles are inspired by the central character and designed to delineate his complex of dimensions. Secondary roles need not only the protagonists but also one another, to bring out their dimensions. As tertiary characters (E and F on the diagram) have scenes with the protagonist or other principals, they also help reveal dimensions. Ideally, in every scene each character brings out qualities that mark the dimensions of the others, all held in constellation by the weight of the protagonist at the center.

The Comic Character

All characters pursue desire against forces of antagonism. But the dramatic character is flexible enough to step back from the risk and

realize: "This could get me killed." Not the comic character. The comic character is marked by a blind obsession. The first step to solving the problem of a character who should be funny but isn't is to find his mania.

When the political satires of Aristophanes and farcical romances of Menander passed into history, Comedy degenerated into the ribald, peasant cousin of Tragedy and Epic Poetry. But with the coming of the Renaissance—from Goldoni in Italy to Molière in France (skipping Germany) to Shakespeare, Jonson, Wycherley, Congreve, Sheridan; through Shaw, Wilde, Coward, Chaplin, Allen, the crackling wits of England, Ireland, and America—it ascended into the gleaming art of today—the saving grace of modern life.

As these masters perfected their art, like all craftsmen, they talked shop and came to realize that a comic character is created by assigning the role a "humour," an obsession the character does not see. Molière's career was built on writing plays ridiculing the protagonist's fixation—*The Miser*, *The Imaginary Invalid*, *The Misanthrope*. Almost any obsession will do. Shoes, for example. Imelda Marcos is an international joke because she doesn't see her neurotic need for shoes, by some estimates over three thousand pairs. Although in her tax trial here in New York she said it was only twelve hundred . . . and none fit. They're gifts from shoe companies, she claimed, who never get the size right.

In *All in the Family* Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) was a blindly obsessed bigot. As long as he doesn't see it, he's a buffoon and we laugh at him. But if he were to turn to someone and say, "You know, I am a racist hate monger," the comedy is over.

A SHOT IN THE DARK: A chauffeur is murdered on the estate of Benjamin Ballon (George Saunders). Enter a man obsessed with being the world's most perfect detective, Captain Clouseau (Peter Sellers), who decides that Ballon did the deed and confronts the billionaire in the billiards room. As Clouseau lays out his evidence, he rips the felt on the pool table and smashes the cues, finally summing up with: ". . . and zen you killed him in a rit of fealous jage." Clouseau turns to leave but walks around the wrong side of the

door. We hear THUMP as he hits the wall. He steps back and with cool contempt, says, “Stupid architects.”

A FISH CALLED WANDA: Wanda (Jamie Lee Curtis), a master criminal, is obsessed with men who speak foreign languages. Otto (Kevin Kline), a failed CIA agent, is convinced he’s an intellectual—although, as Wanda points out, he makes mistakes such as thinking that the London Underground is a political movement. Ken (Michael Palin) is so obsessed with a love of animals that Otto tortures him by eating his goldfish. Archie Leach (John Cleese) has an obsessive fear of embarrassment, a fear, he tells us, that grips the whole English nation. Midway through the film, however, Archie realizes his obsession and once he sees it, he turns from comic protagonist to romantic lead, from Archie Leach to “Cary Grant.” (Archie Leach was Cary Grant’s real name.)

Three Tips on Writing Characters for the Screen

1. Leave room for the actor.

This old Hollywood admonition asks the writer to provide each actor with the maximum opportunity to use his or her creativity; not to overwrite and pepper the page with constant description of behaviors, nuances of gesture, tones of voice:

Bob leans on the lectern, crossing one leg over the other, one arm akimbo. He looks out over the heads of the students, arching an eyebrow thoughtfully:

BOB

(phlegmatically)

Blaa, blaa, blaa, blaa, blaa

...

An actor’s reaction to a script saturated with that kind of detail is to toss it in the trash, thinking, “They don’t want an actor, they want a puppet.” Or if the actor accepts the role, he’ll take a red pencil and scratch all that nonsense off the page. The details above

are meaningless. An actor wants to know: What do I want? Why do I want it? How do I go about getting it? What stops me? What are the consequences? The actor brings a character to life from the subtext out: desire meeting forces of antagonism. On-camera he'll say and do what the scene requires, but characterization must be his work as much as or more than yours.

We must remember that, unlike the theatre where we hope our work will be performed in hundreds, if not thousands of productions, here and abroad, now and into the future, on screen there will be only one production, only one performance of each character fixed on film forever. Writer/actor collaboration begins when the writer stops dreaming of a fictional face and instead imagines the ideal casting. If a writer feels that a particular actor would be his ideal protagonist and he envisions her while he writes, he'll be constantly reminded of how little superb actors need to create powerful moments, and won't write this:

BARBARA

(offering Jack a
cup)

Would you like this cup of
coffee, darling?

The audience *sees* it's a cup of coffee; the gesture says, "Would you like this?"; the actress is feeling "darling . . ." Sensing that less is more, the actress will turn to her director and say: "Larry, do I have to say 'Would you like this cup of coffee, darling?' I mean, I'm offering the damn cup, right? Could we just cut that line?" The line is cut, the actress sets the screen on fire silently offering a man a cup of coffee, while the screenwriter rages, "They're butchering my dialogue!"

2. Fall in love with all your characters.

We often see films with a cast of excellent characters . . . except one, who's dreadful. We wonder why until we realize that the writer hates this character. He's trivializing and insulting this role

at every opportunity. And I'll never understand this. How can a writer hate his own character? It's his baby. How can he hate what he gave life? Embrace all your creations, especially the bad people. They deserve love like everyone else.

Hurt and Cameron must have loved their Terminator. Look at the wonderful things they did for him: In a motel room he repairs a damaged eye with an Exacto knife. Standing over a sink, he pries his eyeball out of his head, drops it in the water, mops up the blood with a towel, puts on Gargoyle sunglasses to hide the hole, then looks in the mirror and smooths down his tangled hair. The stunned audience thinks, "He just pried his eyeball out of his head and he gives a damn what he looks like. He's got vanity!"

Then a knock at the door. As he looks up, the camera takes his POV and we see his computer screen super-imposed over the door. On it is a list of responses to someone knocking: "Go away," "Please come back later," "Fuck off," "Fuck off, asshole." His cursor goes up and down while he makes his choice and stops at "Fuck off, asshole." A robot with a sense of humor. Now the monster's all the more terrifying, for thanks to these moments we have no idea of what to expect from him, and therefore imagine the worst. Only writers who love their characters discover such moments.

A hint about villains: If your character's up to no good and you place yourself within his being, asking, "If I were he in this situation, what would I do?," you'd do everything possible to get away with it. Therefore, you would not act like a villain; you would not twist your mustache. Sociopaths are the most charming folks we ever meet—sympathetic listeners who seem so deeply concerned about our problems while they lead us to hell.

An interviewer once remarked to Lee Marvin that he'd played villains for thirty years and how awful it must be always playing bad people. Marvin smiled, "Me? I don't play bad people. I play people struggling to get through their day, doing the best they can with what life's given them. Others may think they're bad, but no, I never play bad people." That's why Marvin could be a superb villain. He was a craftsman with a deep understanding of human nature: No one thinks they're bad.

