S·T·O·R·Y

STORY

S·T·O·R·Y

Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting

PART 3

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PART 3

THE PRINCIPLES OF STORY DESIGN

> *When forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost—and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl.*
>
> —T. S. Eliot

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THE SUBSTANCE OF STORY

From what material do we create the scenes that will one day walk and talk their way across the screen? What is the clay we twist and shape, keep or throw away? What is the "substance" of story?

In all other arts the answer is self-evident. The composer has his instrument and the notes it sounds. The dancer calls her body her instrument. Sculptors chisel stone. Painters stir paint. All artists can lay hands on the raw material of their art—except the writer. For at the nucleus of a story is a "substance," like the energy swirling in an atom, that's never *directly* seen, heard, or touched, yet we know it and feel it. The stuff of story is alive but intangible.

"Intangible?" I hear you thinking. "But I have my *words*. Dialogue, description. I can put hands on my pages. The writer's raw material is language." In fact, it's not, and the careers of many talented writers, especially those who come to screenwriting after a strong literary education, flounder because of the disastrous misunderstanding of this principle. For just as glass is a medium for light, air a medium for sound, language is only a medium, one of many, in fact, for storytelling. Something far more profound than mere words beats at the heart of a story.

And at the opposite end of story sits another equally profound phenomenon: the audience's reaction to this substance. When you think about it, going to the movies is bizarre. Hundreds of strangers sit in a blackened room, elbow to elbow, for two or more hours. They don't go to the toilet or get a smoke. Instead, they stare wide-eyed at a screen, investing more uninterrupted concentration than they give to work, paying money to suffer emotions they'd do anything to avoid in life. From this perspective, a second question arises: What is the source of story energy? How does it compel such intense mental and sentient attention from the audience? How do stories work?

The answers to these questions come when the artist explores the creative process *subjectively*. To understand the substance of story and how it performs, you need to view your work from the inside out, from the center of your character, looking *out* at the world through your character's eyes, experiencing the story as if you were the living character yourself. To slip into this subjective and highly imaginative point of view, you need to look closely at this creature you intend to inhabit, a *character*. Or more specifically, a *protagonist*. For although the protagonist is a character like any other, as the central and essential role, he embodies all aspects of character in absolute terms.

THE PROTAGONIST

Generally, the protagonist is a single character. A story, however, could be driven by a duo, such as THELMA & LOUISE; a trio, THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK; more, THE SEVEN SAMURAI or THE DIRTY DOZEN. In THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN an entire class of people, the proletariat, create a massive *Plural-Protagonist*.

For two or more characters to form a Plural-Protagonist, two conditions must be met: First, all individuals in the group share the same desire. Second, in the struggle to achieve this desire, they mutually suffer and benefit. If one has a success, all benefit. If one has a setback, all suffer. Within a Plural-Protagonist, motivation, action, and consequence are communal.

A story may, on the other hand, be *Multiprotagonist*. Here, unlike the Plural-Protagonist, characters pursue separate and individual desires, suffering and benefiting independently: PULP FICTION, HANNAH AND HER SISTERS, PARENTHOOD, DINER, DO THE RIGHT THING, THE BREAKFAST CLUB, EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN, PELLE THE CONQUEROR, HOPE AND GLORY, HIGH HOPES. Robert Altman is the master of this design: A WEDDING, NASHVILLE, SHORT CUTS.

On screen the Multiprotagonist story is as old as GRAND HOTEL; in the novel older still, *War and Peace*; in the theatre older yet, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Multiprotagonist stories become Multiplot stories. Rather than driving the telling through the focused desire of a protagonist, either single or plural, these works weave a number of smaller stories, each with its own protagonist, to create a dynamic portrait of a specific society.

The protagonist need not be human. It may be an animal, BABE, or a cartoon, BUGS BUNNY, or even an inanimate object, such as the hero of the children's story *The Little Engine That Could.* Anything that can be given a free will and the capacity to desire, take action, and suffer the consequences can be a protagonist.

It's even possible, in rare cases, to switch protagonists halfway through a story. PSYCHO does this, making the shower murder both an emotional and a formal jolt. With the protagonist dead, the audience is momentarily confused; whom is this movie about? The answer is a Plural-Protagonist as the victim's sister, boyfriend, and a private detective take over the story. But no matter whether the story's protagonist is single, multi or plural, no matter how he is characterized, all protagonists have certain hallmark qualities, and the first is *willpower.*

A PROTAGONIST is a willful character.

Other characters may be dogged, even inflexible, but the protagonist in particular is a willful being. The exact quantity of this willpower, however, may not be measurable. A fine story is not necessarily the struggle of a gigantic will versus absolute forces of inevitability. Quality of will is as important as quantity. A protagonist's willpower may be less than that of the biblical Job, but powerful enough to sustain desire through conflict and ultimately take actions that create meaningful and irreversible change.

What's more, the true strength of the protagonist's will may hide behind a passive characterization. Consider Blanche DuBois, protagonist of A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE. At first glance she seems weak, drifting and *will-less,* only wanting, she says, to live in reality. Yet beneath her frail characterization, Blanche's deep character owns a powerful will that drives her unconscious desire: What she really wants is *to escape from reality.* So Blanche does everything she can to buffer herself against the ugly world that engulfs her: She acts the grand dame, puts doilies on frayed furniture, lampshades on naked light bulbs, tries to make a Prince Charming out of a dullard. When none of this succeeds, she takes the final escape from reality—she goes insane.

On the other hand, while Blanche only seems passive, the truly passive protagonist is a regrettably common mistake. A story cannot be told about a protagonist who doesn't want anything, who cannot make decisions, whose actions effect no change at any level.

The PROTAGONIST has a conscious desire.

Rather, the protagonist's will impels a known desire. The protagonist has a need or goal, *an object of desire,* and knows it. If you could pull your protagonist aside, whisper in his ear, "What do you want?" he would have an answer: "I'd like X today, Y next week, but in the end I want Z." The protagonist's object of desire may be external: the destruction of the shark in JAWS, or internal: maturity in BIG. In either case, the protagonist knows what he wants, and for many characters a simple, clear, conscious desire is sufficient.

The PROTAGONIST may also have a self-contradictory unconscious desire.

However, the most memorable, fascinating characters tend to have not only a conscious but an unconscious desire. Although these complex protagonists are unaware of their subconscious need, the audience senses it, perceiving in them an inner contradiction. The conscious and unconscious desires of a multidimensional protagonist contradict each other. What he believes he wants is the antithesis of what he actually but unwittingly wants.

This is self-evident. What would be the point of giving a character a subconscious desire if it happens to be the very thing he knowingly seeks?

The PROTAGONIST has the capacities to pursue the Object of Desire convincingly.

The protagonist's characterization must be appropriate. He needs a believable combination of qualities in the right balance to pursue his desires. This doesn't mean he'll get what he wants. He may fail. But the character's desires must be realistic enough in relationship to his will and capacities for the audience to believe that he could be doing what they see him doing and that he has a chance for fulfillment.

The PROTAGONIST must have at least a chance to attain his desire.

An audience has no patience for a protagonist who lacks all possibility of realizing his desire. The reason is simple: No one believes this of his own life. No one believes he doesn't have even the smallest chance of fulfilling his wishes. But if we were to pull the camera back on life, the grand overview might lead us to conclude that, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," that most people waste their precious time and die with the feeling they've fallen short of their dreams. As honest as this painful insight may be, we cannot allow ourselves to believe it. Instead, we carry hope to the end.

Hope, after all, is not unreasonable. It's simply hypothetical. "If this . . . if that . . . if I learn more . . . if I love more . . . if I discipline myself . . . if I win the lottery . . . if things change, then I'll have a chance of getting from life what I want." We all carry hope in our hearts, no matter the odds against us. A protagonist, therefore, who's literally hopeless, who hasn't even the minimal capacity to achieve his desire, cannot interest us.

The PROTAGONIST has the will and capacity to pursue the object of his conscious and/or unconscious desire to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre.

The art of story is not about the middle ground, but about the pendulum of existence swinging to the limits, about life lived in its most intense states. We explore the middle ranges of experience, but only as a path to the end of the line. The audience senses that limit and wants it reached. For no matter how intimate or epic the setting, instinctively the audience draws a circle around the characters and their world, a circumference of experience that's defined by the nature of the fictional reality. This line may reach inward to the soul, outward into the universe, or in both directions at once. The audience, therefore, expects the storyteller to be an artist of vision who can take his story to those distant depths and ranges.

A STORY must build to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

In other words, a film cannot send its audience to the street rewriting it: "Happy ending . . . but shouldn't she have settled things with her father? Shouldn't she have broken up with Ed before she moved in with Mac? Shouldn't she have . . ." Or: "Downer . . . the guy's dead, but why didn't he call the cops? And didn't he keep a gun under the dash, and shouldn't he have . . . ?" If people exit imagining scenes they thought they should have seen before or after the ending we give them, they will be less than happy moviegoers. We're supposed to be better writers than they. The audience wants to be taken to the limit, to where all questions are answered, all emotion satisfied—the end of the line.

The protagonist takes us to this limit. He must have it within himself to pursue his desire to the boundaries of human experience in depth, breadth, or both, to reach absolute and irreversible change. This, by the way, doesn't mean your film can't have a sequel; your protagonist may have more tales to tell. It means that each story must find closure for itself.

The PROTAGONIST must be empathetic; he may or may not be sympathetic.

Sympathetic means likable. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, for example, or Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in their typical roles: The moment they step onscreen, we like them. We'd want them as friends, family members, or lovers. They have an innate likability and evoke sympathy. Empathy, however, is a more profound response.

Empathetic means "like me." Deep within the protagonist the audience recognizes a certain shared humanity. Character and audience are not alike in every fashion, of course; they may share only a single quality. But there's something about the character that strikes a chord. In that moment of recognition, the audience suddenly and instinctively wants the protagonist to achieve whatever it is that he desires.

The unconscious logic of the audience runs like this: "This character is like me. Therefore, I want him to have whatever it is he wants, because if I were he in those circumstances, I'd want the same thing for myself." Hollywood has many synonymic expressions for this connection: "somebody to get behind," "someone to root for." All describe the empathetic connection that the audience strikes between itself and the protagonist. An audience may, if so moved, empathize with every character in your film, but it must empathize with your protagonist. If not, the audience/story bond is broken.

THE AUDIENCE BOND

The audience's emotional involvement is held by the glue of empathy. If the writer fails to fuse a bond between filmgoer and protagonist, we sit outside feeling nothing. Involvement has nothing to do with evoking altruism or compassion. We empathize for very personal, if not egocentric, reasons. When we identify with a protagonist and his desires in life, we are in fact rooting for our own desires in life. Through empathy, the vicarious linking of ourselves to a fictional human being, we test and stretch our humanity. The gift of story is the opportunity to live lives beyond our own, to desire and struggle in a myriad of worlds and times, at all the various depths of our being.

Empathy, therefore, is absolute, while sympathy is optional. We've all met likable people who don't draw our compassion. A protagonist, accordingly, may or may not be pleasant. Unaware of the difference between sympathy and empathy, some writers automatically devise nice-guy heroes, fearing that if the star role isn't nice, the audience won't relate. Uncountable commercial disasters, however, have starred charming protagonists. Likability is no guarantee of audience involvement; it's merely an aspect of characterization. The audience identifies with deep character, with innate qualities revealed through choice under pressure.

At first glance creating empathy does not seem difficult. The protagonist is a human being; the audience is full of human beings. As the filmgoer looks up on the screen, he recognizes the character's humanity, senses that he shares it, identifies with the protagonist, and dives into the story. Indeed, in the hands of the greatest writers, even the most unsympathetic character can be made empathetic.

Macbeth, for example, viewed objectively, is monstrous. He butchers a kindly old King while the man is sleeping, a King who had never done Macbeth any harm—in fact, that very day he'd given Macbeth a royal promotion. Macbeth then murders two servants of the King to blame the deed on them. He kills his best friend. Finally he orders the assassination of the wife and infant children of his enemy. He's a ruthless killer; yet, in Shakespeare's hands he becomes a tragic, empathetic hero.

The Bard accomplished this feat by giving Macbeth a conscience. As he wanders in soliloquy, wondering, agonizing, "Why am I doing this? What kind of a man am I?" the audience listens and thinks, "What kind? Guilt-ridden . . . just like me. I feel bad when I'm thinking about doing bad things. I feel awful when I do them and afterward there's no end to the guilt. Macbeth is a human being; he has a conscience just like mine." In fact, we're so drawn to Macbeth's writhing soul, we feel a tragic loss when at climax Macduff decapitates him. *Macbeth* is a breathtaking display of the godlike power of the writer to find an empathetic center in an otherwise contemptible character.

On the other hand, in recent years many films, despite otherwise splendid qualities, have crashed on these rocks because they failed to create an audience bond. Just one example of many: INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE. The audience's reaction to Brad Pitt's Louis went like this: "If I were Louis, caught in his hell-after-death, I'd end it in a flash. Bad luck he's a vampire. Wouldn't wish that on anybody. But if he finds it revolting to suck the life out of innocent victims, if he hates himself for turning a child into a devil, if he's tired of rat blood, he should take this simple solution: Wait for sunrise, and poof, it's over." Although Anne Rice's novel steered us through Louis's thoughts and feelings until we fell into empathy with him, the dispassionate eye of the camera sees him for what he is, a whining fraud. Audiences always disassociate themselves from hypocrites.

THE FIRST STEP

When you sit down to write, the musing begins: "How to start? What would my character do?"

Your character, indeed all characters, in the pursuit of any desire, at any moment in story, will always take the minimum, conservative action *from his point of view*. All human beings always do. Humanity is fundamentally conservative, as indeed is all of nature. No organism ever expends more energy than necessary, risks anything it doesn't have to, or takes any action unless it must. Why should it? If a task can be done in an easy way without risk of loss or pain, or the expenditure of energy, why would any creature do the more difficult, dangerous, or enervating thing? It won't. Nature doesn't allow it . . . and human nature is just an aspect of universal nature.

In life we often see people, even animals, acting with extreme behavior that seems unnecessary, if not stupid. But this is our objective view of their situation. Subjectively, from within the experience of the creature, this apparently intemperate action was minimal, conservative, and necessary. What's thought "conservative," after all, is always relative to point of view.

For example: If a normal person wanted to get into a house, he'd take the minimum and conservative action. He'd knock on the door, thinking, "If I knock, the door'll be opened. I'll be invited in and that'll be a positive step toward my desire." A martial arts hero, however, as a conservative first step, might karate-chop the door to splinters, feeling that this is prudent and minimal.

What is necessary but minimal and conservative is relative to the point of view of each character at each precise moment. In life, for example, I say to myself: "If I cross the street now, that car's far enough away for the driver to see me in time, slow down if needed, and I'll get across." Or: "I can't find Dolores's phone number. But I know that my friend Jack has it in his Rolodex. If I call him in the midst of his busy day, because he's my friend, he'll interrupt what he's doing and give me the number."

In other words, in life we take an action consciously or unconsciously (and life is spontaneous most of the time as we open our mouths or take a step), thinking or sensing within to this effect: "If in these circumstances I take this minimum, conservative action, the world will react to me in a fashion that will be a positive step toward getting me what I want." And in life, 99 percent of the time we are right. The driver sees you in time, taps the brakes, and you reach the other side safely. You call Jack and apologize for interrupting him. He says, "No problem," and gives you the number. This is the great mass of experience, hour by hour, in life. BUT NEVER, EVER IN A STORY.

The grand difference between story and life is that in story we cast out the minutiae of daily existence in which human beings take actions expecting a certain enabling reaction from the world, and, more or less, get what they expect.

In story, we concentrate on that moment, and only that moment, in which a character takes an action expecting a useful reaction from his world, but instead the effect of his action is to provoke forces of antago-

nism. The world of the character reacts differently than expected, more powerfully than expected, or both.

I pick up the phone, call Jack, and say: "Sorry to bother you, but I can't find Dolores's phone number. Could you—" and he shouts: "Dolores? Dolores! How dare you ask me for her number?" and slams down the phone. Suddenly, life is interesting.

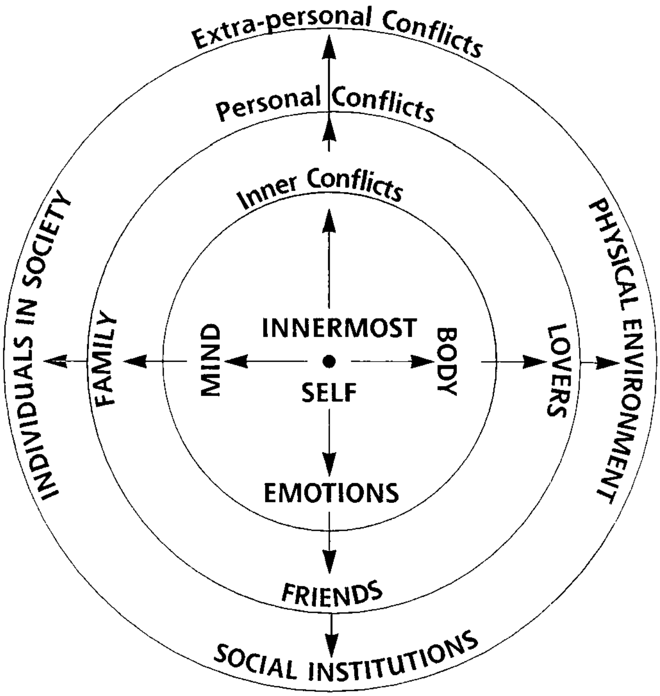
THE WORLD OF A CHARACTER

This chapter seeks the substance of story as seen from the perspective of a writer who in his imagination has placed himself at the very center of the character he's creating. The "center" of a human being, that irreducible particularity of the innermost self, is the awareness you carry with you twenty-four hours a day that watches you do everything you do, that chides you when you get things wrong, or compliments you on those rare occasions when you get things right. It's that deep observer that comes to you when you're going through the most agonizing experience of your life, collapsed on the floor, crying your heart out . . . that little voice that says, "Your mascara is running." This inner eye is you: your identity, your ego, the conscious focus of your being. Everything outside this subjective core is the objective world of a character.

A character's world can be imagined as a series of concentric circles surrounding a core of raw identity or awareness, circles that mark the levels of conflict in a character's life. The inner circle or level is his own self and conflicts arising from the elements of his nature: mind, body, emotion.

When, for example, a character takes an action, his mind may not react the way he anticipates. His thoughts may not be as quick, as insightful, as witty as he expected. His body may not react as he imagined. It may not be strong enough or deft enough for a particular task. And we all know how emotions betray us. So the closest circle of antagonism in the world of a character is his own being: feelings and emotions, mind and body, all or any of which may or may not react from one moment to the next the way he expects. As often as not, we are our own worst enemies.

THE THREE LEVELS OF CONFLICT


Extra-personal Conflicts
Personal Conflicts
Inner Conflicts
INNERMOST
SELF
MIND
BODY
EMOTIONS
FAMILY
LOVERS
FRIENDS
INDIVIDUALS IN SOCIETY
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT
SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The second circle inscribes personal relationships, unions of intimacy deeper than the social role. Social convention assigns the outer roles we play. At the moment, for example, we're playing teacher/student. Someday, however, our paths may cross and we may decide to change our professional relationship to friendship. In the same manner, parent/child begins as social roles that may or may not go deeper than that. Many of us go through life in parent/child relationships that never deepen beyond social definitions of authority and rebellion. Not until we set the conventional role aside do we find the true intimacy of family, friends, and lovers—who then do not react the way we expect and become the second level of personal conflict.

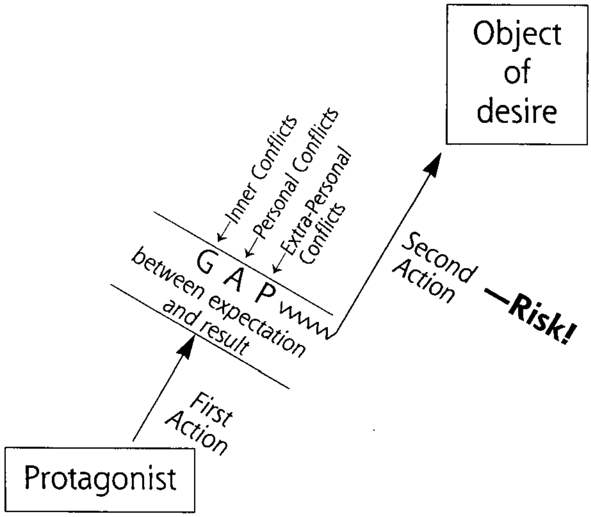
The third circle marks the level of extra-personal conflict—

all the sources of antagonism outside the personal: conflict with social institutions and individuals—government/citizen, church/worshipper; corporation/client; conflict with individuals—cop/criminal/victim, boss/worker, customer/waiter, doctor/patient; and conflict with both man-made and natural environments—time, space, and every object in it.

THE GAP

STORY is born in that place where the subjective and objective realms touch.

The protagonist seeks an object of desire beyond his reach. Consciously or unconsciously he chooses to take a particular action, motivated by the thought or feeling that this act will cause the world to react in a way that will be a positive step toward achieving his desire. From his subjective point of view the action he has chosen seems minimal, conservative, yet sufficient to effect the reaction he wants. But the moment he takes this action, the objective realm of his inner life, personal relationships, or extra-personal world, or a combination of these, react in a way that's more powerful or different than he expected.


Object of desire
Inner Conflicts
Personal Conflicts
Extra-Personal Conflicts
GAP
between expectation and result
Second Action
—Risk!
First Action
Protagonist

This reaction from his world blocks his desire, thwarting him and bending him further from his desire than he was before he took this action. Rather than evoking cooperation from his world, his action provokes forces of antagonism that open up the *gap* between his subjective expectation and the objective result, between what he thought would happen when he took his action and what in fact does happen between his sense of probability and true necessity.

Every human being acts, from one moment to the next, knowingly or unknowingly, on his sense of probability, on what he expects, in all likelihood, to happen when he takes an action. We all walk this earth thinking, or at least hoping, that we understand ourselves, our intimates, society, and the world. We behave according to what we believe to be the truth of ourselves, the people around us, and the environment. But this is a truth we cannot know absolutely. It's what we *believe* to be true.

We also believe we're free to make any decision whatsoever to take any action whatsoever. But every choice and action we make and take, spontaneous or deliberate, is rooted in the sum total of our experience, in what has happened to us in actuality, imagination, or dream to that moment. We then choose to act based on what this gathering of life tells us will be the probable reaction from our world. It's only then, when we take action, that we discover necessity.

Necessity is absolute truth. Necessity is what in fact happens when we act. This truth is known—*and can only be known*—when we take action into the depth and breadth of our world and brave its reaction. This reaction is the truth of our existence at that precise moment, no matter what we believed the moment before. Necessity is what must and does actually happen, as opposed to probability, which is what we hope or expect to happen.

As in life, so in fiction. When objective necessity contradicts a character's sense of probability, a gap suddenly cracks open in the fictional reality. This gap is the point where the subjective and objective realms collide, the difference between anticipation and result, between the world as the character perceived it before acting and the truth he discovers in action.

Once the gap in reality splits open, the character, being willful and having capacity, senses or realizes that he cannot get what he wants in a minimal, conservative way. He must gather himself and struggle through this gap to take a second action. This next action is something the character would not have wanted to do in the first case because it not only demands more willpower and forces him to dig more deeply into his human capacity, but most important, *the second action puts him at risk.* He now stands to lose in order to gain.

ON RISK

We'd all like to have our cake and eat it too. In a state of jeopardy, on the other hand, we must risk something that we want or have in order to gain something else that we want or to protect something we have—a dilemma we strive to avoid.

Here's a simple test to apply to any story. Ask: What is the risk? What does the protagonist stand to lose if he does not get what he wants? More specifically, what's the worst thing that will happen to the protagonist if he does not achieve his desire?

If this question cannot be answered in a compelling way, the story is misconceived at its core. For example, if the answer is: "Should the protagonist fail, life would go back to normal," this story is not worth telling. What the protagonist wants is of no real value, and a story of someone pursuing something of little or no value is the definition of boredom.

Life teaches that the measure of the value of any human desire is in direct proportion to the risk involved in its pursuit. The higher the value, the higher the risk. We give the ultimate values to those things that demand the ultimate risks—our freedom, our lives, our souls. This imperative of risk, however, is far more than an aesthetic principle, it's rooted in the deepest source of our art. For we not only create stories as metaphors for life, we create them as metaphors for meaningful life—and to live meaningfully is to be at perpetual risk.

Examine your own desires. What's true of you will be true of every character you write. You wish to write for the cinema, the foremost media of creative expression in the world today; you wish to give us works of beauty and meaning that help shape our vision of reality; in return you would like to be acknowledged. It's a noble ambition and a grand achievement to fulfill. And because you're a serious artist, you're willing to risk vital aspects of your life to live that dream.

You're willing to risk time. You know that even the most talented writers—Oliver Stone, Lawrence Kasdan, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala—didn't find success until they were in their thirties or forties, and just as it takes a decade or more to make a good doctor or teacher, it takes ten or more years of adult life to find something to say that tens of millions of people want to hear, and ten or more years and often as many screenplays written and unsold to master this demanding craft.

You're willing to risk money. You know that if you were to take the same hard work and creativity that goes into a decade of unsold screenplays and apply it to a normal profession, you could retire before you see your first script on the screen.

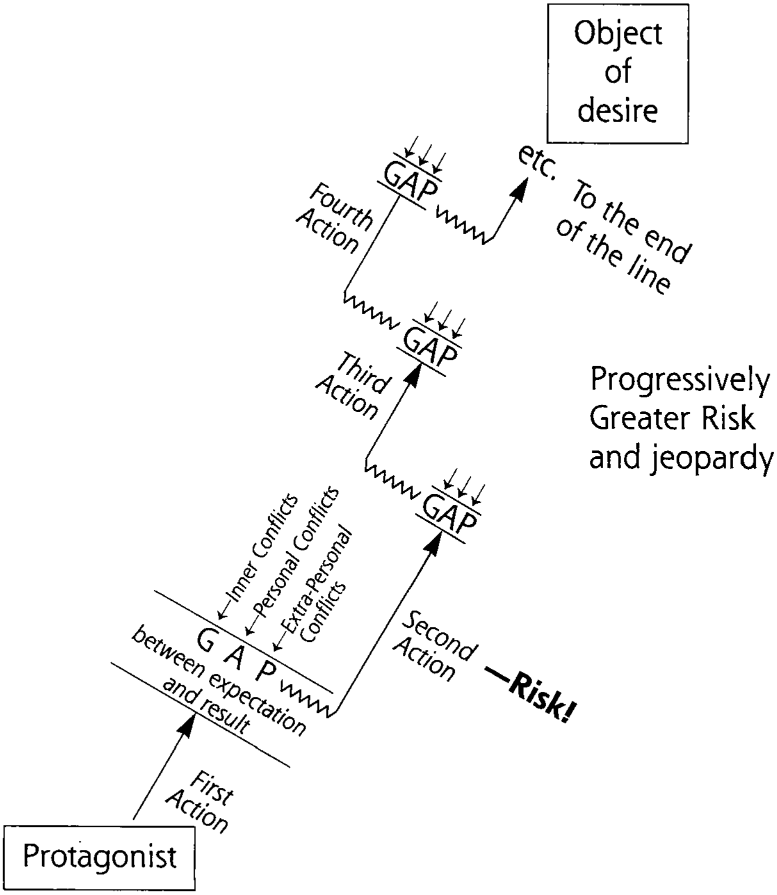
You're willing to risk people. Each morning you go to your desk and enter the imagined world of your characters. You dream and write until the sun's setting and your head's throbbing. So you turn off your word processor to be with the person you love. Except that, while you can turn off your machine, you can't turn off your imagination. As you sit at dinner, your characters are still running through your head and you're wishing there was a notepad next to your plate. Sooner or later, the person you love will say: "You know . . . you're not really here." Which is true. Half the time you're somewhere else, and no one wants to live with somebody who isn't really there.

The writer places time, money, and people at risk because his ambition has life-defining force. What's true for the writer is true for every character he creates:

The measure of the value of a character's desire is in direct proportion to the risk he's willing to take to achieve it; the greater the value, the greater the risk.

THE GAP IN PROGRESSION

The protagonist's first action has aroused forces of antagonism that block his desire and spring open a gap between anticipation and result, disconfirming his notions of reality, putting him in greater conflict with his world, at even greater risk. But the resilient human mind quickly remakes reality into a larger pattern that incorporates this disconfirmation, this unexpected reaction. Now he takes a second, more difficult and risk-taking action, an action consistent with his revised vision of reality, an action based on his new expectations of the world. But again his action provokes forces


Object of desire
etc.
To the end of the line
GAP
Fourth Action
GAP
Third Action
Progressively Greater Risk and jeopardy
GAP
Inner Conflicts
Personal Conflicts
Extra-Personal Conflicts
G A P
between expectation and result
Second Action
—Risk!
First Action
Protagonist

of antagonism, splitting open a gap in his reality. So he adjusts to the unexpected, ups the ante yet again and decides to take an action that he feels is consistent with his amended sense of things. He reaches even more deeply into his capacities and willpower, puts himself at greater risk, and takes a third action.

Perhaps this action achieves a positive result, and for the moment he takes a step toward his desire, but with his next action, the gap will again spring open. Now he must take an even more difficult action that demands even more willpower, more capacity, and more risk. Over and over again in a progression, rather than cooperation, his actions provoke forces of antagonism, opening gaps in his reality. This pattern repeats on various levels to the end of the line, to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

These cracks in moment-to-moment reality mark the difference between the dramatic and the prosaic, between action and activity. True action is physical, vocal, or mental movement that opens gaps in expectation and creates significant change. Mere activity is behavior in which what is expected happens, generating either no change or trivial change.

But the gap between expectation and result is far more than a matter of cause and effect. In the most profound sense, the break between the cause as it seemed and the effect as it turns out marks the point where the human spirit and the world meet. On one side is the world as we believe it to be, on the other is reality as it actually is. In this gap is the nexus of story, the caldron that cooks our tellings. Here the writer finds the most powerful, life-bending moments. The only way we can reach this crucial junction is by working from the inside out.

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Why must we do this? Why during the creation of a scene must we find our way to the center of each character and experience it from his point of view? What do we gain when we do? What do we sacrifice if we don't?

Like anthropologists, we could, for example, discover social and environmental truths through careful observations. Like note-taking psychologists, we could find behavioral truths. We could, by working from the outside in, render a surface of character that's genuine, even fascinating. But the one crucial dimension we would not create is *emotional truth.*

The only reliable source of emotional truth is yourself. If you stay outside your characters, you inevitably write emotional clichés. To create revealing human reactions, you must not only get inside your character, but get inside yourself. So, how to do this? How, as you sit at your desk, do you crawl inside the head of your character to feel your heart pounding, your palms sweating, a knot in your belly, tears in your eyes, laughter in your heart, sexual arousal, anger, outrage, compassion, sadness, joy, or any of the uncountable responses along the spectrum of human emotions?

You've determined that a certain event must take place in your story, a situation to be progressed and turned. How to write a scene of insightful emotions? You could ask: How *should* someone take this action? But that leads to clichés and moralizing. Or you could ask: How *might* someone do this? But that leads to writing "cute"—clever but dishonest. Or: "If my character were in these circumstances, what would he do?" But that puts you at a distance, picturing your character walking the stage of his life, guessing at his emotions, and guesses are invariably clichés. Or you could ask: "If I were in these circumstances, what would I do?" As this question plays on your imagination, it may start your heart pounding, but obviously you're not the character. Although it may be an honest emotion for you, your character might do the reverse. So what do you do?

You ask: "If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?" Using Stanislavski's "Magic if," you act the role. It is no accident that many of the greatest playwrights from Euripides to Shakespeare to Pinter, and screenwriters from D. W. Griffith to Ruth Gordon to John Sayles were also actors. Writers are improvisationalists who perform sitting at their word processors, pacing their rooms, acting all their characters: man, woman, child, monster. We act in our imaginations until honest, character-specific emotions flow in our blood. When a scene is emotionally meaningful to us, we can trust that it'll be meaningful to the audience. By creating work that moves us, we move them.

CHINATOWN

To illustrate writing from the inside out, I'll use one of the most famous and brilliantly written scenes in film, the second act climax of CHINATOWN by screenwriter Robert Towne. I'll work from the scene as performed on screen, but it can also be found in the third draft of Towne's screenplay, dated October 9, 1973.

Synopsis

Private detective J. J. Gittes is investigating the death of Hollis Mulwray, commissioner of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Mulwray has apparently drowned in a reservoir, and the crime baffles Gittes's rival, Police Lieutenant Escobar. Near the end of the Act Two, Gittes has narrowed suspects and motives to two: either a conspiracy of millionaires led by the ruthless Noah Cross killed Mulwray for political power and riches; or Evelyn Mulwray killed her husband in a jealous rage after he was found with another woman.

Gittes follows Evelyn to a house in Santa Monica. Peering through a window, he sees the "other woman," seemingly drugged and held prisoner. When Evelyn comes out to her car, he forces her to talk and she claims that the woman is her sister. Gittes knows she doesn't have a sister, but for the moment says nothing.

The next morning he discovers what appears to be the dead man's eyeglasses in a salt water pond at the Mulwray home in the hills above L.A. Now he knows how and where the man was killed. With this evidence he goes back to Santa Monica to confront Evelyn and turn her over to Escobar, who's threatening to pull Gittes's private investigator's license.

CHARACTERS

J. J. GITTES, while working for the district attorney, fell in love with a woman in Chinatown and while trying to help her somehow caused her death. He resigned and became a PI, hoping to escape corrupt politics and his tragic past. But now he's drawn back into both. What's worse, he finds himself in this predicament because, days before the murder, he was duped into investigating Mulwray for adultery. Someone's made a fool of Gittes and he's a man of excessive pride. Behind his cool demeanor is an impulsive risk-taker; his sarcastic cynicism masks an idealist's hunger for justice. To further complicate matters, he's fallen in love with Evelyn Mulwray. Gittes's scene objective: *to find the truth.*

EVELYN MULWRAY is the victim's wife and daughter of Noah Cross. She's nervous and defensive when questioned about her husband; she stammers when her father is mentioned. She is, we sense, a woman with something to hide. She has hired Gittes to look into the murder of her husband, perhaps to conceal her own guilt. During the investigation, however, she seems drawn to him. After a close escape from some thugs, they make love. Evelyn's scene objective: *to hide her secret and escape with Katherine.*

KHAN is Evelyn's servant. Now that she's widowed, he also sees himself as her bodyguard. He prides himself on his dignified manner and ability to handle difficult situations. Khan's scene objective: *to protect evelyn.*

KATHERINE is a shy innocent who has lead a very protected life. Katherine's scene objective: *to obey evelyn.*

THE SCENE:

INT./ EXT. SANTA MONICA—BUICK—MOVING—DAY

Gittes drives through Los Angeles.

To work from the inside out, slip in Gittes' mind while he drives to Evelyn's hideaway. Imagine yourself in Gittes' *pov. As the streets roll past, you ask:*

"If I were Gittes at this moment, what would I do?"

Letting your imagination roam, the answer comes:

"Rehearse. I always rehearse in my head before taking on life's big confrontations."

Now work deeper into Gittes's emotions and psyche:

Hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, thoughts racing: "She killed him, then used me. She lied to me, came on to me. Man, I fell for her. My guts are in a knot, but I'll be cool. I'll stroll to the door, step in and accuse her. She lies. I send for the cops. She plays innocent, a few tears. But I stay ice cold, show her Mulwray's glasses, then lay out how she did it, step by step, as if I was there. She confesses. I turn her over to Escobar; I'm off the hook."

EXT. BUNGALOW–SANTA MONICA

Gittes' car speeds into the driveway.

You continue working from inside Gittes' pov, thinking:

"I'll be cool, I'll be cool . . ." Suddenly, with the sight of her house, an image of Evelyn flashes in your imagination. A rush of anger. A gap cracks open between your cool resolve and your fury.

The Buick SCREECHES to a halt. Gittes jumps out.

"To hell with her!"

Gittes SLAMS the car door and bolts up the steps.

"Grab her now, before she runs."

He twists the door knob, find it locked, then BANGS on the door.

"Goddamn it."

INT. BUNGALOW

KHAN, Evelyn's Chinese servant, hears POUNDING and heads for the door.

As characters enter and exit, shift back and forth in your imagination, taking the pov of one, then the other. Moving to Khan's point of view, ask yourself:

"If I were Khan at this moment, what would I think, feel, do?"

As you settle into this character's psyche, your thoughts run to:

"Who the hell's that?" Paste on a butler's smile. "Ten to one it's that loud mouth detective again. I'll handle him."

Khan unlocks the door and finds Gittes on the step.

KHAN

You wait.

Shifting back into Gittes' mind:

"That snotty butler again."

GITTES

You wait. Chow hoy kye dye!

(translation: Fuck
off, punk)

Gittes shoves Khan aside and pushes into the house.

> *As you switch back to Khan, the sudden gap between expectation and result inverts your smile:*
>
> **Confusion, anger. "He not only barges in but insults me in Cantonese! Throw him out!"**

Gittes looks up as Evelyn appears on the stairs behind Khan, nervously adjusting her necklace as she descends.

> *As Khan:*
>
> **"It's Mrs. Mulwray. Protect her!"**
>
> *Evelyn has been calling Gittes all morning, hoping to get his help. After packing for hours, she's in a hell-bent rush to catch the 5:30 train to Mexico. You shift to her pov:*
>
> **"If I were Evelyn in this situation, what would I do?"**
>
> *Now find your way to the heart of this very complex woman:*
>
> **"It's Jake. Thank God. I know he cares. He'll help me. How do I look?" Hands instinctively flutter to hair, face. "Khan looks worried."**

Evelyn smiles reassuringly to Khan and gestures for him to leave.