If you can't love them, don't write them. On the other hand, permit neither your empathy nor antipathy for a character to produce melodrama or stereotype. Love them all without losing your clearheadedness.

3. Character is self-knowledge.

Everything I learned about human nature I learned from me.

—Anton Chekhov

Where do we find our characters? Partly through observation. Writers often carry notepads or pocket tape recorders and as they watch life's passing show, collect bits and pieces to fill file cabinets with random material. When they're dry, they dip in for ideas to stir the imagination.

We observe, but it's a mistake to copy life directly to the page. Few individuals are as clear in their complexity and as well delineated as a character. Instead, like Dr. Frankenstein, we build characters out of parts found. A writer takes the analytical mind of his sister and pieces it together with the comic wit of a friend, adds to that the cunning cruelty of a cat and the blind persistence of King Lear. We borrow bits and pieces of humanity, raw chunks of imagination and observation from wherever they're found, assemble them into dimensions of contradiction, then round them into the creatures we call characters.

Observation is our source of characterizations, but understanding of deep character is found in another place. The root of all fine character writing is self-knowledge.

One of the sad truths of life is that there's only one person in this vale of tears that we ever really know, and that's ourselves. We're essentially and forever alone. Yet, although others remain at a distance, changing and unknowable in a definitive, final sense, and despite the obvious distinctions of age, sex, background, and culture, despite all the clear differences among people, the truth is we are all far more alike than we are different. We are all human.

We all share the same crucial human experiences. Each of us is suffering and enjoying, dreaming and hoping of getting through our days with something of value. As a writer, you can be certain that everyone coming down the street toward you, each in his own way, is having the same fundamental human thoughts and feelings that you are. This is why when you ask yourself, "If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?" the honest answer is always correct. You would do the human thing. Therefore, the more you penetrate the mysteries of your own humanity, the more you come to understand yourself, the more you are able to understand others.

When we survey the parade of characters that has marched out of the imaginations of storytellers from Homer to Shakespeare, Dickens, Austen, Hemingway, Williams, Wilder, Bergman, Goldman, and all other masters—each character fascinating, unique, sublimely human and so many, many of them—and realize that all were born of a single humanity . . . it's astounding.

THE TEXT

DIALOGUE

All the creativity and labor that goes into designing story and character must finally be realized on the page. This chapter looks at the text, at dialogue and description, and the craft that guides their writing. Beyond text, it examines the poetics of story, the Image Systems embedded in words that ultimately result in filmic images that enrich meaning and emotion.

Dialogue is not conversation.

Eavesdrop on any coffee shop conversation and you'll realize in a heartbeat you'd never put that slush onscreen. Real conversation is full of awkward pauses, poor word choices and phrasing, non sequiturs, pointless repetitions; it seldom makes a point or achieves closure. But that's okay because conversation isn't about making points or achieving closure. It's what psychologists call "keeping the channel open." Talk is how we develop and change relationships.

When two friends meet on the street and talk about the weather, don't we know that theirs isn't a conversation about the weather? What is being said? "I'm your friend. Let's take a minute out of our busy day and stand here in each other's presence and reaffirm that we are indeed friends." They might talk about sports, weather, shopping . . . anything. But the text is not the subtext. What is said and done is not what is thought and felt. The scene is not about what it

seems to be about. Screen dialogue, therefore, must have the swing of everyday talk but content well above normal.

First, screen dialogue requires compression and economy. Screen dialogue must say the maximum in the fewest possible words. Second, it must have direction. Each exchange of dialogue must turn the beats of the scene in one direction or another across the changing behaviors, without repetition. Third, it should have purpose. Each line or exchange of dialogue executes a step in design that builds and arcs the scene around its Turning Point. All this precision, yet it must sound like talk, using an informal and natural vocabulary, complete with contractions, slang, even, if necessary, profanity. “Speak as common people do,” Aristotle advised, “but think as wise men do.”

Remember, film is not a novel; dialogue is spoken and gone. If words aren’t grasped the instant they leave the actor’s mouth, annoyed people suddenly whisper, “What did he say?” Nor is film theatre. We watch a movie; we hear a play. The aesthetics of film are 80 percent visual, 20 percent auditory. We want to see, not hear as our energies go to our eyes, only half-listening to the soundtrack. Theatre is 80 percent auditory, 20 percent visual. Our concentration is directed through our ears, only half-looking at the stage. The playwright may spin elaborate and ornate dialogue—but not the screenwriter. Screen dialogue demands short, simply constructed sentences—generally, a movement from noun to verb to object or from noun to verb to complement in that order.

Not, for example: “Mr. Charles Wilson Evans, the chief financial officer at Data Corporation in the 666 building on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, who was promoted to that position six years ago, having graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Business School, was arrested today, accused by the authorities of embezzlement from the company’s pension fund and fraud in his efforts to conceal the losses.” But with a polish: “You know Charlie Evans? CFO at Data Corp? Ha! Got busted. Had his fist in the till. Harvard grad ought to know how to steal and get away with it.” The same ideas broken into a series of short, simply constructed, informally spoken sentences, and bit by bit the audience gets it.

Dialogue doesn't require complete sentences. We don't always bother with a noun or a verb. Typically, as above, we drop the opening article or pronoun, speaking in phrases, even grunts.

Read your dialogue out loud or, better yet, into a tape recorder to avoid tongue twisters or accidental rhymes and alliterations such as: "They're moving their car over there." Never write anything that calls attentions to itself as dialogue, anything that jumps off the page and shouts: "Oh, what a clever line am I!" The moment you think you've written something that's particularly fine and literary—cut it.

Short Speeches

The essence of screen dialogue is what was known in Classical Greek theatre as *stikomylthia*—the rapid exchange of short speeches. Long speeches are antithetical with the aesthetics of cinema. A column of dialogue from top to bottom of a page asks the camera to dwell on an actor's face for a talking minute. Watch a second hand crawl around the face of a clock for a full sixty seconds and you'll realize that a minute is a long time. Within ten or fifteen seconds the audience's eye absorbs everything visually expressive and the shot becomes redundant. It's the same effect as a stuck record repeating the same note over and over. When the eye is bored, it leaves the screen; when it leaves the screen, you lose the audience.

The literary ambitious often shrug this problem off, thinking the editor can break up long speeches by cutting to the listening face. But this only introduces new problems. Now an actor is speaking offscreen, and when we disembodied a voice, the actor must slow down and overarticulate because the audience, in effect, lip-reads. Fifty percent of its understanding of what is being said comes from watching it being said. When the face disappears it stops listening. So offscreen speakers must carefully spit out words in the hope the audience won't miss them. What's more, a voice offscreen loses the subtext of the speaker. The audience has the subtext of the listener, but that may not be what it's interested in.

Therefore, be very judicious about writing long speeches. If, however, you feel that it's true to the moment for one character to carry all the dialogue while another remains silent, write the long speech, but as you do, remember that there's no such thing in life as a monologue. Life is dialogue, action/reaction.

If, as an actor, I have a long speech that begins when another character enters and my first line is "You've kept me waiting," how do I know what to say next until I see the reaction to my first words? If the other character's reaction is apologetic, his head goes down in embarrassment, that softens my next action and colors my lines accordingly. If, however, the other actor's reaction is antagonistic, as he shoots me a dirty look, that may color my next lines with anger. How does anyone know from moment to moment what to say or do next until he senses the reaction to what he just did? He doesn't know. Life is always action/reaction. No monologues. No prepared speeches. An improvisation no matter how we mentally rehearse our big moments.

Therefore, show us that you understand film aesthetics by breaking long speeches into the patterns of action/reaction that shape the speaker's behavior. Fragment the speech with silent reactions that cause the speaker to change the beat, such as this from *AMADEUS* as Salieri confesses to a priest:

SALIERI

All I ever wanted was to sing
to God. He gave me that
longing. And then made me
mute. Why? Tell me that.

The Priest looks away, pained and embarrassed, so Salieri answers his own question rhetorically:

SALIERI

If he didn't want me to praise
Him with music, why implant
the desire . . . like a lust in

my body and then deny me
the talent?

Or put parentheticals within dialogue for the same effect, such as this from later in the scene:

SALIERI

You understand, I was in love
with the girl . . .

(amused by his own
choice of words)

. . . or at least in lust.

(seeing the priest
look down at a
crucifix held in his
lap)

But I swear to you, I never
laid a finger on her. No.

(as the priest looks
up, solemn, judg-
mental)

All the same, I couldn't bear
to think of anyone else
touching her.

(angered at the
thought of Mozart)

Least of all . . . the creature.

A character can react to himself, to his own thoughts and emotions, as does Salieri above. That too is part of the scene's dynamics. Demonstrating on the page the action/reaction patterns within characters, between characters, between characters and the physical world projects the sensation of watching a film into the reader's imagination and makes the reader understand that yours is not a film of talking heads.

The Suspense Sentence

In ill-written dialogue useless words, especially prepositional phrases, float to the ends of sentences. Consequently, meaning sits somewhere in the middle, but the audience has to listen to those last empty words and for that second or two they're bored. What's more, the actor across the screen wants to take his cue from that meaning but has to wait awkwardly until the sentence is finished. In life, we cut each other off, slicing the wiggling tails off each other's sentences, letting everyday conversation tumble. This is yet another reason why in production actors and directors rewrite dialogue, as they trim speeches to lift the scene's energy and make the cueing rhythm pop.

Excellent film dialogue tends to shape itself into the periodic sentence: "If you didn't want me to do it, why'd you give me that . . ." Look? Gun? Kiss? The periodic sentence is the "suspense sentence." Its meaning is delayed until the very last word, forcing both actor and audience to listen to the end of the line. Read again Peter Shaffer's superb dialogue above and note that virtually every single line is a suspense sentence.

The Silent Screenplay

The best advice for writing film dialogue is *don't*. Never write a line of dialogue when you can create a visual expression. The first attack on every scene should be: How could I write this in a purely visual way and not have to resort to a single line of dialogue? Obey the Law of Diminishing Returns: The more dialogue you write, the less effect dialogue has. If you write speech after speech, walking characters into rooms, sitting them in chairs and talking, talking, talking, moments of quality dialogue are buried under this avalanche of words. But if you write for the eye, when the dialogue comes, as it must, it sparks interest because the audience is hungry for it. Lean dialogue, in relief against what's primarily visual, has salience and power.

THE SILENCE: Ester and Anna (Ingrid Thulin and Gunnel Lindblom) are sisters living in a lesbian and rather sadomasochistic

relationship. Ester is seriously ill with tuberculosis. Anna is bisexual, has an illegitimate child, and enjoys tormenting her older sister. They're traveling home to Sweden, and the film takes place in a hotel during their journey. Bergman has written a scene in which Anna goes down to the hotel restaurant and allows herself to be seduced by a waiter in order to provoke her sister with this afternoon affair. The "waiter seduces the customer" scene . . . how would you write it?

Does the waiter open a menu and recommend certain items? Ask her if she's staying at the hotel? Traveling far? Compliment her on how she's dressed? Ask her if she knows the city? Mention he's getting off work and would love to show her the sights? Talk, talk . . .

Here's what Bergman gave us: The waiter walks to the table and accidentally on purpose drops the napkin on the floor. As he bends to pick it up, he slowly sniffs and smells Anna from head to crotch to foot. She, in reaction, draws a long, slow, almost delirious breath. CUT TO: They're in a hotel room. Perfect, isn't it? Erotic, purely visual, not a word said or necessary. That's *screenwriting*.

Alfred Hitchcock once remarked, "When the screenplay has been written *and the dialogue has been added*, we're ready to shoot."

Image is our first choice, dialogue the regretful second choice. Dialogue is the last layer we *add* to the screenplay. Make no mistake, we all love great dialogue, but less is more. When a highly imagistic film shifts to dialogue, it crackles with excitement and delights the ear.

DESCRIPTION

Putting a Film in the Reader's Head

Pity the poor screenwriter, for he cannot be a poet. He cannot use metaphor and simile, assonance and alliteration, rhythm and rhyme, synecdoche and metonymy, hyperbole and meiosis, the grand tropes. Instead, his work must contain all the substance of literature but not be literary. A literary work is finished and complete within itself. A screenplay waits for the camera. If not litera-

ture, what then is the screenwriter's ambition? To describe in such a way that as the reader turns pages, a film flows through the imagination.

No small task. The first step is to recognize exactly what it is we describe—the sensation of looking at the screen. Ninety percent of all verbal expression has no filmic equivalent. “He’s been sitting there for a long time” can’t be photographed. So we constantly discipline the imagination with this question: What do I see on the screen? Then describe only what is photographic: Perhaps “He stubs out his tenth cigarette,” “He nervously glances at his watch,” or “He yawns, trying to stay awake” to suggest waiting a long time.

Vivid Action in the Now

The ontology of the screen is *an absolute present tense in constant vivid movement*. We write screenplay in the present tense because, unlike the novel, film is on the knife edge of the now—whether we flash back or forward, we jump to a new *now*. And the screen expresses relentless action. Even static shots have a sense of aliveness, because although the imagery may not move, the audience’s eye constantly travels the screen, giving stationary images energy. And, unlike life, film is vivid. Occasionally, our daily routine may be broken by light glinting off a building, flowers in a shop window, or a woman’s face in the crowd. But as we walk through our days we’re more inside our heads than out, half-seeing, half-hearing the world. The screen, however, is intensely vivid for hours on end.

On the page vividness springs from the names of the things. Nouns are the names of objects; verbs the names of actions. To write vividly, avoid generic nouns and verbs with adjectives and adverbs attached and seek the name of the thing: Not “The carpenter uses a big nail,” but “The carpenter hammers a *spike*.” “Nail” is a generic noun, “big” an adjective. The solid, Anglo-Saxon “*spike*” pops a vivid image in the reader’s mind, “nail” a blur. How big?

The same applies to verbs. A typical line of nondescription: “He starts to move slowly across the room.” How does somebody “start” across a room on film? The character either crosses or takes a step and

stops. And “move slowly”? “Slowly” is an adverb; “move” a vague, bland verb. Instead, name the action: “He pads across the room.” “He (ambles, strolls, moseys, saunters, drags himself, staggers, waltzes, glides, lumbers, tiptoes, creeps, slouches, shuffles, waddles, minces, trudges, teeters, lurches, gropes, hobbles) across the room.” All are slow but each vivid and distinctively different from the others.