EVELYN

It's all right, Khan.

> *As Evelyn turning back to Gittes:*
>
> **Feeling more confident. "Now I'm not alone."**

EVELYN

How are you? I've been
calling you.

INT. LIVING ROOM—SAME

Gittes turns away and steps into the living room.

As Gittes:

"She's so beautiful. Don't look at her. Stay tough, man. Be ready. She'll tell lie on lie."

GITTES

. . . Yeah?

Evelyn follows, searching his face.

As Evelyn:

"I can't get his eye. Something's bothering him. He looks exhausted . . . "

EVELYN

Did you get some sleep?

GITTES

Sure.

". . . and hungry, poor man."

EVELYN

Have you had lunch? Khan
can fix you something.

As Gittes:

"What's this lunch bullshit? Do it now."

GITTES

Where's the girl?

Back in Evelyn's thoughts as a gap in expectation flies open with a shock:

"Why's he asking that? What's gone wrong? Keep calm. Feign innocence."

EVELYN

Upstairs, why?

As Gittes:

"The soft voice, the innocent 'why?' Keep cool."

GITTES

I want to see her.

As Evelyn:

"What does he want with Katherine? No. I can't let him see her now. Lie. Find out first."

EVELYN

. . . She's having a bath now.
Why do you want to see her?

As Gittes:

Disgusted with her lies. "Don't let her get to ya."

Gittes looks around the room and sees half-packed suitcases.

> **"She's making a run for it. Good thing I got here. Keep sharp. She'll lie again."**

GITTES

Going somewhere?

As Evelyn:

> **"Should have told him, but there wasn't time. Can't hide it. Tell the truth. He'll understand."**

EVELYN

Yes, we have a 5:30 train to catch.

As Gittes, a minor gap opens:

> **"What do ya know? Sounds honest. Doesn't matter. Put an end to her bullshit. Let her know you mean business. Where's the phone? There."**

Gittes picks up the telephone.

As Evelyn:

> **Bewilderment, choking fear. "Who's he calling?"**

EVELYN

Jake . . . ?

> **"He's dialing. God, help me . . . "**

As Gittes, ear to the phone:

"Answer, damn it." Hearing the desk sergeant pick up.

GITTES

J. J. Gittes for Lt. Escobar.

As Evelyn:

"The police!" A rush of adrenaline hits. Panic. "No, no. Keep calm. Keep calm. It must be about Hollis. But I can't wait. We have to leave now."

EVELYN

Look, what's the matter?
What's wrong? I told you
we've got a 5:30 train—

As Gittes:

"Enough! Shut her up."

GITTES

You're gonna miss your train.
(into phone)
Lou, meet me at 1972 Canyon
Drive . . . yeah, soon as you
can.

As Evelyn:

Anger rises. "The fool . . ." A shred of hope. "But maybe he's calling the police to help me."

EVELYN

Why did you do that?

As Gittes:

Smug satisfaction. "She's trying to get tough, but I've got her now. Feels good. I'm right at home."

GITTES
(tossing his hat on
the table)
You know any good criminal
lawyers?

As Evelyn, trying to close an ever-widening gap:

"Lawyers? What the hell does he mean?" A chilling fear of something terrible about to happen.

EVELYN
No.

As Gittes:

"Look at her, cool and collected, playing it innocent to the end."

GITTES
(taking out a silver
cigarette case)
Don't worry. I can recommend
a couple. They're expensive,
but you can afford it.

Gittes calmly takes a lighter from his pocket, sits down and lights a cigarette.

As Evelyn:

"My God, he's threatening me. I slept with him. Look at him swagger. Who does he think he is?" Throat tightens in anger. "Don't panic. Handle it. There must be a reason for this."

EVELYN
Will you please tell me what
this is all about?

As Gittes:

"Pissed off, are ya? Good. Watch this."

Gittes slips the cigarette lighter back into his pocket and with the same motion brings out a wrapped handkerchief. He sets it on the table and carefully pulls back the four corners of the cloth to reveal the eyeglasses.

GITTES
I found these in your back-
yard in the pond. They
belonged to your husband,
didn't they . . . didn't they?

As Evelyn:

The gap refuses to close. Dazed. Nothing makes sense. A rising dread. "Glasses? In Hollis' fish pond? What's he after?"

EVELYN
I don't know. Yes, probably.

As Gittes:

"An opening. Get her now. Make her confess."

GITTES
(jumping up)
Yes, positively. That's where
he was drowned.

As Evelyn:

Stunned. "At home?!"

EVELYN
What?!

As Gittes:

Fury. "Make her talk. Now!"

GITTES
There's no time to be shocked
by the truth. The coroner's
report proves that he had salt
water in his lungs when he
was killed. Just take my word
for it, all right? Now I want to
know how it happened, and I
want to know why, and I
want to know before Escobar
gets here because I don't
want to lose my license.

As Evelyn:

His sneering, livid face pushes into yours. Chaos, paralyzing fear, grasping for control.

EVELYN
I don't know what you are
talking about. This is the
craziest, the most insane
thing . . .

GITTES
Stop it!

As Gittes:

Losing control, hands shoot out, grasp her, fingers digging in, making her wince. But then the look of shock and pain in her eyes brings a stab of compassion. A gap opens. Feelings for her struggle against the rage. Hands drop. "She's hurting. Come on, man, she didn't do it in cold blood. could happen to anybody. Give her a chance. Lay it out, point by point, but get the truth out of her!"

GITTES
I'm gonna make it easy for
you. You were jealous, you
had a fight, he fell, hit his
head . . . it was an accident
. . . but his girl's a witness. So
you had to shut her up. You
don't have the guts to harm
her, but you've got the money
to shut her mouth. Yes or no?

As Evelyn:

The gap crashes shut with a horrible meaning: "My God, he thinks I did it!"

EVELYN

No!

As Gittes, hearing her emphatic answer:

"Good. Finally sounds like the truth." Cooling off. "But what the hell's going on?"

GITTES

Who is she? And don't give
me that crap about a sister
because you don't have a
sister.

As Evelyn:

The greatest shock of all splits you in two: "He wants to know who she is . . . God help me." Weak with years of carrying the secret. Back to wall. "If I don't tell him, he'll call the police, but if I do . . ." No place to turn . . . except to Gittes.

EVELYN

I'll tell you . . . I'll tell you the
truth.

As Gittes:

Confident. Focused. "At last."

GITTES

Good. What's her name?

As Evelyn:

"Her name. . . . Dear God, her name . . . "

EVELYN

. . . Katherine.

GITTES

Katherine who?

As Evelyn:

Bracing for the worst. "Tell it all. See if he can take it . . . if I can take it . . . "

EVELYN

She's my daughter.

Back in Gittes pov as the expectation of finally prying loose her confession explodes:

"Another goddamned lie!"

Gittes lashes out and slaps her flush across the face.

As Evelyn:

Searing pain. Numbness. The paralysis that comes from a life time of guilt.

GITTES

I said the truth.

She stands passively, offering herself to be hit again.

EVELYN

She's my sister—

As Gittes:

slapping her again . . .

EVELYN

—she's my daughter—

As Evelyn:

Feeling nothing but a letting go.

As Gittes:

. . . hitting her yet again, seeing her tears . . .

EVELYN

—my sister—

. . . slapping her even harder . . .

EVELYN

—my daughter, my sister—

. . . backhand, open fist, grasp her, hurl her into a sofa.

GITTES

I said I want the truth.

As Evelyn:

At first his assault seems miles away, but slamming against the sofa jolts you back to the now, and you scream out words you've never said to anyone:

EVELYN
She's my sister and my
daughter.

As Gittes:

A blinding gap! Dumbfounded. Fury ebbs away as the gap slowly closes and you absorb the terrible implications behind her words.

Suddenly, Khan POUNDS down the stairs.

As Khan:

Ready to fight to protect her.

As Evelyn, suddenly remembering:

"Katherine! Sweet Jesus, did she hear me?"

EVELYN
(quickly to Kahn)
Khan, please, go back.
For God's sake, keep her
upstairs. Go back.

Khan gives Gittes a hard look, then retreats upstairs.

As Evelyn, turning to see the frozen expression on Gittes' face:

An odd sense of pity for him. "Poor man . . . still doesn't get it."

EVELYN
. . . my father and I . . .
understand? Or is it too tough
for you?

Evelyn drops her head to her knees and sobs.

As Gittes:

A wave of compassion. "Cross . . . that sick bastard . . . "

GITTES
(quietly)
He raped you?

As Evelyn:

Images of you and your father, so many years ago. Crushing guilt. But no more lies:

Evelyn shakes her head "no."

This is the location of a critical rewrite. In the third draft Evelyn explains at great length that her mother died when she was fifteen and her father's grief was such that he had a "breakdown" and became " a little boy," unable to feed or dress himself. This led to incest between them. Unable to face what he had done, her father then turned his back on her. This exposition not only slowed the pace of the scene, but more importantly, it seriously weakened the power of the antagonist, giving him a sympathetic vulnerability. It was cut and replaced by Gittes' "He raped you?" and Evelyn's denial—a brilliant stroke that main-

tains Cross's cruel core, and severely tests Gittes' love for Evelyn.

This opens at least two possible explanations for why Evelyn denies she was raped: Children often have a self-destructive need to protect their parents. It could well have been rape, but even now she cannot bring herself to accuse her father. Or was she complicit. Her mother was dead, making her the "woman of the house." In those circumstances, incest between father and daughter is not unknown. That, however, doesn't excuse Cross. The responsibility is his in either case, but Evelyn has punished herself with guilt. Her denial forces Gittes to face character defining choices: whether or not to continue loving this woman, whether or not to turn her over to the police for murder. Her denial contradicts his expectation and a void opens:

As Gittes:

"If she wasn't raped . . . ?" Confusion. "There must be more."

GITTES

Then what happened?

As Evelyn:

Flashing memories of the shock of being pregnant, your father's sneering face, fleeing to Mexico, the agony of giving birth, a foreign clinic, loneliness . . .

EVELYN

I ran away . . .

GITTES

. . . to Mexico.

As Evelyn:

Remembering when Hollis found you in Mexico, proudly showing him Katherine, grief as your child is taken from you, the faces of the nuns, the sound of Katherine crying . . .

EVELYN
(nodding "yes")
Hollis came and took care of
me. I couldn't see her . . . I
was fifteen. I wanted to but I
couldn't. Then . . .

Images of your joy at getting Katherine to Los Angeles to be with you, of keeping her safe from your father, but then sudden fear: "He must never find her. He's mad. I know what he wants. If he gets his hands on my child, he's going to do it again."

EVELYN
(a pleading look to
Gittes)
Now I want to be with her.
I want to take care of her.

As Gittes:

"I've finally got the truth." Feeling the gap close, and with it, a growing love for her. Pity for all she's suffered, respect for her courage and devotion to the child. "Let her go. No, better yet, get her out of town yourself. She'll never make it on her own. And, man, you owe it to her."

GITTES
Where are you gonna take
her now?

As Evelyn:

Rush of hope. "What does he mean? Will he help?"

EVELYN
Back to Mexico.

As Gittes:

Wheels turning. "How to get her past Escobar?"

GITTES
Well, you can't take the train.
Escobar'll be looking for you
everywhere.

As Evelyn:

Disbelief. Elation. "He is going to help me!"

EVELYN
How . . . how about a plane?

GITTES
No, that's worse. You better
just get out of here, leave all
this stuff here.
(beat)
Where does Kahn live? Get
the exact address.

EVELYN
All right . . .

Light glints off the glasses on the table, catching Evelyn's eye.

As Evelyn:

"Those glasses . . ." An image of Hollis reading . . . without glasses.

EVELYN

Those didn't belong to Hollis.

GITTES

How do you know?

EVELYN

He didn't wear bifocals.

She goes upstairs as Gittes stares down at the glasses.

As Gittes:

"If not Mulwray's glasses . . . ? A gap breaks open. One last piece of truth yet to find. Memory rewinds and flashes back to . . . lunch with Noah Cross, and him peering over bifocals, eyeing the head of a broiled fish. The gap snaps shut. "Cross killed Mulwray because his son-in-law wouldn't tell him where his daughter by his daughter was hiding. Cross wants the kid. But he won't get her because I've got the evidence to nail him . . . in my pocket."

Gittes carefully tucks the bifocals into his vest, then looks up to see Evelyn on the stairs with her arm around a shy teenager.

"Lovely. Like her mother. A little scared. Must have heard us."

EVELYN

Katherine, say hello to Mister
Gittes.

You move into Katherine's pov:

If I were Katherine in this moment, what would I feel?

As Katherine:

Anxious. Flustered. "Mother's been crying. Did this man hurt her? She's smiling at him. I guess it's okay."

KATHERINE

Hello.

GITTES

Hello.

Evelyn gives her daughter a reassuring look and sends her back upstairs.

EVELYN

(to Gittes)

He lives at 1712 Alameda. Do you know where that is?

GITTES

Sure . . .

As Gittes:

A last gap opens, flooded with images of a woman you once loved and her violent death on Alameda in Chinatown. Feelings of dread, of life coming full circle. The gap slowly closes with the thought, "This time I'll do it right."

• • •

CREATING WITHIN THE GAP

In writing out what actors call "inner monologues" I've put this well-paced scene into ultra-slow motion, and given words to what would be flights of feeling or flashes of insight. Nonetheless, that's how it is at the desk. It may take days, even weeks, to write what will be minutes, perhaps seconds, on screen. We put each and every moment under a microscope of thinking, rethinking, creating, recreating as we weave through our characters' moments, a maze of unspoken thoughts, images, sensations, and emotions.

Writing from the inside out, however, does not mean that we imagine a scene from one end to the other locked in a single character's point of view. Rather, as in the exercise above, the writer shifts points of view. He settles into the conscious center of a character and asks the question: "If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?" He feels within his own emotions a specific human reaction and imagines the character's next action.

Now the writer's problem is this: how to progress the scene? To build a next beat, the writer must move out of the character's subjective point of view and take an objective look at the action he just created. This action anticipates a certain reaction from the character's world. But that must not occur. Instead, the writer must pry open the gap. To do so, he asks the question writers have been asking themselves since time began: "*What is the opposite of that?*"

Writers are by instinct dialectical thinkers. As Jean Cocteau said, "The spirit of creation is the spirit of contradiction—the breakthrough of appearances toward an unknown reality." You must doubt appearances and seek the opposite of the obvious. Don't skim the surface, taking things at face value. Rather, peel back the skin of life to find the hidden, the unexpected, the seemingly inappropriate—in other words, the truth. And you will find your truth in the gap.

Remember, you are the God of your universe. You know your characters, their minds, bodies, emotions, relationships, world. Once you've created an honest moment from one point of view, you move around your universe, even into the inanimate, looking for another point of view so you can invade that, create an unexpected reaction, and splinter open the cleft between expectation and result.

Having done this, you then go back into the mind of the first character, and find your way to a new emotional truth by asking again: "If I were this character under these *new* circumstances, what would I do?" Finding your way to that reaction and action, you then step right out again, asking: "And what is the opposite of *that*?"

Fine writing emphasizes REACTIONS.

Many of the actions in any story are more or less expected. By genre convention, the lovers in a *Love Story* will meet, the detective in a *Thriller* will discover a crime, the protagonist's life in an *Education Plot* will bottom out. These and other such commonplace actions are universally known and anticipated by the audience. Consequently, fine writing puts less stress on *what* happens than on to *whom* it happens and *why* and *how* it happens. Indeed, the richest and most satisfying pleasures of all are found in stories that focus on the *reactions* that events cause and the *insight gained.*

Looking back at the CHINATOWN scene: Gittes knocks on the door expecting to be let in. What's the reaction he gets? Khan blocks his way, expecting Gittes to wait. Gittes's reaction? He shocks Khan by insulting him in Cantonese and barging in. Evelyn comes downstairs expecting Gittes's help. The reaction to that? Gittes calls the police, expecting to force her to confess the murder and tell the truth about the "other woman." Reaction? She reveals that the other woman is her daughter by incest, indicting her lunatic father for the murder. Beat after beat, even in the quietest, most internalized of scenes, a dynamic series of action/*reaction*/gap, renewed action/surprising *reaction*/gap builds the scene to and around its Turning Point as reactions amaze and fascinate.

If you write a beat in which a character steps up to a door, knocks, and waits, and in reaction the door is politely opened to invite him in, and the director is foolish enough to shoot this, in all probability it will never see the light of the screen. Any editor worthy of the title would instantly scrap it, explaining to the director: "Jack, these are eight dead seconds. He knocks on the door and it's actually opened for him? No, we'll cut to the sofa. That's the first real beat. Sorry you squandered fifty thousand dollars walking your star through a door, but it's a pace killer and pointless." A "pointless pace killer" is any scene in which reactions lack insight and imagination, forcing expectation to equal result.

Once you've imagined the scene, beat by beat, gap by gap, you write. What you write is a vivid description of what happens and the reactions it gets, what is seen, said, and done. You write so that when someone else reads your pages he will, beat by beat, gap by gap, live through the roller coaster of life that you lived through at your desk. The words on the page allow the reader to plunge into each gap, seeing what you dreamed, feeling what you felt, learning what you understood until, like you, the reader's pulse pounds, emotions flow, and meaning is made.

THE SUBSTANCE AND ENERGY OF STORY

The answers to the questions that began this chapter should now be clear. The stuff of a story is not its words. Your text must be lucid to express the desk-bound life of your imagination and feelings. But words are not an end, they are a means, a medium. The substance of story is the gap that splits open between what a human being expects to happen when he takes an action and what really does happen; the rift between expectation and result, probability and necessity. To build a scene, we constantly break open these breaches in reality.

As to the source of energy in story, the answer is the same: the gap. The audience empathizes with the character, vicariously seeking his desire. It more or less expects the world to react the way the character expects. When the gap opens up for character, it opens up for audience. This is the "Oh, my God!" moment, the "Oh, no!" or "Oh, yes!" you've experienced again and again in well-crafted stories.

The next time you go to the movies, sit in the front row at the wall, so you can watch an audience watch a film. It's very instructive: Eyebrows fly up, mouths drop open, bodies flinch and rock, laughter explodes, tears run down faces. Every time the gap splits open for character, it opens for audience. With each turn, the character must pour more energy and effort into his next action. The audience, in empathy with the character, feels the same surges of energy building beat by beat through the film.

As a charge of electricity leaps from pole to pole in a magnet, so the spark of life ignites across the gap between the self and reality. With this flash of energy we ignite the power of story and move the heart of the audience.

8

THE INCITING INCIDENT

A story is a design in five parts: The *Inciting Incident*, the first major event of the telling, is the primary cause for all that follows, putting into motion the other four elements—*Progressive Complications, Crisis, Climax, Resolution*. To understand how the Inciting Incident enters into and functions within the work, let's step back to take a more comprehensive look at *setting*, the physical and social world in which it occurs.

THE WORLD OF THE STORY

We've defined *setting* in terms of period, duration, location, and level of conflict. These four dimensions frame the story's world, but to inspire the multitude of creative choices you need to tell an original, cliché-free story, and you must fill that frame with a depth and breadth of detail. Below is a list of general questions we ask of all stories. Beyond these, each work inspires a unique list of its own, driven by the writer's thirst for insight.

How do my characters make a living? We spend a third or more of our lives at work, yet rarely see scenes of people doing their jobs. The reason is simple: Most work is boring. Perhaps not to the person doing the work, but boring to watch. As any lawyer, cop, or doctor knows, the vast majority of their time is spent in routine duties, reports, and meetings that change little or nothing—the epitome of expectation meeting result. That's why in the professional genres—*Courtroom, Crime, Medical*—we focus on only those moments when work causes more problems than it solves. Nonetheless, to get inside a character, we must question all aspects of their twenty-four-hour day. Not only work, but how do they play? Pray? Make love?

What are the politics of my world? Not necessarily politics in terms of right-wing/left-wing, Republican/Democrat, but in the true sense of the word: power. Politics is the name we give to the orchestration of power in any society. Whenever human beings gather to do anything, there's always an uneven distribution of power. In corporations, hospitals, religions, government agencies, and the like, someone at the top has great power, people at the bottom have little or none, those in between have some. How does a worker gain power or lose it? No matter how we try to level inequalities, applying egalitarian theories of all kinds, human societies are stubbornly and inherently pyramidal in their arrangement of power. In other words, politics.

Even when writing about a household, question its politics, for like any other social structure, a family is political. Is it a patriarchal home where Dad has the clout, but when he leaves the house, it transfers to Mom, then when she's out, to the oldest child? Or is it a matriarchal home, where Mom runs things? Or a contemporary family in which the kid is tyrannizing his parents?

Love relationships are political. An old Gypsy expression goes: "He who confesses first loses." The first person to say "I love you" has lost because the other, upon hearing it, immediately smiles a knowing smile, realizing that he's the one loved, so he now controls the relationship. If you're lucky, those three little words will be said in unison over candlelight. Or, if very, very lucky, they won't need to be said . . . they'll be *done*.

What are the rituals of my world? In all corners of the world life is bound up in ritual. This is a ritual, is it not? I've written a book and you're reading it. In another time and place we might sit under a tree or take a walk, like Socrates and his students. We create a ritual for every activity, not only for public ceremony but for our very private rites. Heaven help the person who rearranges my organization of toiletries around the bathroom basin.

How do your characters take meals? Eating is a different ritual everywhere in the world. Americans, for example, according to a recent survey, now eat 75 percent of all their meals in restaurants. If your characters eat at home, is it an old-fashioned family that dresses for dinner at a certain hour, or a contemporary one that feeds from an open refrigerator?

What are the values in my world? What do my characters consider good? Evil? What do they see as right? Wrong? What are my society's laws? Realize that good/evil, right/wrong, and legal/illegal don't necessarily have anything to do with one another. What do my characters believe is worth living for? Foolish to pursue? What would they give their lives for?

What is the genre or combination of genres? With what conventions? As with setting, genres surround the writer with creative limitations that must be kept or brilliantly altered.

What are the biographies of my characters? From the day they were born to the opening scene, how has life shaped them?

What is the Backstory? This is an oft-misunderstood term. It doesn't mean life history or biography. *Backstory* is the set of significant events that occurred in the characters' past that the writer can use to build his story's progressions. Exactly how we use Backstory to tell story will be discussed later, but for the moment note that we do not bring characters out of a void. We landscape character biographies, planting them with events that become a garden we'll harvest again and again.

What is my cast design? Nothing in a work of art is there by accident. Ideas may come spontaneously, but we must weave them consciously and creatively into the whole. We cannot allow any character who comes to mind to stumble into the story and play a part. Each role must fit a purpose, and the first principle of cast design is polarization. Between the various roles we devise a network of contrasting or contradictory attitudes.

If the ideal cast sat down for dinner and something happened, whether as trivial as spilled wine or as important as a divorce announcement, from each and every character would come a separate and distinctively different reaction. No two would react the same because no two share the same attitude toward anything. Each is an individual with a character-specific view of life, and the disparate reaction of each contrasts with all others.

If two characters in your cast share the same attitude and react in kind to whatever occurs, you must either collapse the two into one, or expel one from the story. When characters react the same, you minimize opportunities for conflict. Instead, the writer's strategy must be to maximize these opportunities.

Imagine this cast: father, mother, daughter, and a son named Jeffrey. This family lives in Iowa. As they sit down for dinner, Jeffrey turns to them and says: "Mom, Dad, Sis, I've come to a big decision. I have an airline ticket and tomorrow I'm leaving for Hollywood to pursue a career as an art director in the movies." And all three respond: "Oh, what a wonderful idea! Isn't that great? Jeff's going off to Hollywood!" And they toast him with their glasses of milk.

CUT TO: Jeff's room, where they help him pack while admiring his pictures on the wall, reflecting nostalgically on his days in art school, complimenting his talent, predicting success.

CUT TO: The airport as the family puts Jeff on the plane, tears in their eyes, embracing him: "Write when you get work, Jeff."

Suppose, instead, Jeffrey sits down for dinner, delivers his declaration, and suddenly Dad's fist POUNDS the table: "What the hell are you talking about, Jeff? You're not going off to Hollyweird to become some art director . . . whatever an art director is. No, you're staying right here in Davenport. Because, Jeff, as you know, I have never done anything for myself. Not in my entire life. It's all for you, Jeff, for you! Granted, I'm the king of plumbing supplies in Iowa . . . but someday, son, you'll be emperor of plumbing supplies all over the Midwest and I won't hear another word of this nonsense. End of discussion."

CUT TO: Jeff sulking in his room. His mother slips in whispering: "Don't you listen to him. Go off to Hollywood, become an art director . . . whatever that is. Do they win Oscars for that, Jeff?" "Yes, Mom, they do," Jeff says. "Good! Go off to Hollywood and win me an Oscar and prove that bastard wrong. And you can do it, Jeff. Because you've got talent. I know you've got talent. You got that from my side of the family. I used to have talent too, but I gave it all up when I married your father, and I've regretted it ever since. For God's sake, Jeff, don't sit here in Davenport. Hell, this town was named after a sofa. No, go off to Hollywood and make me proud."

CUT TO: Jeff packing. His sister comes in, shocked, "Jeff! What are you doing? Packing? Leaving me alone? With those two? You know how they are. They'll eat me alive. If you go off to Hollywood, I'll end up in the plumbing supply business!" Pulling his stuff out of the suitcase: "If you wanna be an artist, you can be an artist anywhere. A sunset's a sunset. A landscape's a landscape. What the hell difference does it make? And someday you'll have success. I know you will. I've seen paintings just like yours . . . in Sears. Don't leave, Jeff! I'll die!"

Whether or not Jeff goes off to Hollywood, the polarized cast gives the writer something we all desperately need: scenes.

AUTHORSHIP

When research of setting reaches the saturation point, something miraculous happens. Your story takes on a unique atmosphere, a personality that sets it apart from every other story ever told, no matter how many millions there have been through time. It's an amazing phenomenon: Human beings have told one another stories since they sat around the fire in caves, and every time the storyteller uses the art in its fullest, his story, like a portrait by a master painter, becomes one of a kind.

Like the stories you're striving to tell, you want to be one of a kind, recognized and respected as an original. In your quest, consider these three words: "author," "authority," "authenticity."

First, "author." "Author" is a title we easily give novelists and playwrights, rarely screenwriters. But in the strict sense of "originator," the screenwriter, as creator of setting, characters, and story, is an *author*. For the test of authorship is knowledge. A true author, no matter the medium, is an artist with godlike knowledge of his subject, and the proof of his authorship is that his pages smack of *authority.* What a rare pleasure it is to open a screenplay and immediately surrender to the work, giving over emotion and concentration because there is something ineffable between and under the lines that says: "*This writer knows.* I'm in the hands of an authority." And the effect of writing with authority is *authenticity.*

Two principles control the emotional involvement of an audience. First, empathy: identification with the protagonist that draws us into the story, vicariously rooting for our own desires in life. Second, authenticity: *We must believe,* or as Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested, we must willingly suspend our disbelief. Once involved, the writer must keep us involved to FADE OUT. To do so, he must convince us that the world of his story is authentic. We know that storytelling is a ritual surrounding a metaphor for life. To enjoy this ceremony in the dark we react to stories as if they're real. We suspend our cynicism and believe in the tale as long as we find it authentic. The moment it lacks credibility, empathy dissolves and we feel nothing.

Authenticity, however, does not mean actuality. Giving a story a contemporary milieu is no guarantee of authenticity; authenticity means an internally consistent world, true to itself in scope, depth, and detail. As Aristotle tells us: "For the purposes of [story] a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility." We can all list films that had us moaning: "I don't buy it. People aren't like that. Makes no sense. That's not how things happen."

Authenticity has nothing to do with so-called reality. A story set in a world that could never exist could be absolutely authentic. Story arts do not distinguish between reality and the various nonrealities of fantasy, dream, and ideality. The creative intelligence of the writer merges all these into a unique yet convincing fictional reality.

ALIEN: In the opening sequence the crew of an interstellar cargo ship awakes from its stasis chambers and gathers at the mess table. Dressed in work shirts and dungarees, they drink coffee and smoke cigarettes. On the table a toy bird bobs in a glass. Elsewhere, little collectibles of life clutter the living spaces. Plastic bugs hang from the ceiling, pinups and family photos are taped to the bulkhead. The crew talks—not about work or getting home—but about money. Is this unscheduled stop in their contract? Will the company pay bonuses for this extra duty?

Have you ever ridden in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler? How are they decorated? With the little collectibles of life: a plastic saint on the dashboard, blue ribbons won at a county fair, family photos, magazine clippings. Teamsters spend more time in their trucks than at home, so they take pieces of home on the road. And when they take a break, what's the first topic of talk? Money—golden time, overtime, is this in our contract? Understanding this psychology, screenwriter Dan O'Bannon recreated it in subtle details, so as that the scene played, the audience surrendered, thinking: "Wonderful! They're not spacemen like Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon. They're truck drivers."

In the next sequence, as Kane (John Hurt) investigates an alien growth, something springs out and smashes through the helmet of his space suit. Like a huge crab, the creature covers Kane's face, its legs locked around his head. What's worse, it's forced a tube down his throat and into his belly, putting him in a coma. Science Officer Ash (Ian Holm) realizes he can't pry the creature loose without ripping Kane's face apart, so he decides to release the creature's grip by severing its legs one at a time.

But as Ash applies a laser saw to the first leg, the flesh splits and out spits a viscous substance; a blistering "acid blood" that dissolves steel like sugar and eats a hole through the floor as big as a watermelon. The crew rushes to the deck below and looks up to see the acid eating through the ceiling, then burning a hole just as big through that floor. They rush down another deck and it's eating through that ceiling and floor until three decks down the acid finally peters out. At this point, one thought passed through the audience: "These people are in deep shit."

In other words, O'Bannon researched his alien. He asked himself, "What is the biology of my beast? How does it evolve? Feed? Grow? Reproduce? Does it have any weaknesses? What are its strengths?" Imagine the list of attributes O'Bannon must have concocted before seizing on "acid blood." Imagine the many sources he may have explored. Perhaps he did an intense study of earth-bound parasitical insects, or remembered the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* in which the blood of Grendel the water monster burns through the hero's shield, or it came to him in a nightmare. Whether through investigation, imagination, or memory, O'Bannon's alien is a stunning creation.

All the artists making ALIEN—writer, director, designers, actors—worked to the limit of their talents to create an authentic world. They knew that believability is the key to terror. Indeed, if the audience is to feel *any* emotion, it must believe. For when a film's emotional load becomes too sad, too horrifying, even too funny, how do we try to escape? We say to ourselves: "It's only a movie." We deny its authenticity. But if the film's of quality, the second we glance back at the screen, we're grabbed by the throat and pulled right back into those emotions. We won't escape until the film lets us out, which is what we paid our money for in the first place.

Authenticity depends on the "telling detail." When we use a few selected details, the audience's imagination supplies the rest, completing a credible whole. On the other hand, if the writer and director try too hard to be "real"—especially with sex and violence—the audience reaction is: "That's not really real," or "My God, that's so real," or "They're not really fucking," or "My God, they're really fucking." In either case, credibility shatters as the audience is yanked out of the story to notice the filmmaker's technique. An audience believes as long as we don't give them reason to doubt.

Beyond physical and social detail, we must also create emotional authenticity. Authorial research must pay off in believable character behavior. Beyond behavioral credibility, the story itself must persuade. From event to event, cause and effect must be convincing, logical. The art of story design lies in the fine adjustment of things both usual and unusual to things universal and archetypal. The writer whose knowledge of subject has taught him exactly what to stress and expand versus what to lay down quietly and subtly will stand out from the thousands of others who always hit the same note.

Originality lies in the struggle for authenticity, not eccentricity. A personal style, in other words, cannot be achieved self-consciously.

Rather, when your authorial knowledge of setting and character meets your personality, the choices you make and the arrangements you create out of this mass of material are unique to you. Your work becomes what you are, an original.

Compare a Waldo Salt story (MIDNIGHT COWBOY, SERPICO) with an Alvin Sargent story (DOMINICK AND EUGENE, ORDINARY PEOPLE): one hard-edged, the other tender, one elliptical, the other linear, one ironic, the other compassionate. The unique story styles of each is the natural and spontaneous effect of an author mastering his subject in the never-ending battle against clichés.

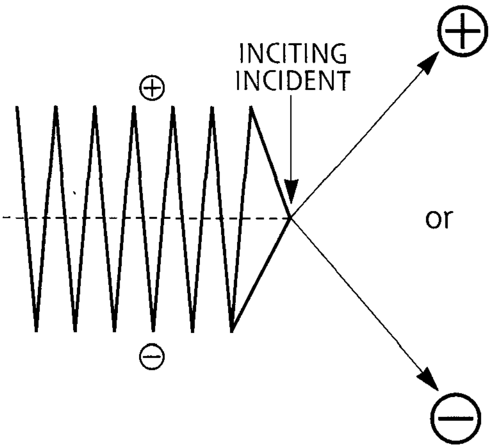
THE INCITING INCIDENT

Starting from any Premise at any point in the story's chronology, our research feeds the invention of events, the events redirect research. We do not, in other words, necessarily design a story by beginning with its first major event. But at some point as you create your universe, you'll face these questions: How do I set my story into action? Where do I place this crucial event?

When an Inciting Incident occurs it must be a dynamic, fully developed event, not something static or vague. This, for example, is not an Inciting Incident: A college dropout lives off-campus near New York University. She wakes one morning and says: "I'm bored with my life. I think I'll move to Los Angeles." She packs her VW and motors west, but her change of address changes nothing of value in her life. She's merely exporting her apathy from New York to California.

If, on the other hand, we notice that she's created an ingenious kitchen wallpaper from hundreds of parking tickets, then a sudden POUNDING on the door brings the police, brandishing a felony warrant for ten thousand dollars in unpaid citations, and she flees down the fire escape, heading West—this could be an Inciting Incident. It has done what an Inciting Incident must do.

The INCITING INCIDENT radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life.



As a story begins, the protagonist is living a life that's more or less in balance. He has successes and failures, ups and downs. Who doesn't? But life is in relative control. Then, perhaps suddenly but in any case decisively, an event occurs that radically upsets its balance, swinging the value-charge of the protagonist's reality either to the negative or to the positive.

Negative: Our dropout reaches L.A., but she balks at taking a normal job when she's asked for her social security number. Fearful that in a computerized world the Manhattan police will track her down through the Internal Revenue Service, what does she do? Go underground? Sell drugs? Turn to prostitution?

Positive: Perhaps the knock at the door is an heir hunter with news of a million-dollar fortune left by an anonymous relative. Suddenly rich, she's under terrible pressure. With no more excuses for failure, she has a heart-thumping fear of screwing up this dream come true.

In most cases, the Inciting Incident is a single event that either happens directly to the protagonist or is caused by the protagonist. Consequently, he's immediately aware that life is out of balance for better or worse. When lovers first meet, this face-to-face event turns life, for the moment, to the positive. When Jeffrey abandons the security of his Davenport family for Hollywood, he knowingly puts himself at risk.

Occasionally, an Inciting Incident needs two events: a setup and a payoff. JAWS: Setup, a shark eats a swimmer and her body washes onto the beach. Payoff, the sheriff (Roy Scheider) discovers the corpse. If the logic of an Inciting Incident requires a setup, the writer cannot delay the payoff—at least not for very long—and keep the protagonist ignorant of the fact that his life is out of balance. Imagine JAWS with this design: Shark eats girl, followed by sheriff goes bowling, gives out parking tickets, makes love to his wife, goes to PTA meeting, visits his sick mother . . . while the corpse rots on the beach. A story is not a sandwich of episodic slices of life between two halves of an Inciting Incident.

Consider the unfortunate design of THE RIVER: The film opens with the first half of an Inciting Incident: a businessman, Joe Wade (Scott Glenn) decides to build a dam across a river, knowing he'll flood five farms in the process. One of these belongs to Tom and Mae Garvey (Mel Gibson and Sissy Spacek). No one, however, tells Tom or Mae. So for the next hundred minutes we watch: Tom plays baseball, Tom and Mae struggle to make the farm turn a profit, Tom goes to work in a factory caught up in a labor dispute, Mae breaks her arm in a tractor accident, Joe makes romantic passes at Mae, Mae goes to the factory to visit her husband who's now a scab locked in the factory, a stressed-out Tom fails to get it up, Mae whispers a gentle word, Tom gets it up, and so on.

Ten minutes from its end, the film delivers the second half of the Inciting Incident: Tom stumbles into Joe's office, sees a model of the dam, and says, in effect: "If you build that dam, Joe, you'll flood my farm." Joe shrugs. Then, deus ex machina, it starts to rain and the river rises. Tom and his buddies get their bulldozers to shore up the levee; Joe gets his bulldozer and goons to tear down the levee. Tom and Joe have a bulldozer-to-bulldozer Mexican standoff. At this point, Joe steps back and declares that he didn't want to build the dam in the first place. FADE OUT.

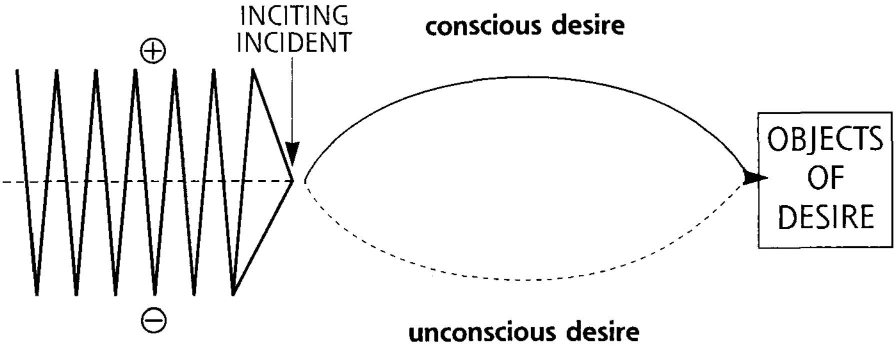
The protagonist must react to the Inciting Incident.