Eliminate “is” and “are” throughout. Onscreen nothing is in a state of being; story life is an unending flux of change, of becoming. Not: “There is a big house on a hill above a small town.” “There is,” “They are,” “It is,” “He/She is” are the weakest possible ways into any English sentence. And what’s a “big house”? Chateau? Hacienda? A “hill”? Ridge? Bluff? A “small town”? Crossroads? Hamlet? Perhaps: “A mansion guards the headlands above the village.” With a Hemingwayesque shunning of Latinate and abstruse terms, of adjectives and adverbs, in favor of the most specific, active verbs and concrete nouns possible, even establishing shots come alive. Fine film description requires an imagination and a vocabulary.

Eliminate all metaphor and simile that cannot pass this test: “What do I see (or hear) onscreen?” As Milos Forman observed, “In film, a tree is a tree.” “As if,” for example, is a trope that doesn’t exist onscreen. A character doesn’t come through a door “as if.” He comes through the door—period. The metaphor “A mansion guards . . .” and simile “The door slams like a gunshot . . .” pass the test in that a mansion can be photographed from a foreground angle that gives the impression it shelters or guards a village below it; a door slam can crack the ear like a gunshot. In fact, in *MISSING* the sound effects of all door slams were done with gunshots to subliminally increase tension as the conscious mind hears a door slam but the unconscious reacts to a gunshot.

These, on the other hand, were found in submissions to the European Script Fund: “The sun sets like a tiger’s eye closing in the jungle,” and, “The road twists and knifes and gouges its way up the hillside, struggling until it reaches the rim, then disappears out of sight before bursting onto the horizon.” They are director traps, seductive but unphotographable. Although the European writers of these passages lack screenwriting discipline, they are ingeniously

trying to be expressive; whereas American writers, out of cynicism and laziness, often resort to sarcasm:

“BENNY, in his thirties, is a small, muscular Englishman with an air of mania that suggests that, at least once in his life, he’s bitten the head off a chicken.” And, “You guessed it. Here comes the sex scene. I’d write it, but my mother reads these things.” Amusing, but that’s what these writers want us to think so we don’t notice that they can’t or won’t write. They’ve resorted to bald telling masked by sarcasm because they haven’t the craft, talent, or pride to create a scene that acts out the simplest of ideas.

Eliminate “we see” and “we hear.” “We” doesn’t exist. Once into the story ritual, the theatre could be empty for all we care. Instead, “We see” injects an image of the crew looking through the lens and shatters the script reader’s vision of the film.

Eliminate all camera and editing notations. In the same way actors ignore behavioral description, directors laugh at RACK FOCUS TO, PAN TO, TIGHT TWO SHOT ON, and all other efforts to direct the film from the page. If you write TRACK ON, does the reader see a film flowing through his imagination? No. He now sees *a film being made*. Delete CUT TO, SMASH CUT TO, LAP DISSOLVE TO, and other transitions. The reader assumes that all changes of angle are done on a cut.

The contemporary screenplay is a *Master Scene* work that includes only those angles absolutely necessary to the telling of the story and no more. For example:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack enters, dropping his briefcase on the antique chair next to the door. He notices a note propped up on the dining room table. Strolling over, he picks up the note, tears it open, and reads. Then crumpling the note, he drops into a chair, head in hands.

If the audience knows the contents of the note from a previous scene, then the description stays on Jack reading

and slumping into a chair. If, however, it's vital that the audience read the note with Jack or it wouldn't be able follow the story, then:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack enters, dropping his briefcase on the antique chair next to the door. He notices a note propped up on the dining room table. Strolling over, he picks it up and tears it open.

INSERT NOTE:

Calligraphic handwriting reads: Jack, I've packed and left. Do not try to contact me. I have a lawyer. She will be in touch.
Barbara

ON SCENE

Jack crumples the note and drops into a chair, head in hands.

Another example: If, as Jack sits, head in hands, he were to hear a car pull outside and hurry to a window, and it's critical to audience comprehension that they see what Jack sees at that moment, then continuing from above:

ON SCENE

Jack crumples the note and drops into a chair, head in hands.

Suddenly, a car PULLS UP outside. He hurries to the window.

JACK'S POV

through the curtains to the curb. Barbara gets out of her station wagon, opens the hatch and takes out suitcases.

ON JACK

turning from the window, hurling Barbara's note across the room.

If, however, the audience would assume that car pulling up is Barbara coming back to Jack because she's done it twice before and Jack's angry reaction says it all, then the description would stay on the Master Shot of Jack in the dining room.

Beyond the essential storytelling angles, however, the Master Scene screenplay gives the writer a strong influence on the film's direction. Instead of labeling angles, the writer suggests them by breaking single-spaced paragraphs into units of description with images and language subtly indicating camera distance and composition. For example:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack enters and looks around the empty room. Lifting his briefcase above his head, he drops it with a THUMP on the fragile, antique chair next to the door. He listens. Silence.

Pleased with himself, he ambles for the kitchen, when suddenly he's brought up short.

A note with his name on it sits propped against the rose-filled vase on the dining table.

Nervously he twists his wedding ring.

Taking a breath, he strolls over, picks up the note, tears it open, and reads.

Rather than writing the above into a thick block of single spaced prose, lines of white split it into five units that suggest in

order: A wide angle covering most of the room, a moving shot through the room, a close-up on the note, an even tighter close-up on Jack's ring finger, and a medium follow-shot to the table.

The briefcase insult to Barbara's antique chair and Jack's nervous gesture with his wedding ring express his shifts of feeling. Actor and director are always free to improvise new business of their own, but the miniparagraphs lead the reader's inner eye through a pattern of action/reaction between Jack and the room, Jack and his emotions, Jack and his wife as represented in her note. That's the life of the scene. Now director and actor must capture it under the influence of this pattern. How exactly will be their creative tasks. In the meantime, the effect of the Master Scene technique is a readability that translates into the sensation of watching a film.

IMAGE SYSTEMS

The Screenwriter As Poet

"Pity the poor screenwriter, for he cannot be a poet" is not in fact true. Film is a magnificent medium for the poet's soul, once the screenwriter understands the nature of story *poetics* and its workings within a film.

Poetic does not mean pretty. Decorative images of the kind that send audiences out of disappointing films muttering "but it's beautifully photographed" are not poetic. *THE SHELTERING SKY*: Its human content is aridity, a desperate meaninglessness—what was once called an *existential crisis*, and the novel's desert setting was metaphor for the barrenness of the protagonists' lives. The film, however, glowed with the postcard glamour of a tourist agency travelogue, and little or nothing of the suffering at its heart could be felt. Pretty pictures are appropriate if the subject is pretty: *THE SOUND OF MUSIC*.

Rather, poetic means an *enhanced expressivity*. Whether a story's content is beautiful or grotesque, spiritual or profane, quietistic or violent, pastoral or urban, epic or intimate, it wants full expression. A good story well told, well directed and acted, and perhaps a good

film. All that plus an enrichment and deepening of the work's expressivity through its poetics, and perhaps a great film.