Given the infinitely variable nature of protagonists, however, any reaction is possible. For example, how many Westerns began like this? Bad guys shoot up the town and kill the old marshal. Townspeople gather and go down to the livery stable, run by Matt, a retired gunslinger who's sworn a sacred oath never to kill again. The mayor pleads: "Matt, you've got to pin on the badge and come to our aid. You're the only one that can do it." Matt replies: "No, no, I hung up my guns long ago." "But, Matt," begs the schoolmarm, "they killed your mother." Matt toes the dirt and says: "Well . . . she was old and I guess her time had come." He refuses to act, but that is a reaction.

The protagonist responds to the sudden negative or positive change in the balance of life in whatever way is appropriate to character and world. A refusal to act, however, cannot last for very long, even in the most passive protagonists of minimalist Nonplots. For we all wish some reasonable sovereignty over our existence, and if an event radically upsets our sense of equilibrium and control, what would we want? What does anyone, including our protagonist, want? To restore balance.

Therefore, the Inciting Incident first throws the protagonist's life out of balance, then arouses in him the desire to restore that balance. Out of this need—often quickly, occasionally with deliberation—the protagonist next conceives of an Object of Desire: something physical or situational or attitudinal that he feels he lacks or needs to put the ship of life on an even keel. Lastly, the Inciting Incident propels the protagonist into an active pursuit of this object or goal. And for many stories or genres this is sufficient: An event pitches the protagonist's life out of kilter, arousing a conscious desire for something he feels will set things right, and he goes after it.

But for those protagonists we tend to admire the most, the Inciting Incident arouses not only a conscious desire, but an unconscious one as well. These complex characters suffer intense inner battles because these two desires are in direct conflict with each other. No matter what the character consciously thinks he wants, the audience senses or realizes that deep inside he unconsciously wants the very opposite.



CARNAL KNOWLEDGE: If we were to pull the protagonist Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) aside and ask him "What do you want?" his conscious answer would be: "I'm a good-looking guy, lot of fun to be with, make a terrific living as a CPA. My life would be paradise if I could find the perfect woman to share it." The film takes Jonathan from his college years to middle age, a thirty-year search for his dream woman. Again and again he meets a beautiful, intelligent woman, but soon their candlelit romance turns to dark emotions, acts of physical violence, then breakup. Over and over he plays the great romantic until he has a woman head over heels in love with him, then he turns on her, humiliates her, and hurls her out of his life.

At Climax, he invites Sandy (Art Garfunkel), an old college buddy, for dinner. For amusement he screens 35mm slides of all the women from his life; a show he entitles "Ballbusters on Parade." As each woman appears, he trashes her to Sandy for "what was wrong with her." In the Resolution scene, he's with a prostitute (Rita Moreno) who has to read him an ode he's written in praise of his penis so he can get it up. He thinks he's hunting for the perfect woman, but we know that unconsciously he wants to degrade and destroy women and has done that throughout his life. Jules Feiffer's screenplay is a chilling delineation of a man that too many women know only too well.

MRS. SOFFEL: In 1901 a thief (Mel Gibson) who's committed murder awaits execution. The wife of the prison warden (Diane Keaton) decides to save his soul for God. She reads Bible quotations to him, hoping that when he's hanged he'll go to heaven and not hell.

They are attracted. She engineers his jailbreak, then joins him. On the run they make love, but only once. As the authorities close in, she realizes he's about to die and decides to die with him: "Shoot me," she begs him, "I don't want to live a day beyond you." He pulls the trigger but only wounds her. In the Resolution, she's imprisoned for life, but goes into her cell proudly, virtually spitting in the eye of her jailer.

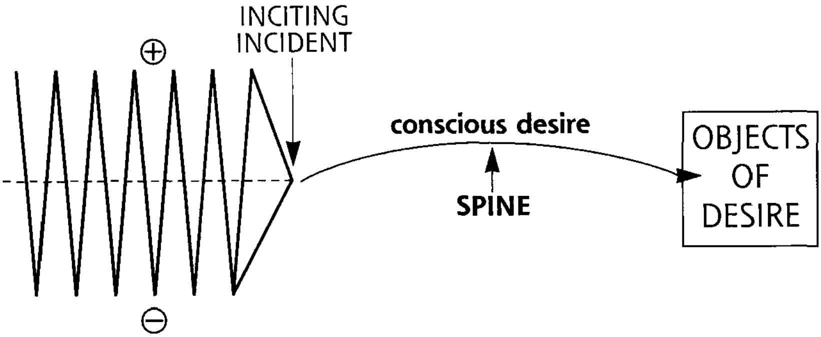
Mrs. Soffel seems to flit from choice to choice, but we sense that underneath her changes of mind is the powerful unconscious desire for a transcendent, absolute, romantic experience of such intensity that if nothing ever happened to her again it wouldn't matter . . . because for one sublime moment she will have lived. Mrs. Soffel is the ultimate romantic.

THE CRYING GAME: Fergus (Stephen Rea), a member of the Irish Republican Army, is put in charge of a British corporal (Forest Whitaker) held prisoner by his IRA unit. He finds himself in sympathy with the man's plight. When the corporal is killed, Fergus goes AWOL to England, hiding out from both the British and the IRA. He looks up the corporal's lover, Dil (Jaye Davidson). He falls in love, only to discover that Dil's a transvestite. The IRA then tracks him down. Fergus volunteered for the IRA knowing it isn't a college fraternity, so when they order him to assassinate an English judge, he must finally come to terms with his politics. Is he or is he not an Irish patriot?

Beneath Fergus's conscious political struggle, the audience senses from his first moments with the prisoner to his last tender scenes with Dil that this film isn't about his commitment to the cause. Hidden behind his zigzag politics Fergus harbors the most human of needs: to love and be loved.

THE SPINE OF THE STORY

The energy of a protagonist's desire forms the critical element of design known as the *Spine* of the story (AKA *Through-line* or *Super-objective*). The Spine is the deep desire in and effort by the protagonist to restore the balance of life. It's the primary unifying force that holds all other story elements together. For no matter what happens on the surface of the story, each scene, image, and word is

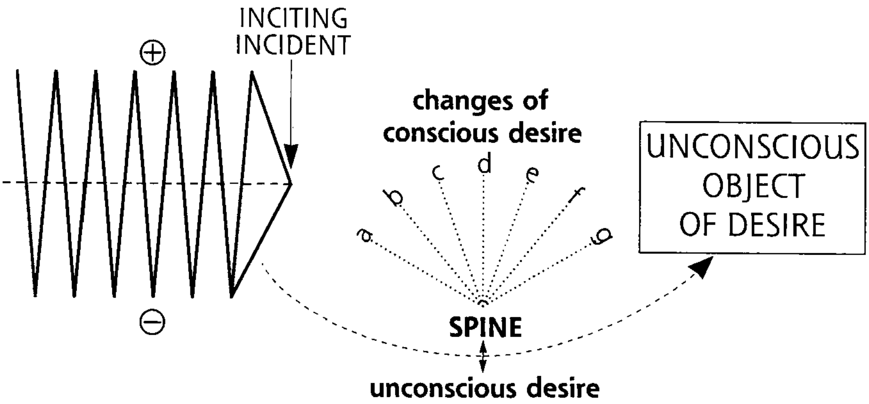


ultimately an aspect of the Spine, relating, causally or thematically, to this core of desire and action.

If the protagonist has no unconscious desire, then his conscious objective becomes the Spine. The Spine of any Bond film, for example, can be phrased as: *To defeat the arch-villain.* James has no unconscious desires; he wants and only wants to save the world. As the story's unifying force, Bond's pursuit of his conscious goal cannot change. If he were to declare, "To hell with Dr. No. I'm bored with the spy business. I'm going south to work on my backswing and lower my handicap," the film falls apart.

If, on the other hand, the protagonist has an unconscious desire, this becomes the Spine of the story. An unconscious desire is always more powerful and durable, with roots reaching to the protagonist's innermost self. When an unconscious desire drives the story, it allows the writer to create a far more complex character who may repeatedly change his conscious desire.

MOBY DICK: If Melville had made Ahab sole protagonist, his novel would be a simple but exciting work of *High Adventure,* driven by the captain's monomania to destroy the white whale. But by adding Ishmael as dual protagonist, Melville enriched his story into a complex classic of the *Education Plot.* For the telling is in fact driven by Ishmael's unconscious desire to battle inner demons, seeking in himself the destructive obsessions he sees in Ahab—a desire that not only contradicts his conscious hope to survive Ahab's mad voyage, but may destroy him as it does Ahab.

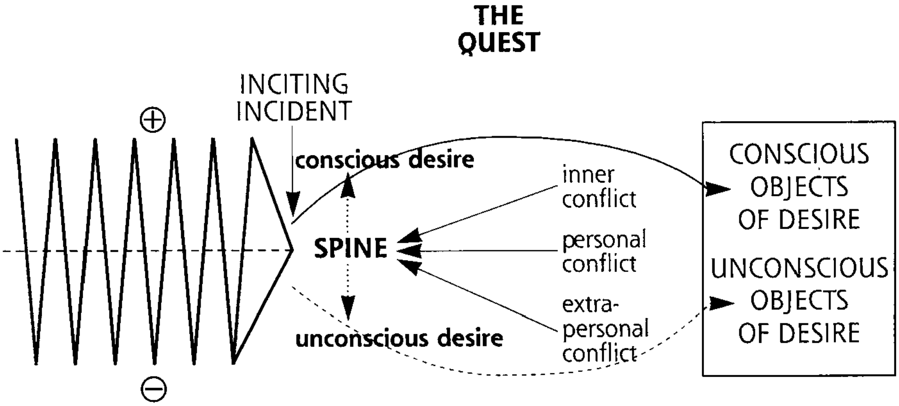


In THE CRYING GAME Fergus agonizes over politics while his unconscious need *to love and be loved* drives the telling. Jonathan searches for the "perfect woman" in CARNAL KNOWLEDGE, flitting from relationship to relationship, while his unconscious desire *to humiliate and destroy women* never varies. The leaps of desire in Mrs. Soffel's mind are enormous—from salvation to damnation—while unconsciously she seeks *to experience the transcendent romance.* The audience senses that the shifting urges of the complex protagonist are merely reflections of the one thing that never changes: the unconscious desire.

THE QUEST

From the point of view of the writer looking from the Inciting Incident "down the Spine" to the last act's Climax, in spite of all we've said about genres and the various shapes from Archplot to Antiplot, in truth there's only one story. In essence we have told one another the same tale, one way or another, since the dawn of humanity, and that story could be usefully called *the Quest.* All stories take the form of a Quest.

> **For better or worse, an event throws a character's life out of balance, arousing in him the conscious and/or unconscious desire for that which he feels will restore**


THE QUEST
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UNCONSCIOUS OBJECTS OF DESIRE

balance, launching him on a Quest for his Object of Desire against forces of antagonism (inner, personal, extra-personal). He may or may not achieve it. This is story in a nutshell.

The essential form of story is simple. But that's like saying that the essential form of music is simple. It is. It's twelve notes. But these twelve notes conspire into everything and anything we have ever called music. The essential elements of the Quest are the twelve notes of our music, the melody we've listened to all our lives. However, like the composer sitting down at the piano, when a writer takes up this seemingly simple form, he discovers how incredibly complex it is, how inordinately difficult to do.

To understand the Quest form of your story you need only identify your protagonist's Object of Desire. Penetrate his psychology and find an honest answer to the question: "What does he want?" It may be the desire for something he can take into his arms: *someone to love* in MOONSTRUCK. It may be the need for inner growth: *maturity* in BIG. But whether a profound change in the real world—*security from a marauding shark* in JAWS—or a profound change in the spiritual realm—*a meaningful life* in TENDER MERCIES—by looking into the heart of the protagonist and discovering his desire, you begin to see the arc of your story, the Quest on which the Inciting Incident sends him.

DESIGN OF THE INCITING INCIDENT

An Inciting Incident happens in only one of two ways: randomly or causally, either by coincidence or by decision. If by decision, it can be made by the protagonist—Ben's decision to drink himself to death in LEAVING LAS VEGAS, or, as in KRAMER vs. KRAMER, by someone with the power to upset the protagonist's life—Mrs. Kramer's decision to leave Mr. Kramer and their child. If by coincidence, it may be tragic—the accident that kills Alice's husband in ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, or serendipitous—a sports promoter meets beautiful and gifted athlete in PAT AND MIKE. By choice or accident; there are no other means.

The Inciting Incident of the Central Plot must happen onscreen—not in the Backstory, not between scenes offscreen. Each subplot has its own Inciting Incident, which may or may not be onscreen, but the presence of the audience at the Central Plot's Inciting Incident is crucial to story design for two reasons.

First, when the audience experiences an Inciting Incident, the film's Major Dramatic Question, a variation on "How will this turn out?" is provoked to mind. JAWS: Will the sheriff kill the shark, or the shark the sheriff? LA NOTTE: After Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) tells her husband (Marcello Mastroianni) that he disgusts her and she's leaving, will she go or stay? JALSAGHER (THE MUSIC ROOM): Biswas (Huzur Roy), an aristocrat with a life-consuming love of music, decides to sell his wife's jewels, then his palace to finance his passion for beauty. Will extravagance destroy or redeem this connoisseur?

In Hollywood jargon, the Central Plot's Inciting Incident is the "big hook." It must occur onscreen because this is the event that incites and captures the audience's curiosity. Hunger for the answer to the Major Dramatic Question grips the audience's interest, holding it to the last act's climax.

Second, witnessing the Inciting Incident projects an image of the Obligatory Scene into the audience's imagination. The Obligatory Scene (AKA Crisis) is an event the audience knows it must see before the story can end. This scene will bring the protagonist into a confrontation with the most powerful forces of antagonism in his quest, forces stirred to life by the Inciting Incident that will gather focus and strength through the course of the story. The scene is called "obligatory" because having teased the audience into anticipating this moment, the writer is obligated to keep his promise and show it to them.

JAWS: When the shark attacks a vacationer and the sheriff discovers her remains, an vivid image comes to mind: The shark and the sheriff do battle face-to-face. We don't know how we'll get there, or how it'll turn out. But we do know the film can't be over until the shark has the sheriff virtually in its jaws. Screenwriter Peter Benchley could not have played this critical event from the point of view of townspeople peering out to sea with binoculars, wondering: "Is that the sheriff? Is that the shark?" BOOM! Then have sheriff and marine biologist (Richard Dreyfuss) swim ashore, shouting, "Oh, what a fight. Let us tell you about it." Having projected the image in our mind, Benchley was obligated to put us with the sheriff when it happens.

Unlike action genres that bring the Obligatory Scene immediately and vividly to mind, other more interior genres hint at this scene in the Inciting Incident, then like a photo negative in acid solution, slowly bring it into focus. In TENDER MERCIES Mac Sledge is drowning in booze and an utterly meaningless life. His ascent from rock bottom begins when he meets a lonely woman with a son who needs a father. He's inspired to write some new songs, then accepts baptism and tries to make peace with his estranged daughter. Gradually he pieces together a meaningful life.

The audience, however, senses that because the dragon of meaninglessness drove Sledge to rock bottom, it must once again rear its gruesome head, that the story can't end until he is slapped in the face with the cruel absurdity of life—this time in all its soul-destroying force. The Obligatory Scene comes in the form of a hideous accident that kills his only child. If a drunk needed an excuse to pick up a bottle again, this would do. Indeed, his daughter's death plunges his ex-wife into a drugged stupor, but Sledge finds strength to go on.

The death of Sledge's daughter was "obligatory" in this sense: Suppose Horton Foote had written this scenario: The friendless alcoholic Sledge wakes up one morning with nothing to live for. He meets a woman, falls in love, likes her kid and wants to raise him, finds religion, and writes a new tune. FADE OUT. This isn't story; it's daydream. If the quest for meaning has brought about a profound inner change in Sledge, how is Foote to express this? Not through declarations of a change of heart. Self-explanatory dialogue convinces no one. It must be tested by an ultimate event, by pressure-filled character choice and action—the Obligatory (Crisis) Scene and Climax of the last act.

When I say that the audience "knows" an Obligatory Scene awaits, it doesn't know in an objective, checklist sense. If this event is mishandled, the audience won't exit thinking, "Lousy flick. No Obligatory Scene." Rather, the audience knows intuitively when something is missing. A lifetime of story ritual has taught the audience to anticipate that the forces of antagonism provoked at the Inciting Incident will build to the limit of human experience, and that the telling cannot end until the protagonist is in some sense face to face with these forces at their most powerful. Linking a story's Inciting Incident to its Crisis is an aspect of *Foreshadowing*, the arrangement of early events to prepare for later events. In fact, every choice you make—genre, setting, character, mood—foreshadows. With each line of dialogue or image of action you guide the audience to anticipate certain possibilities, so that when events arrive, they somehow satisfy the expectations you've created. The primary component of foreshadowing, however, is the projection of the Obligatory Scene (Crisis) into the audience's imaginaton by the Inciting Incident.

LOCATING THE INCITING INCIDENT

Where to place the Inciting Incident in the overall story design? As a rule of thumb, the first major event of the Central Plot occurs within the first 25 percent of the telling. This is a useful guide, no matter what the medium. How long would you make a theatre audience sit in the dark before engaging the story in a play? Would you make a reader plow through the first hundred pages of a four-hundred-page novel before finding the Central Plot? How long before irredeemable boredom sets in? The standard for a two-hour feature film is to locate the Central Plot's Inciting Incident somewhere within the first half-hour.

It could be the very first thing that happens. In the first thirty seconds of SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS Sullivan (Joel McCrea), a director of vapid but profitable films, defies studio bosses and sets out to make a film with social significance. Within the first two minutes of ON THE WATERFRONT Terry (Marlon Brando) unwittingly helps gangsters murder a friend.

Or much later. Twenty-seven minutes into TAXI DRIVER a teenage prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster), jumps into Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) taxi. Her abusive pimp, Matthew (Harvey Keitel) yanks her back to the street, igniting Travis's desire to rescue her. A half-hour into ROCKY an obscure club fighter, Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), agrees to fight Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) for the heavyweight championship of the world. When Sam plays "As Time Goes By" thirty-two minutes into CASABLANCA, Ilsa suddenly reappears in Rick's life, launching one of the screen's great love stories.

Or anywhere in between. However, if the Central Plot's Inciting Incident arrives much later than fifteen minutes into the film, boredom becomes a risk. Therefore, while the audience waits for the main plot, a subplot may be needed to engage their interest.

In TAXI DRIVER, the subplot of Travis's lunatic attempt at political assassination grips us. In ROCKY we're held by the ghetto love story of the painfully shy Adrian (Talia Shire) and the equally troubled Rocky. In CHINATOWN Gittes is duped into investigating Hollis Mulwray for adultery, and this subplot fascinates us as he struggles to untangle himself from the ruse. CASABLANCA's Act One hooks us with the Inciting Incidents of no fewer than five well-paced subplots.