To begin with, as audience in the ritual of story, we react to every image, visual or auditory, symbolically. We instinctively sense that each object has been selected to mean more than itself and so we add a connotation to every denotation. When an automobile pulls into a shot, our reaction is not a neutral thought such as "vehicle"; we give it a connotation. We think, "Huh. Mercedes . . . rich. Or, "Lamborghini . . . foolishly rich." "Rusted-out Volkswagen . . . artist." "Harley-Davidson . . . dangerous." "Red Trans-Am . . . problems with sexual identity." The storyteller then builds on this natural inclination in the audience.

The first step in turning a well-told story into a poetic work is to exclude 90 percent of reality. The vast majority of objects in the world have the wrong connotations for any specific film. So the spectrum of possible imagery must be sharply narrowed to those objects with appropriate implications.

In production, for example, if a director wants a vase added to a shot, this prompts an hour's discussion, and a critical one. What kind of vase? What period? What shape? Color? Ceramic, metal, wood? Are there flowers in it? What kind? Where located? Fore-ground? Mid-ground? Background? Upper left of the shot? Lower right? In or out of focus? Is it lit? Is it touched as a prop? Because this isn't just a vase, it's a highly charged, symbolic object resonating meaning to every other object in the shot and forward and backward through the film. Like all works of art, a film is a unity in which every object relates to every other image or object.

Limited to what's appropriate, the writer then empowers the film with an *Image System*, or systems, for there are often more than one.

An IMAGE SYSTEM is a strategy of motifs, a category of imagery embedded in the film that repeats in sight and sound from beginning to end with persistence and great variation, but with equally great subtlety, as a subliminal communication to increase the depth and complexity of aesthetic emotion.

“Category” means a subject drawn from the physical world that’s broad enough to contain sufficient variety. For example, a dimension of nature—animals, the seasons, light and dark—or a dimension of human culture—buildings, machines, art. This category must repeat because one or two isolated symbols have little effect. But the power of an organized return of images is immense, as variety and repetition drive the Image System to the seat of the audience’s unconscious. Yet, *and most important*, a film’s poetics must be handled with virtual invisibility and go consciously unrecognized.

An Image System is created one of two ways, via External or Internal Imagery. External Imagery takes a category that outside the film already has a symbolic meaning and brings it in to mean the same thing in the film it means outside the film: for example, to use the national flag—a symbol of patriotism and love of country—to mean patriotism, love of country. In *ROCKY IV*, for example, after Rocky defeats the Russian boxer, he wraps himself in a massive American flag. Or to use a crucifix, a symbol of love of God and religious feelings, to mean love of God, religious feelings; a spider’s web to mean entrapment; a teardrop to mean sadness. External Imagery, I must point out, is the hallmark of the student film.

Internal Imagery takes a category that outside the film may or may not have a symbolic meaning attached but brings it into the film to give it an entirely new meaning appropriate to this film and this film alone.

LES DIABOLIQUE: In 1955 director/screenwriter Henri-Georges Clouzot adapted Pierre Boileau’s novel, *Celle Qui N’etait Pas* to the screen. In it Christina (Vera Clouzot) is an attractive young woman but very shy, quiet, and sensitive. She has suffered from a heart condition since childhood and is never in the best of health. Years before she inherited an impressive estate in the suburbs of Paris that has been turned into an exclusive boarding school. She runs this school with her husband, Michel (Paul Meurisse), a sadistic, abusive, malignant bastard who delights in treating his wife like dirt. He’s having an affair with one of the school’s teachers, Nicole (Simone Signoret), and he’s as vicious and cruel to his mistress as he is to his wife.

Everybody knows about this affair. In fact, the two women have become best friends, both suffering under the heel of this brute. Early in the film they decide that the only way out of their problem is to kill him.

One night they lure Michel to an apartment in a village well away from the school where they've secretly filled a bathtub full of water. He comes in, dressed in his three-piece suit, and arrogantly taunts and insults his two women while they get him as drunk as they possibly can, then try to drown him in the bathtub. But he's not that drunk and it's a hell of a struggle. The terror nearly kills the poor wife, but Nicole rushes into the living room and grabs a ceramic statue of a panther from the coffee table. She loads this heavy thing on the man's chest. Between the weight of the statue and her own strength she manages to hold him down under the water long enough to drown him.

The women wrap the body in a tarp, hide it in the back of a pickup truck, and sneak back to the campus in the middle of the night. The school's swimming pool hasn't been used all winter; an inch of algae covers the water. The women dump the body in and it submerges out of sight. They quickly retire and wait for the next day when the body will float up and be discovered. But the next day comes and goes and the body does not float up. Days go by and the body will not float up.

Finally, Nicole accidentally on purpose drops her car keys in the pool and asks one of the older students to retrieve them. The kid dives down under the scum and searches and searches and searches. He comes up, gulps some air, then goes down again and searches and searches and searches. He comes up to gulp air, then goes down a third time and searches and searches and searches. At last he surfaces . . . with the car keys.

The women then decide it's time to clean the swimming pool. They order the pool drained and stand at its edge, watching as the scum goes down and down and down and down . . . to the drain. But there is no body. That afternoon a dry cleaner's van drives out from Paris to deliver the cleaned and pressed suit that the man died in. The women rush into Paris to the cleaners where they find

a receipt, and on it is the address of a boardinghouse. They head there and talk to a concierge who says, “Yes, yes, there was a man living here but . . . he moved this morning.”

They go back to the school and even more bizarre things happen: Michel appears and disappears in the windows of the school. When they look at the senior class graduation photo, there he is standing behind the students, slightly out of focus. They can’t imagine what’s going on. Is he a ghost? Did he somehow survive the drowning and he’s doing this to us? Did someone else find the body? Are they doing this?

Summer vacation comes and all the students and teachers leave. Then Nicole herself departs. She packs her bags, saying she can’t take this anymore, abandoning the poor wife alone.

That evening Christina can’t sleep; she sits up in bed, wide awake, her heart pounding. Suddenly in the dead of night she hears the sound of typing coming from her husband’s office. She slowly gets up and edges down a long corridor, hand on her heart, but just as she touches the office doorknob, the typing stops.

She eases open the door and there, alongside the typewriter, are her husband’s gloves . . . like two huge hands. Then she hears the most terrifying sound imaginable: dripping water. Now she heads toward the bathroom off the office, her heart raging. She creaks open the bathroom door and there he is—still in his three-piece suit, submerged in a bathtub full of water, the faucet dripping.

The body sits up, water cascades off. Its eyes open but there are no eyeballs. Hands reach out for her, she grabs her chest, has a fatal heart attack, and drops dead on the floor. Michel reaches under his eyelids and removes white plastic inserts. Nicole jumps out of a closet. They embrace and whisper, “We did it!”

The opening titles of *LES DIABOLIQUE* look as if they’re over an abstract painting of grays and blacks. But suddenly, as titles end, a truck tire splashes from bottom to top of the screen and we realize we’ve been looking at the top angle view of a mud puddle. The camera comes up on a rainy landscape. From this first moment on, Image System “water” is continually and subliminally

repeated. It's always drizzly and foggy. Condensation on windows runs in little drops to the sills. At dinner they eat fish. Characters drink wine and tea while Christina sips her heart medicine. When the teachers discuss summer vacation, they talk of going to the South of France to "take the waters." Swimming pool, bathtubs . . . it's one of the dampest films ever made.