But why make an audience sit through a subplot, waiting half an hour for the main plot to begin? ROCKY, for example, is in the *Sports Genre.* Why not start with two quick scenes: The heavyweight champion gives an obscure club fighter a shot at the title (setup), followed by Rocky choosing to take the fight (payoff). Why not open the film with its Central Plot?

Because if ROCKY's Inciting Incident were the first event we saw, our reaction would have been a shrug and "So what?" Therefore, Stallone uses the first half-hour to delineate Rocky's world and character with craft and economy, so that when Rocky agrees to the fight, the audience's reaction is strong and complete: "Him? That loser?!" They sit in shock, dreading the blood-soaked, bone-crushing defeat that lies ahead.

Bring in the Central Plot's Inciting Incident as soon as possible . . . but not until the moment is ripe.

An Inciting Incident must "hook" the audience, a deep and complete response. Their response must not only be emotional, but rational. This event must not only pull at audience's feelings, but cause them to ask the Major Dramatic Question and imagine the Obligatory Scene. Therefore, the location of the Central Plot's Inciting Incident is found in the answer to this question: How much does the audience need to know about the protagonist and his world to have a full response?

In some stories, nothing. If an Inciting Incident is archetypal in nature, it requires no setup and must occur immediately. The first sentence of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* reads: "One day Gregor Samsa awoke to discover he had been changed into a large cockroach." KRAMER VS. KRAMER: A wife walks out on her husband and leaves her child with him in the film's first two minutes. It needs no preparation, for we immediately understand the terrible impact that would have on anybody's life. JAWS: Shark eats swimmer, sheriff discovers body. These two scenes strike within the first seconds as we instantly grasp the horror.

Suppose Peter Benchley had opened JAWS with scenes of the sheriff quitting his job with the New York City police and moving out to Amity Island, looking forward to a peaceful life as a law officer in this resort town. We meet his family. We meet the town council and mayor. Early summer brings the tourists. Happy times. Then a shark eats somebody. And suppose Spielberg had been foolish enough to shoot all of this exposition, would we have seen it? No. Editor Verna Fields would have dumped it on the cutting room floor, explaining that all the audience needs to know about the sheriff, his family, the mayor, city council, and tourists will be nicely dramatized in the town's *reaction* to the attack . . . but JAWS starts with the shark.

As soon as possible, but not until the moment is ripe . . . Every story world and cast are different, therefore, every Inciting Incident is a different event located at a different point. If it arrives too soon, the audience may be confused. If it arrives too late, the audience may be bored. The instant the audience has a sufficient understanding of character and world to react fully, execute your Inciting Incident. Not a scene earlier, or a scene later. The exact moment is found as much by feeling as by analysis.

If we writers have a common fault in design and placement of the Inciting Incident, it's that we habitually delay the Central Plot while we pack our opening sequences with exposition. We consistently underestimate knowledge and life experience of the audience, laying out our characters and world with tedious details the filmgoer has already filled in with common sense.

Ingmar Bergman is one of the cinema's best directors because he is, in my opinion, the cinema's finest screenwriter. And the one quality that stands above all the others in Bergman's writing is his extreme economy—how little he tells us about anything. In his THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY, for example, all we ever learn about his four characters is that the father is a widowed, best-selling novelist, his son-in-law a doctor, his son a student, and his daughter a schizophrenic, suffering from the same illness that killed her mother. She's been released from a mental hospital to join her family for a few days by the sea, and that act alone upsets the balance of forces in all their lives, propelling a powerful drama from the first moments.

No book-signing scenes to help us understand that the father is a commercial but not critical success. No scenes in an operating room to demonstrate the doctor's profession. No boarding school scenes to explain how much the son needs his father. No electric shock treatment sessions to explain the daughter's anguish. Bergman knows that his urbane audience quickly grasps the implications behind best-seller, doctor, boarding school, and mental hospital . . . and that less is always more.

THE QUALITY OF THE INCITING INCIDENT

A favorite joke among film distributors goes like this: A typical European film opens with golden, sunlit clouds. Cut to even more splendid, bouffant clouds. Cut again to yet more magnificent, rubescent clouds. A Hollywood film opens with golden, billowing clouds. In the second shot a 747 jumbo jet comes out of the clouds. In the third, it explodes.

What quality of event need an Inciting Incident be?

ORDINARY PEOPLE carries a Central Plot and subplot that are often mistaken for each other because of their unconventional design. Conrad (Timothy Hutton) is the protagonist of the film's subplot with an Inciting Incident that takes the life of his older brother during a storm at sea. Conrad survives but is guilt-ridden and suicidal. The brother's death is in the Backstory and is dramatized in flashback at the Crisis/Climax of the subplot when Conrad relives the boating accident and chooses to live.

The Central Plot is driven by Conrad's father, Calvin (Donald Sutherland). Although seemingly passive, he is by definition the protagonist: the empathetic character with the will and capacity to pursue desire to the end of the line. Throughout the film, Calvin is on a quest for the cruel secret that haunts his family and makes reconciliation between his son and wife impossible. After a painful struggle, he finds it: His wife hates Conrad, not since the death of her older son, but since Conrad's birth.

At the Crisis Calvin confronts his wife, Beth (Mary Tyler Moore) with the truth: She's an obsessively orderly woman who wanted only one child. When her second son came along, she resented his craving for love when she could love only her firstborn. She's always hated Conrad, and he's always felt it. This is why he's been suicidal over his brother's death. Calvin then forces the Climax: She must learn to love Conrad or leave. Beth goes to a closet, packs a suitcase, and heads out the door. She cannot face her inability to love her son.

This Climax answers the Major Dramatic Question: Will the family solve its problems within itself or be torn apart? Working backward from it, we seek the Inciting Incident, the event that has upset the balance of Calvin's life and sent him on his quest.

The film opens with Conrad coming home from a psychiatric hospital, presumably cured of his suicidal neurosis. Calvin feels that the family has survived its loss and balance has been restored. The next morning Conrad, in a grim mood, sits opposite his father at the breakfast table. Beth puts a plate of French toast under her son's face. He refuses to eat. She snatches the plate away, marches to the sink, and scrapes his breakfast down a garbage disposal, muttering: "You can't keep French toast."

Director Robert Redford's camera cuts to the father as the man's life crashes. Calvin instantly senses that the hatred is back with a vengeance. Behind it hides something fearful. This chilling event grips the audience with dread as it reacts, thinking: "Look what she did to her child! He's just home from the hospital and she's doing this number on him."

Novelist Judith Guest and screenwriter Alvin Sargent gave Calvin a quiet characterization, a man who won't leap up from the table and try to bully wife and son into reconciliation. His first thought is to give them time and loving encouragements, such as the family photo scene. When he learns of Conrad's troubles at school, he hires a psychiatrist for him. He talks gently with his wife, hoping to understand.

Because Calvin is a hesitant, compassionate man, Sargent had to build the dynamic of the film's progressions around the subplot. Conrad's struggle with suicide is far more active than Calvin's subtle quest. So Sargent foregrounded the boy's subplot, giving it inordinate emphasis and screentime, while carefully increasing the momentum of the Central Plot in the background. By the time the subplot ends in the psychiatrist's office, Calvin is ready to bring the Central Plot to its devastating end. The point, however, is that the Inciting Incident of ORDINARY PEOPLE is triggered by a woman scraping French toast down a garbage disposal.

Henry James wrote brilliantly about story art in the prefaces to his novels, and once asked: "What, after all, is an event?" An event, he said, could be as little as a woman putting her hand on the table and looking at you "that certain way." In the right context, just a gesture and a look could mean, "I'll never see you again," or "I'll love you forever"—a life broken or made.

The quality of the Inciting Incident (for that matter, any event) must be germane to the world, characters, and genre surrounding it. Once it is conceived, the writer must concentrate on its function. Does the Inciting Incident radically upset the balance of forces in the protagonist's life? Does it arouse in the protagonist the desire to restore balance? Does it inspire in him the conscious desire for that object, material or immaterial, he feels would restore the balance? In a complex protagonist, does it also bring to life an unconscious desire that contradicts his conscious need? Does it launch the protagonist on a quest for his desire? Does it raise the Major Dramatic Question in the mind of the audience? Does it project an image of the Obligatory Scene? If it does all this, then it can be as little as a woman putting her hand on the table, looking at you "that certain way."

CREATING THE INCITING INCIDENT

The Climax of the last act is far and away the most difficult scene to create: It's the soul of the telling. If it doesn't work, the story doesn't work. But the second most difficult scene to write is the Central Plot's Inciting Incident. We rewrite this scene more than any other. So here are some questions to ask that should help bring it to mind.

What is the worst possible thing that could happen to my protagonist? How could that turn out to be the best possible thing that could happen to him?

KRAMER VS. KRAMER. The worst: Disaster strikes the workaholic Kramer (Dustin Hoffman) when his wife walks out on him and her child. The best: This turns out to be the shock he needed to fulfill his unconscious desire to be a loving human being.

AN UNMARRIED WOMAN. The worst: When her husband says he's leaving her for another woman, Erica (Jill Clayburgh) retches. The best: His exit turns out to be the freeing experience that allows this male-dependent woman to fulfill her unconscious desire for independence and self-possession.

Or: What's the best possible thing that could happen to my protagonist? How could it become the worst possible thing?

DEATH IN VENICE. Von Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde) has lost his wife and children to a plague. Since then he's buried himself in his work to the point of physical and mental collapse. His doctor sends him to the Venice spa to recuperate. The best: There he falls madly, helplessly in love . . . but with a boy. His passion for the impossibly beautiful youth, and the impossibility of it, leads to despair. The worst: When a new plague invades Venice and the child's mother hurries her son away, Von Aschenbach lingers to wait for death and escape from his misery.

THE GODFATHER, PART II. The best: After Michael (Al Pacino) is made Don of the Corleone crime family, he decides to take his family into the legitimate world. The worst: His ruthless enforcement of the mafia code of loyalty ends in the assassination of his closest associates, estrangement from his wife and children, and the murder of his brother, leaving him a hollowed-out, desolate man.

A story may turn more than one cycle of this pattern. What is the best? How could that become the worst? How could that reverse yet again into the protagonist's salvation? Or: What is the worst? How could that become the best? How could that lead the protagonist to damnation? We stretch toward the "bests" and "worsts" because story—when it is art—is not about the middle ground of human experience.

The impact of the Inciting Incident creates our opportunity to reach the limits of life. It's a kind of explosion. In *Action* genres it may be in fact an explosion; in other films, as muted as a smile. No matter how subtle or direct, it must upset the status quo of the protagonist and jolt his life from its existing pattern, so that chaos invades the character's universe. Out of this upheaval, you must find, at Climax, a resolution, for better or worse, that rearranges this universe into a new order.

9

ACT DESIGN

PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATIONS

The second element of the five-part design is *Progressive Complications*: that great sweeping body of story that spans from Inciting Incident to Crisis/Climax of the final act. To complicate means to make life difficult for characters. To complicate progressively means to generate more and more conflict as they face greater and greater forces of antagonism, creating a succession of events that passes points of no return.

Points of No Return

The Inciting Incident launches the protagonist on a quest for a conscious or unconscious Object of Desire to restore life's balance. To begin the pursuit of his desire, he takes a minimum, conservative action to provoke a positive response from his reality. But the effect of his action is to arouse forces of antagonism from inner, personal, or social/environmental Levels of Conflict that block his desire, cracking open the Gap between expectation and result.

When the Gap opens, the audience realizes that this is a point of no return. Minimal efforts won't work. The character can't restore the balance of life by taking lesser actions. Henceforth, all action like the character's first effort, actions of minor quality and magnitude, must be eliminated from the story.

Realizing he's at risk, the protagonist draws upon greater willpower and capacity to struggle through this gap and take a second, more difficult action. But again the effect is to provoke forces of antagonism, opening a second gap between expectation and result.

The audience now senses that this too is a point of no return. Moderate actions like the second won't succeed. Therefore, all actions of this magnitude and quality must be eliminated.

At greater risk, the character must adjust to his changed circumstances and take an action that demands even more willpower and personal capacity, expecting or at least hoping for a helpful or manageable reaction from his world. But once more the gap flies open as even more powerful forces of antagonism react to his third action.

Again, the audience recognizes that this is yet another point of no return. The more extreme actions won't get the character what he wants, so these too are canceled out of consideration.

Progressions build by drawing upon greater and greater capacities from characters, demanding greater and greater willpower from them, putting them at greater and greater risk, constantly passing points of no return in terms of the magnitude or quality of action.

A story must not retreat to actions of lesser quality or magnitude, but move progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

How many times have you had this experience? A film begins well, hooking you into the lives of the characters. It builds with strong interest over the first half-hour to a major Turning Point. But then forty or fifty minutes into the film, it starts to drag. Your eyes wander from the screen; you glance at your watch; you wish you'd bought more popcorn; you start paying attention to the anatomy of the person you came with. Perhaps the film gains pace again and finishes well, but for twenty or thirty flabby minutes in the middle you lost interest.

If you look closely at the soft bellies that hang out over the belt of so many films, you'll discover that this is where the writer's insight and imagination went limp. He couldn't build progressions, so in effect he put the story in retrograde. In the middle of Act Two he's given his characters lesser actions of the kind they've already done in Act One—not identical actions but actions of a similar size or kind: minimal, conservative, and by now trivial. As we watch, our instincts tell us that these actions didn't get the character what he wanted in Act One, therefore they're not going to get him what he wants in Act Two. The writer is recycling story and we're treading water.

The only way to keep a film's current flowing and rising is research—imagination, memory, fact. Generally, a feature-length Archplot is designed around forty to sixty scenes that conspire into twelve to eighteen sequences that build into three or more acts that top one another continuously to the end of the line. To create forty to sixty scenes and *not repeat yourself,* you need to invent hundreds. After sketching this mountain of material, tunnel to find those few gems that will build sequences and acts into memorable and moving points of no return. For if you devise only the forty to sixty scenes needed to fill the 120 pages of a screenplay, your work is almost certain to be antiprogressive and repetitious.

The Law of Conflict

When the protagonist steps out of the Inciting Incident, he enters a world governed by the Law of Conflict. To wit: *Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict.*

Put another way, conflict is to storytelling what sound is to music. Both story and music are temporal arts, and the single most difficult task of the temporal artist is to hook our interest, hold our uninterrupted concentration, then *carry us through time without an awareness of the passage of time.*

In music, this effect is accomplished through sound. Instruments or voices capture us and move us along, making time vanish. Suppose we were listening to a symphony and the orchestra suddenly fell silent. What would be the effect? First, confusion as we wonder why they've stopped, then very quickly we would hear in our imaginations the sound of a ticking clock. We would become acutely aware of the passage of time, and because time is so subjective, if the orchestra were silent for just three minutes, it would seem like thirty.

The music of story is conflict. As long as conflict engages our thoughts and emotions we travel through the hours unaware of the voyage. Then suddenly the film's over. We glance at our watches, amazed. But when conflict disappears, so do we. The pictorial interest of eye-pleasing photography or the aural pleasures of a beautiful score may hold us briefly, but if conflict is kept on hold for too long, our eyes leave the screen. And when our eyes leave the screen they take thought and emotion with them.

The Law of Conflict is more than an aesthetic principle; it is the soul of story. Story is metaphor for life, and to be alive is to be in seemingly perpetual conflict. As Jean-Paul Sartre expressed it, the essence of reality is scarcity, a universal and eternal lacking. There isn't enough of anything in this world to go around. Not enough food, not enough love, not enough justice, and never enough time. Time, as Heidegger observed, is the basic category of existence. We live in its ever-shrinking shadow, and if we are to achieve anything in our brief being that lets us die without feeling we've wasted our time, we will have to go into heady conflict with the forces of scarcity that deny our desires.

Writers who cannot grasp the truth of our transitory existence, who have been mislead by the counterfeit comforts of the modern world, who believe that life is easy once you know how to play the game, give conflict a false inflection. Their scripts fail for one of two reasons: either a glut of meaningless and absurdly violent conflict, or a vacancy of meaningful and honestly expressed conflict.

The former are exercises in turbo special effects, written by those who follow textbook imperatives to create conflict, but, because they're disinterested in or insensitive to the honest struggles of life, devise phony, overwrought excuses for mayhem.

The latter are tedious portraits written in reaction against conflict itself. These writers take the Pollyanna view that life would really be nice . . . if it weren't for conflict. Therefore, their films avoid it in favor of low-key depictions to suggest that if we learned to communicate a little better, be a little more charitable, respect the environment, humanity could return to paradise. But if history has taught us anything, it's that when toxic nightmare is finally cleaned up, the homeless provided shelter, and the world converted to solar energy, each of us will still be up to our eyebrows in mulch.

Writers at these extremes fail to realize that while the *quality* of conflict changes as it shifts from level to level, *the quantity of conflict in life is constant.* Something is always lacking. Like squeezing a balloon, the volume of conflict never changes, it just bulges in another direction. When we remove conflict from one level of life, it amplifies ten times over on another level.

If, for example, we manage to satisfy our external desires and find harmony with the world, in short order serenity turns to boredom. Now Sartre's "scarcity" is the absence of conflict itself. Boredom is the inner conflict we suffer when we lose desire, when we lack a lacking. What's worse, if we were to put on screen the conflictless existence of a character who, day-in, day-out, lives in placid contentment, the boredom in the audience would be palpably painful.

By and large, the struggle for physical survival has been eliminated for the educated classes of the industrialized nations. This security from the outside world gives us time to reflect on the world inside. Once housed, dressed, fed, and medicated, we take a breath and realize how incomplete we are as human beings. We want more than physical comfort, we want, of all things, happiness, and so begin the wars of the inner life.

If, as a writer, however, you find that the conflicts of mind, body, emotions, and soul do not interest you, then look into the Third World and see how the rest of humanity lives. The majority suffer short, painful existences, ridden with disease and hunger, terrorized by tyranny and lawless violence, without hope that life will ever be any different for their children.

If the depth and breadth of conflict in the inner life and the greater world do not move you, let this: death. Death is like a freight train in the future, heading toward us, closing the hours, second by second, between now and then. If we're to live with any sense of satisfaction, we must engage life's forces of antagonism before the train arrives.

An artist intent on creating works of lasting quality comes to realize that life isn't about subtle adjustments to stress, or hyperconflicts of master criminals with stolen nuclear devices holding cities for ransom. Life is about the ultimate questions of finding love and self-worth, of bringing serenity to inner chaos, of the titanic social inequities everywhere around us, of time running out. Life is conflict. That is its nature. The writer must decide where and how to orchestrate this struggle.

Complication Versus Complexity

To complicate a story the writer builds conflict progressively to the end of the line. Difficult enough. But the task increases geometrically when we take story from mere complication to full complexity.

Conflict may come, as we've seen, from any one, two, or all three of the levels of antagonism. To simply complicate a story means to place all conflict on only one of these three levels.