Outside this film water is a universal symbol of all things positive: sanctification, purification, the feminine—archetype for life itself. But Clouzot reverses these values until water takes on the power of death, terror, and evil, and the sound of a dripping faucet brings the audience up out of its seats.

CASABLANCA weaves three Image Systems. Its primary motifs create a sense of imprisonment as the city of Casablanca becomes a virtual penitentiary. Characters whisper their "escape" plans as if the police were prison guards. The beacon on the airport tower moves through the streets like a searchlight scanning a prison compound, while window blinds, room dividers, stair railings, even the leaves of potted palms create shadows like the bars of prison cells.

The second system builds a progression from the particular to the archetypal. Casablanca starts as a refugee center but becomes a mini-United Nations filled with not only Arab and European faces but Asian and African ones as well. Rick and his friend Sam are the only Americans we meet. Repeated images, including dialogue in which characters speak to Rick as if he were a country, associate Rick to America until he comes to symbolize America itself and Casablanca the world. Like the United States in 1941 Rick is steadfastly neutral, wanting no part in yet another World War. His conversion to the fight subliminally congratulates America for finally taking sides against tyranny.

The third system is one of linking and separating. A number of images and compositions within the frame are used to link Rick and Ilsa, making the subliminal point that although these two are apart, they belong together. The counterpoint to this is a series of images and compositional designs that separate Ilsa from Laszlo, giving the opposite impression that although these two are together, they belong apart.

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY is a multiplot film with six story lines—three positive climaxes devoted to the father, three negative endings to his daughter—in a point/counterpoint design that interweaves no fewer than four Image Systems. The father's stories are marked by open spaces, light, intellect, and verbal communication; the daughter's conflicts are expressed in closed spaces, darkness, animal images, and sexuality.

CHINATOWN also employs four systems, two of External Imagery, two of Internal Imagery. The primary internalized system is motifs of “blind seeing” or seeing falsely: Windows; rearview mirrors; eyeglasses, and particularly broken spectacles; cameras; binoculars; eyes themselves, and even the open, unseeing eyes of the dead, all gather tremendous forces to suggest that if we are looking for evil out in the world, we're looking in the wrong direction. It is in here. In us. As Mao Tse-tung once said, “History is the symptom, we are the disease.”

The second internalized system takes political corruption and turns it into social cement. False contracts, subverted laws, and acts of corruption become that which hold society together and create “progress.” Two systems of External Imagery, water versus drought and sexual cruelty versus sexual love have conventional connotations but are used with a sharp-edged effectiveness.

When ALIEN was released *Time* magazine ran a ten-page article with stills and drawings asking the question: Has Hollywood gone too far? For this film incorporates a highly erotic Image System and contains three vivid “rape” scenes.

When Gail Anne Hurd and James Cameron made the sequel, ALIENS, they not only switched genres from *Horror* to *Action/Adventure*, they reinvented the Image System to motherhood as Ripley becomes the surrogate mother of the child Newt (Carrie Henn), who in turn is the surrogate mother of her broken doll. The two are up against the most terrifying “mother” in the universe, the gigantic monster queen who lays her eggs in a womblike nest. In dialogue, Ripley remarks, “The monsters make you pregnant.”

AFTER HOURS works on only one internalized refrain but with a rich variety: Art. But not as the ornament of life. Rather, art

as a weapon. The art and artists of Manhattan's Soho district constantly assault the protagonist, Paul (Griffin Dunne), until he's encapsulated inside a work of art and stolen by Cheech and Chong.

Going back through the decades, Hitchcock's *Thrillers* combine images of religiosity with sexuality, while John Ford's *Westerns* counterpoint wilderness with civilization. In fact, traveling back through the centuries we realize that Image Systems are as old as story itself. Homer invented beautiful motifs for his epics, as did Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides for their plays. Shakespeare submerged a unique Image System into each of his works, as did Melville, Poe, Tolstoy, Dickens, Orwell, Hemingway, Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, Beckett—all great novelists and playwrights have embraced this principle.

And who, after all, invented screenwriting? Novelists and playwrights who came to the cradles of our art in Hollywood, London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and Moscow to write the scenarios of silent films. Film's first major directors, such as D. W. Griffith, Eisenstein, and Murnau, did their apprenticeship in the theatre; they too realized that, like a fine play, a film can be taken to the sublime by the repetition of a subliminal poetics.

And an Image System *must be* subliminal. The audience is not to be aware of it. Years ago as I watched Buñuel's *VIRIDIANA*, I noticed that Buñuel had introduced an Image System of rope: A child jump ropes, a rich man hangs himself with a rope, a poor man uses rope as a belt. About the fifth time a piece of rope came on the screen the audience shouted in unison, "Symbol!"

Symbolism is powerful, more powerful than most realize, as long as it bypasses the conscious mind and slips into the unconscious. As it does while we dream. The use of symbolism follows the same principle as scoring a film. Sound doesn't need cognition, so music can deeply affect us when we're unconscious of it. In the same way, symbols touch us and move us—as long as we don't recognize them as symbolic. Awareness of a symbol turns it into a neutral, intellectual curiosity, powerless and virtually meaningless.

Why, then, do so many contemporary writer/directors label their symbols? The hamhanded treatment of "symbolic" images in

the remake of CAPE FEAR, BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA, and THE PIANO, to name three of the more barefaced examples. I can think of two likely reasons: First, to flatter the elite audience of self-perceived intellectuals that watches at a safe, unemotional distance while collecting ammunition for the postfilm ritual of cafe criticism. Second, to influence, if not control, critics and the reviews they write. Declamatory symbolism requires no genius, just egotism ignited by misreadings of Jung and Derrida. It is a vanity that demeans and corrupts the art.

Some argue that the film's Image System is the director's work and that he or she alone should create it. And I've no argument with that, for ultimately the director is responsible for every square inch of every shot in the film. Except . . . how many working directors understand what I've explained above? Few. Perhaps two dozen in the world today. Just the very best, while, unfortunately, the vast majority cannot tell the difference between decorative and expressive photography.

I argue that the screenwriter should begin the film's Image System and the director and designers finish it. It's the writer who first envisions the ground of all imagery, the story's physical and social world. Often, as we write, we discover that spontaneously we've already begun the work, that a pattern of imagery has found its way into our descriptions and dialogue. As we become aware of that, we devise variations and quietly embroider them into the story. If an Image System doesn't arrive on its own, we invent one. The audience won't care how we do it; it only wants the story to work.

TITLES

A film's title is the marketing centerpiece that "positions" the audience, preparing it for the experience ahead. Screenwriters, therefore, cannot indulge in literary, nontitle titles: TESTAMENT, for example, is actually a film about postnuclear holocaust; LOOKS AND SMILES portrays desolate lives on welfare. My favorite nontitle tile is MOMENT BY MOMENT. MOMENT BY MOMENT is the working title I always use until I figure out the title.

To title means to name. An effective title points to something solid that is actually in the story—character, setting, theme, or genre. The best titles often name two or all elements at once.

JAWS names a character, sets the story in the wilds, and gives us the theme, man against nature, in the *Action/Adventure* genre. KRAMER VS. KRAMER names two characters, a divorce theme, and *Domestic Drama*. STAR WARS titles an epic conflict of galactic warriors. PERSONA suggests a cast of psychologically troubled characters and a theme of hidden identities. LA DOLCE VITA places us in a decadent setting among the urban rich. MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING establishes characters, setting, and *Romantic Comedy*.