From the *Horror Film* to *Action/Adventure* to *Farce,* action heroes face conflict only on the extra-personal level. James Bond, for example, has no inner conflicts, nor would we mistake his encounters with women as personal—they're recreational.

COMPLICATION: CONFLICT AT ONLY ONE LEVEL

INNER CONFLICT — Stream of Consciousness

PERSONAL CONFLICT — Soap Opera

EXTRA-PERSONAL CONFLICT — Action/Adventure, Farce

Complicated films share two hallmarks. The first is a large cast. If the writer restricts the protagonist to social conflict, he'll need, as the advertising declares, "a cast of thousands." James Bond faces arch-villains along with their minions, assassins, femmes fatale, and armies, plus helper characters and civilians needing rescue—

more and more characters to build more and more powerful conflicts between Bond and society.

Second, a complicated film needs multiple sets and locations. If the writer progresses via physical conflict, he must keep changing the environment. A Bond film might start in a Viennese opera house, then go to the Himalayas, across the Sahara Desert, under the polar ice cap, up to the moon, and down to Broadway, giving Bond more and more opportunities for fascinating feats of derring-do.

Stories that are complicated only on the level of personal conflict are known as *Soap Opera,* an open-ended combination of *Domestic Drama* and *Love Story* in which every character in the story has an intimate relationship with every other character in the story—a multitude of family, friends, and lovers, all needing sets to house them: living rooms, bedrooms, offices, nightclubs, hospitals. *Soap Opera* characters have no inner or extra-personal conflicts. They suffer when they don't get what they want, but because they're either good people or bad, they rarely face true inner dilemmas. Society never intervenes in their air-conditioned worlds. If, for example, a murder should bring a detective, a representative of society, into the story, you can be certain that within a week this cop will have an intimate and personal relationship with every other character in the *Soap.*

Stories that are complicated only on the level of inner conflict are not films, plays, or conventional novels. They're prose works in the *Stream of Consciousness* genre, a verbalization of the inscape of thought and feeling. Again, a large cast. Even though we're placed inside a single character, that character's mind is populated with the memories and imaginings of everyone he has ever met or could hope to meet. What's more, the density of imagery in the *Stream of Consciousness* work, such as NAKED LUNCH, is so intense that locations change, as it were, three or four times in a single sentence. A barrage of places and faces pours through the reader's imagination, but these works are all on one, albeit richly subjective, level and, therefore, merely complicated.

COMPLEXITY: CONFLICT AT ALL THREE LEVELS

INNER CONFLICT
PERSONAL CONFLICT
EXTRA-PERSONAL CONFLICT

To achieve complexity the writer brings his characters into conflict on all three levels of life, often simultaneously. For example, the deceptively simple but complex writing of one of the most memorable events in any film for the last two decades: the French toast scene from KRAMER VS. KRAMER. This famous scene turns on a complex of three values: self-confidence, a child's trust and esteem for his father, and domestic survival. As the scene begins, all three are at the positive charge.

In the film's first moments Kramer discovers his wife has left him and his son. He's torn with an inner conflict that takes the form of doubts and fears that he's in over his head versus a male arrogance telling him whatever women do is easy. As he opens the scene, however, he's confident.

Kramer has personal conflict. His son is hysterical, afraid he'll starve without his mother to feed him. Kramer tries to calm his son, telling him not to worry, Mom will be back, but meantime it'll be fun, like camping out. The child dries his eyes, trusting his father's promises.

Finally, Kramer has extra-personal conflict. The kitchen is an alien world, but he strolls into it as if he were a French chef.

Perching his son on a stool, Kramer asks what he wants for breakfast and the kid says, "French toast." Kramer takes a breath, pulls out a frying pan, pours in some grease, puts the pan on the stove, and turns the flame to high while he looks for ingredients. He knows French toast involves eggs, so he searches the refrigerator and finds some, but doesn't know into what to break them. He rummages in the cupboard and comes down with a coffee mug that reads "Teddy."

The son sees the handwriting on the wall and warns Kramer that he's seen his mother do this and she doesn't use a mug. Kramer tells him it'll work. He cracks the eggs. Some actually gets into the mug, the rest makes a gooey mess . . . and the child starts to cry.

The grease starts to spatter in the frying pan and Kramer panics. It doesn't occur to him to turn off the gas; instead, he engages in a race against time. He bangs more eggs into the mug, rushes back to the refrigerator, grabs a quart of milk, and slops it up and over the brim of the mug. He finds a butter knife to break up the yolks, making an even gooier mess. The child can see he is not going to eat this morning and cries his eyes out. The grease is now smoking in the pan.

Kramer, desperate, angry, losing the fight to control his fears, grabs a slice of Wonder Bread, stares at it, and realizes it won't fit in the mug. He folds it in half and stuffs it in, coming up with a dripping handful of soggy bread, yolk, and milk that he flings at the griddle, spattering and burning him and the child. He snatches the pan from the stove, scalding his hand, clutches his son's arm, and pushes him through the door, saying, "We'll go to a restaurant."

Kramer's male arrogance is overwhelmed by his fears, his self-confidence turning positive to negative. He's humiliated in front of his frightened child, whose trust and esteem turn positive to negative. He's defeated by a seemingly animated kitchen, as blow by blow, eggs, grease, bread, milk, and pan send him stumbling out the door, turning domestic survival from positive to negative. With very little dialogue and the simple activity of a man trying to make breakfast for his son, the scene becomes one of the most memorable in film—a three-minute drama of a man in simultaneous conflict with the complexities of life.

Unless it's your ambition to write in the *Action* genres, *Soap Opera,* or *Stream of Consciousness* prose, my advice to most writers is to design relatively simple but complex stories. "Relatively simple" doesn't mean simplistic. It means beautifully turned and told stories restrained by these two principles: Do not proliferate characters; do not multiply locations. Rather than hopscotching through time, space, and people, discipline yourself to a reasonably contained cast and world, while you concentrate on creating a rich complexity.

Act Design

As a symphony unfolds in three, four, or more movements, so story is told in movements called *acts*—the macro-structure of story.

Beats, changing patterns of human behavior, build scenes. Ideally, every scene becomes a Turning Point in which the values at stake swing from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive, creating significant but *minor* change in their lives. A series of scenes build a sequence that culminates in a scene that has a *moderate* impact on the characters, turning or changing values for better or worse to a greater degree than any scene. A series of sequences builds an act that climaxes in a scene that creates a *major* reversal in the characters' lives, greater than any sequence accomplished.

In the *Poetics,* Aristotle deduces that there is a relationship between the size of the story—how long it takes to read or perform—and the number of major Turning Points necessary to tell it: the longer the work, the more major reversals. In other words, in his polite way, Aristotle is pleading, "Please don't bore us. Don't make us sit for hours on those hard marble seats listening to choral chants and laments while nothing actually happens."

Following Aristotle's principle: A story can be told in one act—a series of scenes that shape a few sequences that build up to one major reversal, ending the story. But if so, it must be brief. This is the prose short story, the one-act play, or the student or experimental film of perhaps five to twenty minutes.

A story can be told in two acts: two major reversals and it's over. But again it must be relatively brief: the sitcom, the novella, or hour-length plays such as Anthony Shaffer's *Black Comedy* and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie.*

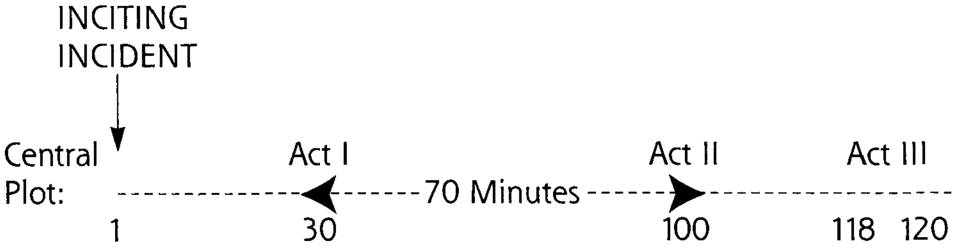
But when a story reaches a certain magnitude—the feature film, an hour-long TV episode, the full-length play, the novel—three acts is the minimum. Not because of an artificial convention, but to serve a profound purpose.

As audience we embrace the story artist and say: "I'd like a poetic experience in breadth and depth to the limits of life. But I'm a reasonable person. If I give you only a few minutes to read or witness your work, it would be unfair of me to demand that you to take me to the limit. Instead I'd like a moment of pleasure, an insight or two, no more than that. But if I give you important hours of my life, I expect you to be an artist of power who can reach the boundaries of experience."

In our effort to satisfy the audience's need, to tell stories that touch the innermost and outermost sources of life, two major reversals are never enough. No matter the setting or scope of the telling, no matter how international and epic or intimate and interior, *three* major reversals are the necessary minimum for a full-length work of narrative art to reach the end of the line.

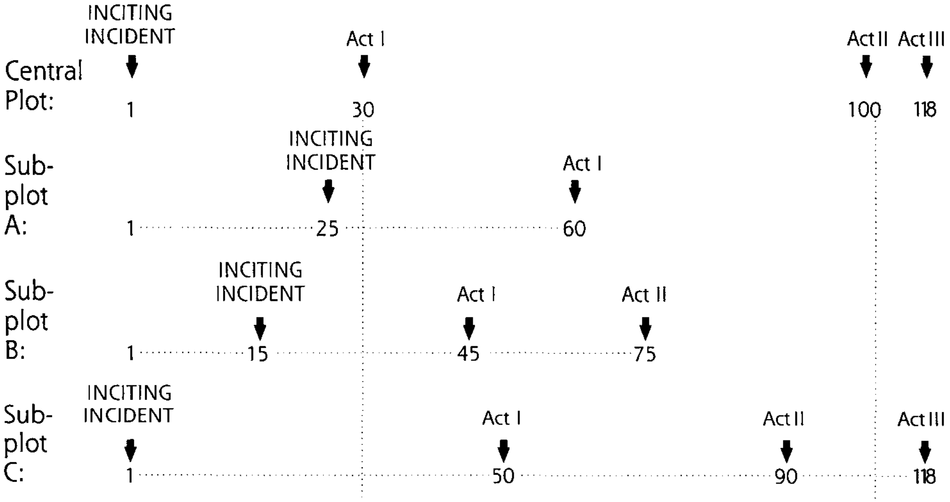
Consider these rhythms: Things were bad, then they were good—end of story. Or things were good, then they were bad—end of story. Or things were bad, then they were very bad—end of story. Or things were good, then they were very good—end of story. In all four cases we feel something's lacking. We know that the second event, whether positively or negatively charged, is neither the end nor the limit. Even if the second event kills the cast: Things were good (or bad), then everyone died—end of story—it's not enough. "Okay, they're all dead. Now what?" we're wondering. The third turn is missing and we know we haven't touched the limit until at least one more major reversal occurs. Therefore, the three-act story rhythm was the foundation of story art for centuries before Aristotle noted it.

But it's only a foundation, not a formula, so I'll begin with it, then delineate some of its infinite variations. The proportions I'll use are the rhythms of the feature film, but in principle they apply equally to the play and novel. Again, I caution that these are approximations, not formulas.



The first act, the opening movement, typically consumes about 25 percent of the telling, the Act One Climax occurring between twenty and thirty minutes into a 120-minute film. The last act wants to be the shortest of all. In the ideal last act we want to give the audience a sense of acceleration, a swiftly rising action to Climax. If the writer tries to stretch out the last act, the pace of acceleration is almost certain to slow in mid-movement. So last acts are generally brief, twenty minutes or less.

Let's say a 120-minute film places its Central Plot's Inciting Incident in the first minute, the Act One Climax at the thirty-minute point, has an eighteen-minute Act Three, and a two-minute Resolution to FADE OUT. This rhythm creates an Act Two that's seventy minutes long. If an otherwise well-told story bogs down, that's where it'll happen—as the writer sloshes through the swamps of the long second act. There are two possible solutions: Add subplots or more acts.

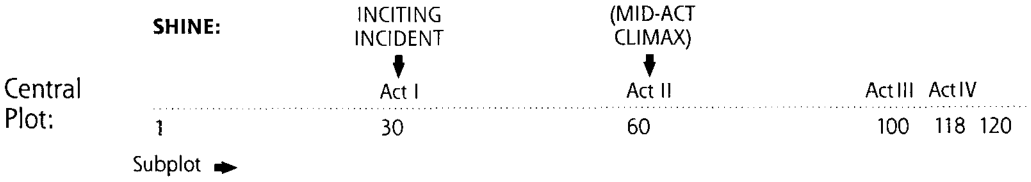

INCITING INCIDENT
Act I
Act II
Act III
Central Plot:
1
30
100
118
INCITING INCIDENT
Act I
Sub-plot A:
1
25
60
INCITING INCIDENT
Act I
Act II
Sub-plot B:
1
15
45
75
INCITING INCIDENT
Act I
Act II
Act III
Sub-plot C:
1
50
90
118

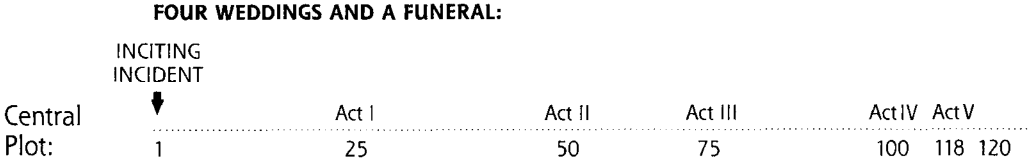
Subplots have their own act structure, although usually brief. Between the central plot's three-act design above, let's weave three subplots: a one-act Subplot A with an Inciting Incident twenty-five minutes into the film, climaxing and ending at sixty minutes; a two-act Subplot B with an Inciting Incident at the fifteen-minute point, an Act One Climax at forty-five minutes, ending with an Act Two Climax at seventy-five minutes; a three-act Subplot C is with its Inciting Incident happening inside the Inciting Incident of the Central Plot (lovers meet, for example, and start a subplot in the same scene cops discover the crime that launches the central plot), an Act One Climax at fifty minutes, an Act Two Climax at ninety minutes, and a third act climaxing inside the Central Plot's last Climax (the lovers decide to marry in the same scene that they apprehend the criminal).

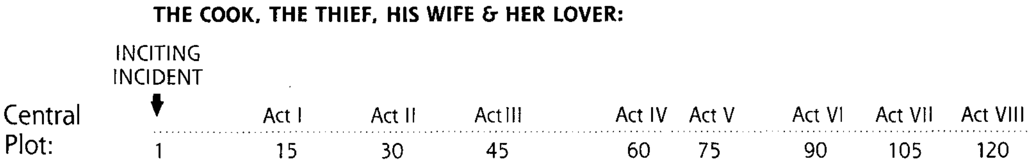
Although the Central Plot and three subplots may have up to four different protagonists, an audience could empathize with all of them, and each subplot raises its own Major Dramatic Question. So the interest and emotions of the audience are hooked, held, and amplified by four stories. What's more, the three subplots have five major reversals that fall between the Central Plot's Act One and Act Two climaxes—more than enough storytelling to keep the overall film progressing, deepen the involvement of the audience, and tighten the soft belly of the Central Plot's second act.

On the other hand, not every film needs or wants a subplot: THE FUGITIVE. How then does the writer solve the problem of the long second act? By creating more acts. *The three-act design is the minimum.* If the writer builds progressions to a major reversal at the halfway point, he breaks the story into four movements with no act more than thirty or forty minutes long. David's collapse after performing Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in SHINE is a superb example. In Hollywood this technique is known as the *Mid-Act Climax,* a term that sounds like sexual dysfunction, but means a major reversal in the middle of Act Two, expanding the design from three acts to an Ibsen-like rhythm of four acts, accelerating the mid-film pace.

A film could have a Shakespearean rhythm of five acts: FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL. Or more. RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK is in seven acts; THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE & HER LOVER in eight. These films turn a major reversal every fifteen or twenty minutes, decisively solving the long second act problem. But the five- to eight-act design is the exception, for the cure of one problem is the cause of others.


SHINE:
INCITING INCIDENT
(MID-ACT CLIMAX)
Central Plot:
Act I
Act II
Act III
Act IV
1
30
60
100
118
120
Subplot


FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL:
INCITING INCIDENT
Central Plot:
Act I
Act II
Act III
Act IV
Act V
1
25
50
75
100
118
120


THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE & HER LOVER:
INCITING INCIDENT
Central Plot:
Act I
Act II
Act III
Act IV
Act V
Act VI
Act VII
Act VIII
1
15
30
45
60
75
90
105
120

First, the multiplication of act climaxes invites clichés.

Generally, a three-act story requires four memorable scenes: the Inciting Incident that opens the telling, and an Act One, Act Two, and Act Three Climax. In the Inciting Incident of KRAMER VS. KRAMER Mrs. Kramer walks out on her husband and her son. Act One Climax: She returns, demanding custody of the child. Act Two Climax: The court awards custody of the son to his mother. Act Three Climax: Like her ex-husband, she realizes that they must act selflessly for the best interest of the child they love and returns the boy to Kramer. Four powerful turning points spanned with excellent scenes and sequences.

When the writer multiplies acts, he's forcing the invention of five, perhaps six, seven, eight, nine, or more brilliant scenes. This becomes a creative task beyond his reach, so he resorts to the clichés that infest so many action films.

Second, the multiplication of acts reduces the impact of climaxes and results in repetitiousness.

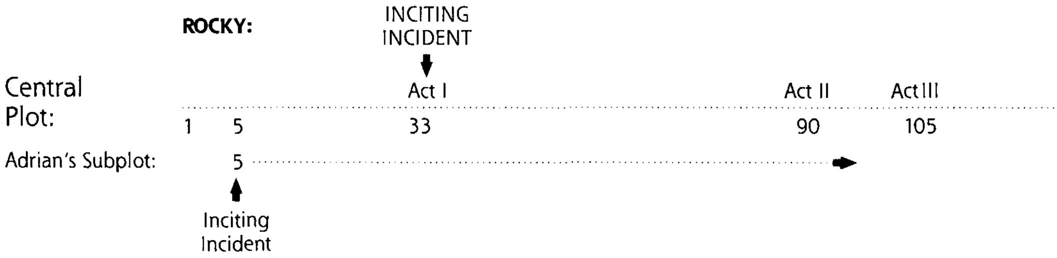
Even if the writer feels he's up to creating a major reversal every fifteen minutes, turning act climaxes on scenes of life and death, life and death, life and death, life and death, life and death, seven or eight times over, boredom sets in. Before too long the audience is yawning: "That's not a major turn. That's his day. Every fifteen minutes somebody tries to kill the guy."

What is major is relative to what is moderate and minor. If every scene screams to be heard, we go deaf. When too many scenes strive to be powerhouse climaxes, what should be major becomes minor, repetitious, running downhill to a halt. This is why a three-act Central Plot with subplots has become a kind of standard. It fits the creative powers of most writers, provides complexity, and avoids repetition.