A title, of course, isn't the only marketing consideration. As the legendary Harry Cohn once observed, "MOGAMBO is a terrible title. MOGAMBO, starring Clark Gable and Ava Gardner, is a great f . . . ing title."

A WRITER'S METHOD

Professional writers may or may not receive critical acclaim, but they're in control of the craft, have access to their talent, improve their performance over the years, and make a living from the art. A struggling writer may at times produce quality, but from day to day he cannot make his talent perform when and as he wants, doesn't progress in quality from story to story, and receives little, if any, income from his efforts. On the whole, the difference between those who succeed and those who struggle is their opposed methods of work: inside out versus outside in.

WRITING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

The struggling writer tends to have a way of working that goes something like this: He dreams up an idea, noodles on it for a while, then rushes straight to the keyboard:

EXT. HOUSE—DAY

Description, description, description. Characters A and B enter.

CHARACTER A

Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

CHARACTER B

Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

Description, description, description, description, description.

He imagines and writes, writes and dreams until he reaches page 120 and stops. Then he hands out Xerox copies to friends and back come their reactions: "Oh, it's nice, and I love that scene in the garage when they threw paint all over each other, was that funny or what? And when the little kid came down at night in his pajamas, how sweet! The scene on the beach was so romantic, and when the car blew up, exciting. But I don't know . . . there's something about the ending . . . and the middle . . . and the way it starts . . . that just doesn't work for me."

So the struggling writer gathers friends' reactions and his own thoughts to start the second draft with this strategy: "How can I keep the six scenes that I love and that everyone else loves and somehow pretzel this film through them in a way that'll work?" With a little more thought he's back at the keyboard:

INT. HOUSE—NIGHT

Description, description, description. Characters A and C enter while Character B watches from hiding.

CHARACTER A

Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

CHARACTER C

Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

Description, description, description, description, description.

He imagines and writes, writes and dreams, but all the while he clings like a drowning man to his favorite scenes until a rewrite comes out the other end. He makes copies and hands them out to friends and back come reactions: "It's different, decidedly different. But I'm so glad you kept that scene in the garage and with the kid in his pajamas and the car on the beach . . . great scenes. But . . .

there's still something about that ending and the middle and the way it starts that just doesn't work for me."

The writer then does a third draft and a fourth and a fifth but the process is always the same: He clings to his favorite scenes, twisting a new telling through them in hopes of finding a story that works. Finally a year's gone by and he's burned out. He declares the screenplay perfect and hands it to his agent, who reads it without enthusiasm, but because he's an agent, he does what he must. He too makes copies, papers Hollywood, and back come reader reports: "Very nicely written, good crisp, actable dialogue, vivid scene description, fine attention to detail, the story sucks. PASS ON IT." The writer blames the Philistine tastes of Hollywood and gears up for his next project.

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Successful writers tend to use the reverse process. If, hypothetically and optimistically, a screenplay can be written from first idea to last draft in six months, these writers typically spend the first four of those six months writing on stacks of three-by-five cards: a stack for each act—three, four, perhaps more. On these cards they create the story's *step-outline*.

Step-Outline

As the term implies, a step-outline is the story told in steps.

Using one- or two-sentence statements, the writer simply and clearly describes what happens in each scene, how it builds and turns. For example: "He enters expecting to find her at home, but instead discovers her note saying she's left for good."

On the back of each card the writer indicates what step in the design of the story he sees this scene fulfilling—at least for the moment. Which scenes set up the Inciting Incident? Which is the Inciting Incident? First Act Climax? Perhaps a Mid-Act Climax? Second Act? Third? Fourth? Or more? He does this for Central Plot and subplots alike.

He confines himself to a few stacks of cards for months on end

for this critical reason: He wants to destroy his work. Taste and experience tell him that 90 percent of everything he writes, regardless of his genius, is mediocre at best. In his patient search for quality, he must create far more material than he can use, then destroy it. He may sketch a scene a dozen different ways before finally throwing the *idea* of the scene out of the outline. He may destroy sequences, whole acts. A writer secure in his talent knows there's no limit to what he can create, and so he trashes everything less than his best on a quest for a gem-quality story.

This process, however, doesn't mean the writer isn't filling pages. Day after day a huge stack grows on the side of the desk: but these are biographies, the fictional world and its history, thematic notations, images, even snippets of vocabulary and idiom. Research and imaginings of all kinds fill a file cabinet while the story is disciplined to the step-outline.

Finally, after weeks or months, the writer discovers his Story Climax. With that in hand, he reworks, as needed, backward from it. At last he has a story. Now he goes to friends, but not asking for a day out of their lives—which is what we ask when we want a conscientious person to read a screenplay. Instead he pours a cup of coffee and asks for ten minutes. Then he pitches his story.

The writer never shows his step-outline to people because it's a tool, too cryptic for anyone but the writer to follow. Instead, at this critical stage, he wants to tell or pitch his story so he can see it unfold in time, watch it play on the thoughts and feelings of another human being. He wants to look in that person's eyes and see the story happen there. So he pitches and studies the reactions: Is my friend hooked by my Inciting Incident? Listening and leaning in? Or are his eyes wandering? Am I holding him as I build and turn the progressions? And when I hit the Climax, do I get a strong reaction of the kind I want?

Any story pitched from its step-outline to an intelligent, sensitive person must be able to grab attention, hold interest for ten minutes, and pay it off by moving him to a meaningful, emotional experience—just as my *LES DIABOLIQUE* pitch hooked, held, and moved you. Regardless of genre, if a story can't work in ten

minutes, how will it work in 110 minutes? It won't get better when it gets bigger. Everything that's wrong with it in a ten-minute pitch is ten times worse onscreen.

Until a good majority of listeners respond with enthusiasm, there's no point going forward. "With enthusiasm" doesn't mean people leap up and kiss you on both cheeks, rather they whisper "Wow" and fall silent. A fine work of art—music, dance, painting, story—has the power to silence the chatter in the mind and lift us to another place. When a story, pitched from a step-outline, is so strong it brings silence—no comments, no criticism, just a look of pleasure—that's a hell of a thing and time is too precious to waste on a story that hasn't that power. Now the writer's ready to move to the next stage—the treatment.

Treatment

To "treat" the step-outline, the writer expands each scene from its one or two sentences to a paragraph or more of double-spaced, present-tense, moment by moment description:

Dining Room—Day Jack walks in and tosses his briefcase on the chair next to the door. He looks around. The room is empty. He calls her name. Gets no answer. He calls it again, louder and louder. Still no answer. As he pads to the kitchen, he sees a note on the table. Picks it up, reads it. The note says that she has left him for good. He drops in the chair, head in hands, and starts to cry.

In treatment the writer indicates what characters talk about—"he wants her to do this, but she refuses," for example—but never writes dialogue. Instead, he creates the subtext—the true thoughts and feelings underneath what is said and done. We may think we know what our characters are thinking and feeling, but we don't know we know until we write it down:

Dining Room—Day The door opens and Jack leans on the jamb, exhausted from a day of failed and frustrating work. He looks

around the room, sees she's not around, and hopes like hell she's out. He really doesn't want to have to deal with her today. To be sure he has the house to himself, he calls her name. Gets no answer. Calls out louder and louder. Still no answer. Good. He's finally alone. He lifts his briefcase high in the air drops it with a thud onto her precious Chippendale chair next to the door. She hates him for scratching her antiques but today he doesn't give a damn.

Hungry, he heads for the kitchen, but as he crosses the room he notices a note on the dining-room table. It's one of those damn, annoying notes that she's always leaving around, taped to the bathroom mirror or the refrigerator or whatever. Irritated, he picks it up and tears it open. Reading it, he discovers that she's left him for good. As his legs go weak, he drops into a chair, a knot twisting in his gut. His head falls into his hands and he starts to cry. He's surprised by his outburst, pleased he can still feel some emotion. But his tears are not grief; they're the dam breaking with relief that the relationship is finally over.

• • •

The forty to sixty scenes of a typical screenplay, treated to a moment by moment description of all action, underlaid with a full subtext of the conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings of all characters, will produce sixty, eight, ninety, or more double-spaced pages. In the studio system from the 1930s to the 1950s when producers ordered treatments from writers, they were often two hundred to three hundred pages long. The strategy of studio writers was to extract the screenplay from a much larger work so nothing would be overlooked or unthought.

The ten- or twelve-page "treatments" that pass around show business today are not treatments but outlines given enough words that a reader can follow the story. A ten-page outline is not nearly enough material for a screenplay. Today's writers may not return to the vast treatments of the studio system, but when a step-outline is expanded to a treatment of sixty to ninety pages, creative achievement expands correspondingly.

At the treatment stage, we inevitably discover that things we

thought would work a certain way in the step-outline now want to change. Research and imagination never stop, and so the characters and their world are still growing and evolving, leading us to revise any number of scenes. We won't change the overall design of the story because it worked every time we pitched it. But within that structure scenes may need to be cut, added, or reordered. We rework the treatment until every moment lives vividly, in text and subtext. That done, then and only then does the writer move to the screenplay itself.

SCREENPLAY

Writing a screenplay from a thorough treatment is a joy and often runs at a clip of five to ten pages per day. We now convert treatment description to screen description and add dialogue. And dialogue written at this point is invariably the finest dialogue we've ever written. Our characters have had tape over their mouths for so long, they can't wait to talk, and unlike so many films in which all characters speak with the same vocabulary and style, dialogue written after in-depth preparation creates character-specific voices. They don't all sound like one another and they don't all sound like the writer.

At the first draft stage, changes and revisions will still be needed. When characters are allowed to speak, scenes in treatment you thought would work a certain way now want to alter direction. When you find such a fault, it can rarely be fixed with a simple rewrite of dialogue or behavior. Rather, you must go back into the treatment and rework the setups, then perhaps go beyond the faulty scene to redo the payoff. A number of polishes may be necessary until you reach the final draft. You must develop your judgment and taste, a nose for your own bad writing, then call upon a relentless courage to root out weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

If you shortcut the process and rush straight to screenplay from outline, the truth is that your first draft is not a screenplay, it's a surrogate treatment—a narrow, unexplored, unimprovised, tissue-thin treatment. Event choice and story design must be given free rein to consume your imagination and knowledge. Turning Points

must be imagined, discarded, and reimagined, then played out in text and subtext. Otherwise you have little hope of achieving excellence. Now, how and when do you want to do that? In treatment or screenplay? Either may work, but, more often than not, screenplay is a trap. The wise writer puts off the writing of dialogue for as long as possible because *the premature writing of dialogue chokes creativity*.

Writing from the outside in—writing dialogue in search of scenes, writing scenes in search of story—is *the least creative method*. Screenwriters habitually overvalue dialogue because they're the only words we write that actually reach the audience. All else is assumed by the film's images. If we type out dialogue before we know *what happens*, we inevitably fall in love with our words; we're loath to play with and explore events, to discover how fascinating our characters might become, because it would mean cutting our priceless dialogue. All improvisation ceases and our so-called rewriting is tinkering with speeches.

What's more, the premature writing of dialogue is the slowest way to work. It may send you in circles for years before you finally realize that not all your children are going to walk and talk their way to the screen; not every idea is worth being a motion picture. When do you want to find that out? Two years from now or two months from now? If you write the dialogue first, you'll be blind to this truth and wander forever. If you write from the inside out, you'll realize in the outline stage that you can't get the story to work. Nobody likes it when pitched. In truth, you don't like it. So you toss it in the drawer. Maybe years from now you'll pick it up and solve it, but for now you go on to your next idea.

As I offer this method to you, I'm fully aware that each of us, by trial and error, must find our own method, that indeed some writers short-cut the treatment stage and produce quality screenplays, and that in fact a few have written very well from the outside in. But I'm also left to wonder what brilliance they might have achieved had they taken greater pains. For the inside-out method is a way of working that's both disciplined and free, designed to encourage your finest work.

FADE OUT

You have pursued *Story* to its final chapter, and, with this step, taken your career in a direction many writers fear. Some, dreading that awareness of how they do what they do would cripple their spontaneity, never study the craft. Instead, they march along in a lockstep of unconscious habit, thinking it's instinct. Their dreams of creating unique works of power and wonder are seldom, if ever, realized. They put in long, tough days, for no matter how it's taken, the writer's road is never smooth, and because they have a gift, from time to time their efforts draw applause, but in their secret selves they know they're just taking talent for a walk. Such writers remind me of the protagonist of a fable my father loved to recite:

*High above the forest floor, a millipede strolled along the branch of a tree, her thousand pairs of legs swinging in an easy gait. From the tree top, song birds looked down, fascinated by the synchronization of the millipede's stride. "That's an amazing talent," chirped the songbirds. "You have more limbs than we can count. How do you do it?" And for the first time in her life the millipede thought about this. "Yes," she wondered, "how **do** I do what I do?" As she turned to look back, her bristling legs suddenly ran into one another and tangled like vines of ivy. The songbirds laughed as the millipede, in a panic of confusion, twisted herself into a knot and fell to the earth below.*

You too may sense this panic. I know that when confronted with a rush of insights even the most experienced writer can be knocked off stride. Fortunately, my father's fable had an Act Two:

On the forest floor, the millipede, realizing that only her pride was hurt, slowly, carefully, limb by limb, unraveled herself. With patience and hard work, she studied and flexed and tested her appendages, until she was able to stand and walk. What was once instinct became knowledge. She realized she didn't have to move at her old, slow, rote pace. She could amble, strut, prance, even run and jump. Then, as never before, she listened to the symphony of the songbirds and let music touch her heart. Now in perfect command of thousands of talented legs, she gathered courage and, with a style of her own, danced and danced a dazzling dance that astonished all the creatures of her world.

Write every day, line by line, page by page, hour by hour. Keep *Story* at hand. Use what you learn from it as a guide, until command of its principles becomes as natural as the talent you were born with. Do this despite fear. For above all else, beyond imagination and skill, what the world asks of you is courage, courage to risk rejection, ridicule and failure. As you follow the quest for stories told with meaning and beauty, study thoughtfully but write boldly. Then, like the hero of the fable, your dance will dazzle the world.

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