Design Variations

First, stories vary according to the number of major reversals in the telling: from the one- or two-act design of Miniplots, LEAVING LAS VEGAS, through the three- or four-acts plus subplots of most Archplots, THE VERDICT, to the seven or eight acts of many action genres, SPEED, to the helter-skelter patterns of Antiplots, THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE, and beyond to Multiplot films that have no Central Plot, THE JOY LUCK CLUB, but may contain a dozen or more major Turning Points over their various story lines.

Second, the shapes of stories vary according to the placement of the Inciting Incident. Conventionally, the Inciting Incident occurs very early in the telling and progressions build to a major reversal at the Act One Climax twenty or thirty minutes later. This pattern requires the writer to place two major scenes in the first quarter of the film. However, the Inciting Incident may enter as late as twenty, thirty, or more minutes into the telling. ROCKY, for example, has a very late-arriving Central Plot Inciting Incident. The effect of this is that the Inciting Incident becomes, in effect, the first act Climax and serves two purposes.



This, however, cannot be done for the convenience of the writer. The only reason to delay the entrance of the Central Plot is the audience's need to know the protagonist at length so it can fully react to the Inciting Incident. If this is necessary, then a setup subplot must open the telling. ROCKY has one, the Adrian/Rocky *Love Story*; CASABLANCA uses five with Laszlo, Ugarte, Yvonne, and the Bulgarian wife as single protagonists and refugees as the plural protagonist. Story must be told to hold the audience while it waits for a late-arriving Central Plot to ripen.

Suppose, however, the ripe moment is reached somewhere between the first and thirtieth minute. Does a film then need a setup subplot to carry the opening? Maybe . . . maybe not. The Inciting Incident of THE WIZARD OF OZ occurs at the fifteen-minute mark when a cyclone carries Dorothy (Judy Garland) to Munchkinland. There's no subplot to set this up, rather we're held by dramatized exposition of her longing to go "somewhere over the rainbow." In ADAM'S RIB the Inciting Incident also arrives fifteen minutes into the film, as district attorney Adam Bonner (Spencer Tracy) and his defense attorney wife Amanda (Katharine Hepburn) discover themselves on opposing sides of a trial. In this case, the film opens with a setup subplot as defendant (Judy Holliday) discovers her husband's philandering and shoots him. This hooks and carries us to the Central Plot's Inciting Incident.

With an Inciting Incident at the fifteen-minute point, does the writer need a major reversal at the thirty-minute point? Maybe . . . maybe not. In THE WIZARD OF OZ Dorothy is threatened by the Wicked Witch of the West, given the red slippers, and sent on her quest along the yellow brick road fifteen minutes after the Inciting Incident. In ADAM'S RIB the next major reversal of the Central Plot happens forty minutes after the Inciting Incident when Amanda wins a key point in court. However, a relationship subplot complicates this stretch as a composer (David Wayne), to Adam's great annoyance, flirts openly with Amanda.

The rhythm of act movements is established by the location of the Central Plot's Inciting Incident. Act structure, therefore, varies enormously. The number and placement of the major reversals for both main plot and subplots are choices made in the creative play between artist and material, depending on quality and number of protagonists, sources of antagonism, genre, and, ultimately, the personality and worldview of the writer.

False Ending

Occasionally, especially in *Action* genres, at the Penultimate Act Climax or within the last act's movement, the writer creates a *False Ending:* a scene so seemingly complete we think for a moment the story is over. E.T. is dead—end of movie, we think. In ALIEN Ripley blows up her spaceship and escapes, we think. In ALIENS she blows up an entire planet and escapes, we hope. In BRAZIL Jonathan (Sam Lowry) rescues Kim (Jill Layton) from a tyrannical regime, the lovers embrace, happy ending . . . or is it?

TERMINATOR devised a double False Ending: Reese (Michael Biehn) and Sarah (Linda Hamilton) blow up the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) with a tankard of gasoline, its flesh burning away. The lovers celebrate. But then the chrome inner version of this half-man/half-robot rises out of the flames. Reese sacrifices his life to put a pipe bomb in the belly of the Terminator and blow it in half. But then the creature's torso revives and crawls claw over claw toward the wounded heroine until Sarah finally destroys him.

False Endings may even find their way into *Art Films.* Near the climax of JESUS OF MONTREAL Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), an actor playing Christ in a Passion Play, is bludgeoned by his falling crucifix. Other actors rush him unconscious to the emergency room, but he awakes, resurrected, we pray.

Hitchcock loved False Endings, placing them unconventionally early for shock effect. The "suicide" of Madeleine (Kim Novak) is the Mid-Act Climax of VERTIGO before she reappears as Judy. The shower murder of Marion (Janet Leigh) marks the Act One Climax of PSYCHO, suddenly shifting genres from *Caper* to *Psycho-Thriller* and switching protagonists from Marion to a plural protagonist of the dead woman's sister, lover, and a private eye.

For most films, however, the False Ending is inappropriate. Instead, the Penultimate Act Climax should intensify the Major Dramatic Question: "*Now* what's going to happen?"

Act Rhythm

Repetitiousness is the enemy of rhythm. The dynamics of story depend on the alternation of its value-charges. For example, the two most powerful scenes in a story are the last two act climaxes. Onscreen they're often only ten or fifteen minutes apart. Therefore, they cannot repeat the same charge. If the protagonist achieves his Object of Desire, making the last act's Story Climax positive, then the Penultimate Act Climax must be negative. You cannot set up an up-ending with an up-ending: "Things were wonderful . . . then they got even better!" Conversely, if the protagonist fails to achieve his desire, the Climax of the Penultimate Act cannot be negative. You cannot set up a down-ending with a down-ending: "Things were terrible . . . then they got even worse." When emotional experience repeats, the power of the second event is cut in half. And if the power of the Story Climax is halved, the power of the film is halved.

On the other hand, a story may climax in irony, an ending that's both positive and negative. What then must be the emotional charge of the Penultimate Climax? The answer's found in close study of the Story Climax, for although irony is somewhat positive, somewhat negative, it should never be balanced. If it is, the positive and negative values cancel each other out and the story ends in a bland neutrality.

For example, Othello finally achieves his desire: a wife who loves him and has never betrayed him with another man—positive. However, when he discovers this, it's too late because he's just murdered her—an overall negative irony. Mrs. Soffel goes to prison for the rest of her life—negative. But she goes into jail with her head up because she's achieved her desire, the transcendent romantic experience—an overall positive irony. With careful thought and feeling the writer studies his irony to make certain it leans one way or the other, and then designs a Penultimate Climax to contradict its overall emotional charge.

Working back from the Penultimate Climax to the opening scene, previous act climaxes are further apart, often with subplot and sequence climaxes coming into emotional play between them, creating a unique rhythm of positive and negative turnings. Consequently, although we know that the Ultimate and Penultimate Climaxes must contradict each other, from story to story there is no way to predict the charges of the other act climaxes. Each film finds its own rhythm and all variations are possible.

Subplots and Multiple Plots

A subplot receives less emphasis and screentime than a Central Plot, but often it's the invention of a subplot that lifts a troubled screenplay to a film worth making. WITNESS, for example, without its *Love Story* subplot of big-city cop and Amish widow would be a less than compelling *Thriller.* Multiplot films, on the other hand, never develop a Central Plot; rather they weave together a number of stories of subplot size. Between the Central Plot and its subplots or between the various plot lines of a Multiplot, four possible relationships come into play.

A subplot may be used to contradict the Controlling Idea of the Central Plot and thus enrich the film with irony.

Suppose you were writing a happy-ending *Love Story* with the Controlling Idea "Love triumphs because the lovers sacrifice their needs for each other." You believe in your characters, their passion and self-sacrifice, yet you feel the story's becoming too sweet, too pat. To balance the telling, you might then create a subplot of two other characters whose love ends tragically because they betray each other out of emotional greed. This down-ending subplot contradicts the up-ending Central Plot, making the film's overall meaning more complex and ironic: "Love cuts two ways: we possess it when we give it freedom, but destroy it with possessiveness."

Subplots may be used to resonate the Controlling Idea of the Central Plot and enrich the film with variations on a theme.

If a subplot expresses the same Controlling Idea as the main plot, but in a different, perhaps unusual way, it creates a variation that strengthens and reinforces the theme. All the many love stories in A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, for example, end happily—but some sweetly, some farcically, some sublimely.

The principle of thematic contradiction and variation is the genesis of Multiplot films. A Multiplot has no Central Plot Spine to structurally unify the telling. Instead, a number of plot lines either cross-cut, as in SHORT CUTS, or connect via a motif such as the twenty-dollar bill that passes from story to story in TWENTY BUCKS or the series of swimming pools that link the tales in THE SWIMMER—a collection of "ribs" but no individual plot line strong enough to carry from first scene to last. What then holds the film together? An idea.

PARENTHOOD plays variations on the notion that in the game of parenthood you cannot win. Steve Martin plays the world's most attentive father whose child still ends up in therapy. Jason Robards plays the world's most neglectful father whose kid comes back late in life needing him, then betraying him. Dianne Wiest portrays a mother who tries to make all the safe life decisions for her child, but the child knows better than she does. All parents can do is love their children, support them, pick them up when they fall. But there's no such thing as winning this game.

DINER resonates with the idea that men cannot communicate with women. Fenwick (Kevin Bacon) cannot bring himself to speak to a woman. Boogie (Mickey Rourke) talks nonstop to women, but only to get them into bed. Eddie (Steve Guttenberg) won't marry his fiancée until she can pass a test in football trivia. When Billy (Timothy Daly) faces his emotional issues with the woman he loves, he lets his guard down and talks honestly with her. Once able to communicate with a woman, he leaves his friends—a resolution that contradicts all others to add a layer of irony.

The Multiplot frames an image of a particular society, but, unlike the static Nonplot, it weaves small stories around an idea, so that these group photos vibrate with energy. DO THE RIGHT THING depicts the universality of big-city racism; SHORT CUTS landscapes the soullessness of the American middle class; EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN paints a triptych of the father/daughter relationship. Multiplot gives the writer the best of both worlds: a portrait that captures the essence of a culture or community along with ample narrative drive to compel interest.

When the Central Plot's Inciting Incident must be delayed, a setup subplot may be needed to open the storytelling.

A late-arriving Central Plot—ROCKY, CHINATOWN, CASABLANCA—leaves a story vacuum for the first thirty minutes that must be filled by subplots to engage the audience's interest and acquaint it with the protagonist and his world in order to evoke a full reaction to its Inciting Incident. A setup subplot dramatizes the Central Plot's exposition so that it's absorbed in a fluid, indirect manner.

A subplot may be used to complicate the Central Plot.

This fourth relationship is the most important: use of the subplot as an additional source of antagonism. For example, the *Love Story* typically found inside *Crime Stories*: In SEA OF LOVE Frank Keller (Al Pacino) falls in love with Helen (Ellen Barkin). While hunting down her psychotic ex-husband, he risks his life to protect the woman he loves. In BLACK WIDOW a federal agent (Debra Winger) becomes infatuated with the killer herself (Theresa Russell). In THE VERDICT, a *Courtroom Drama,* Frank (Paul Newman) falls in love with Laura (Charlotte Rampling), a spy from the opposing law firm. These subplots add dimension to characters, create comic or romantic relief from the tensions or violence of the Central Plot, but their primary purpose is to make life more difficult for the protagonist.

The balance of emphasis between the Central Plot and subplot has to be carefully controlled, or the writer risks losing focus on the primary story. A setup subplot is particularly dangerous in that it may mislead the audience as to genre. The opening *Love Story* of ROCKY, for example, was carefully handled so that we knew we were heading for the *Sports Genre.*

Additionally, if the protagonists of the Central Plot and subplot are not the same character, care must be taken not to draw too much empathy to the subplot's protagonist. CASABLANCA, for example, has a *Political Drama* subplot involving the fate of Victor Laszlo (Paul Heinreid) and a *Thriller* subplot centered on Ugarte (Peter Lorre), but both were deemphasized to keep the emotional spotlight on the Central Plot's *Love Story* of Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). To deemphasize a subplot, some of its elements—Inciting Incident, act climaxes, Crisis, Climax, or Resolution—may be kept offscreen.

If, on the other hand, as you develop your screenplay, your subplot seems to demand greater focus and empathy, then reconsider the overall design and turn your subplot into the Central Plot.

If a subplot doesn't thematically contradict or resonate the Controlling Idea of the main plot, if it doesn't set up the introduction of the main plot's Inciting Incident, or complicate the action on the main plot, if it merely runs alongside, it will split the story down the middle and destroy its effect. The audience understands the principle of aesthetic unity. It knows that every story element is there because of the relationship it strikes to every other element. This relationship, structural or thematic, holds the work together. If the audience can't find it, it'll disengage from the story and consciously try to force a unity. When this fails, it sits in confusion.

In the screen adaptation of the best-selling *Psycho-Thriller* THE FIRST DEADLY SIN, the Central Plot takes a police lieutenant (Frank Sinatra) on the hunt for a serial killer. In a subplot, his wife (Faye Dunaway) is in intensive care with only weeks to live. The detective hunts for the killer, then commiserates with his dying wife; he hunts the killer, then reads to his wife; he hunts for the killer some more, then visits her in the hospital again. Before long this alternating story design ignited a burning curiosity in the audience: When will the *killer* come to the hospital? But he never does. Instead, the wife dies, the cop catches the killer, plot and subplot never connect, and the audience is left in disgruntled confusion.

In Lawrence Sanders' novel, however, this design succeeds with powerful effect because on the page main plot and subplot complicate each other *in the mind of the protagonist*: the cop's fierce preoccupation with a psychotic killer conflicts with a desperate desire to give his wife the comfort she needs, while at the same time his dread of losing her and the pain of watching the woman he loves suffer contradicts his need for clear, rational deduction in pursuit of a ruthless but brilliant lunatic. A novelist can enter a character's mind and in first- or third-person delineate inner conflict directly in prose description. The screenwriter cannot.

The screenwriting is the art of making the mental *physical*. We create visual correlatives for inner conflict—not dialogue or narration to describe ideas and emotions, but images of character choice and action to indirectly and ineffably express the thoughts and feelings within. Therefore, the interior life a novel must be reinvented for the screen.

In adapting Manuel Puig's novel KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN, screenwriter Leonard Schrader was faced with a similar structural problem. Once again, main plot and subplot complicate one another only within the mind of the protagonist. The subplot, in fact, is Luis' (William Hurt) fantasies of the Spider Woman (Sonia Braga), a character he idolizes, drawn from films he vaguely remembers and greatly embellishes. Schrader visualizes Luis' dreams and desires by turning his fantasy into a film-within-the-film.

Still, these two plots cannot causally interact because they're on different planes of reality. They are connected, however, by making the subplot's story mirror the Central Plot. This gives Luis the chance to act out his fantasy in reality. At that moment the two plots collide in Luis' psyche and the audience imagines the emotional battle raging within: Will Luis do in life what the Spider Woman did in his dreams? Will he too betray the man he loves? What's more, the two plotlines ironize the Controlling Idea of *Love Through Self-sacrifice* and give the film an added thematic unity.

There's yet another revealing exception in the design of KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN. In principle, the Central Plot's Inciting Incident must be onscreen. But here the Inciting Incident is not revealed until the Mid-Act Climax. In the Backstory Luis, a homosexual convict imprisoned in a fascist dictatorship, is called into the warden's office and made this offer: A leftist revolutionary, Valentin (Raul Julia), will be put in his cell. If Luis spies on him and gets valuable information, the warden will give Luis his freedom. The audience, unaware of this deal, waits through the first hour of the film to finally discover this Central Plot when Luis visits the warden asking for medicine and camomile tea for the ailing Valentin.

For many this film began so tediously they nearly walked out. So why not open conventionally with the Inciting Incident, as does the novel, and start the story with a strong hook? Because, if

Schrader had placed the scene in which Luis agrees to spy on a freedom fighter at the opening of the film, the audience would have instantly hated the protagonist. With a choice of a fast opening versus empathy for the protagonist, the screenwriter violated the design of the novel. While the novelist used inner narration to gain empathy, the screenwriter knew that he would first have to convince the audience that Luis loved Valentin before revealing Luis' pact with the fascists. The right choice. Without empathy the film would be a hollow exercise in exotic photography.

Faced with irreconcilable choices, such as pace versus empathy, the wise writer redesigns the story to preserve what's vital. You're free to break or bend convention, but for one reason only: *to put something more important in its place.*

10

SCENE DESIGN

This chapter focuses on the components of scene design: *Turning Points, Setups/Payoffs, Emotional Dynamics,* and *Choice.* Chapter 11 will analyze two scenes to demonstrate how Beats, changing character behaviors, shape a scene's inner life.

TURNING POINTS

A scene is a story in miniature—an action through conflict in a unity or continuity of time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life. In theory there's virtually no limit to a scene's length or locations. A scene may be infinitesimal. In the right context a scene consisting of a single shot in which a hand turns over a playing card could express great change. Conversely, ten minutes of action spread over a dozen sites on a battlefield may accomplish much less. No matter locations or length, a scene is unified around desire, action, conflict, and change.

In each scene a character pursues a desire related to his immediate time and place. But this *Scene-Objective* must be an aspect of his *Super-Objective* or Spine, the story-long quest that spans from Inciting Incident to Story Climax. Within the scene, the character acts on his Scene-Objective by choosing under pressure to take one action or another. However, from any or all levels of conflict comes a reaction he didn't anticipate. The effect is to crack open the gap between expectation and result, turning his outer fortunes, inner life, or both from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive in terms of values the audience understands are at risk.

A scene causes change in a minor, albeit significant way. A *Sequence Climax* is a scene that causes a moderate reversal—change with more impact than a scene. An *Act Climax* is a scene that causes a major reversal—change with greater impact than Sequence Climax. Accordingly, we never write a scene that's merely a flat, static display of exposition; rather we strive for this ideal: to create a story design in which every scene is a minor, moderate, or major *Turning Point.*

TRADING PLACES: The value at stake is wealth. Inspired by *Porgy and Bess,* Billy Ray Valentine (Eddie Murphy) begs on the streets, pretending to be a paraplegic on a skateboard. A gap opens when police try to bust him, then widens enormously when two elderly businessmen, the Duke brothers (Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche), suddenly intervene with the cops to save him. Billy's begging has caused his world to react differently and more powerfully than he expected. He doesn't resist, but wisely chooses to surrender to the gap. CUT TO: A walnut-paneled office where the Duke brothers have dressed him in a three-piece suit and made him a commodities broker. Billy's financial life goes from beggar to broker around this delightful Turning Point.

WALL STREET: The values at stake are wealth and honesty. A young stockbroker, Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), secures a meeting with billionaire Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas). Bud lives from paycheck to paycheck, but his integrity is intact. When he proposes legitimate business ideas, his sales pitch provokes forces of antagonism he couldn't anticipate as Gekko retorts: "Tell me something I don't know." Suddenly Bud realizes Gekko doesn't want to do honest business. He pauses, then reveals a corporate secret that his own father had told him. Bud chooses to join Gekko in an unlawful conspiracy, reversing his inner nature from honest to criminal and his fortunes from poor to rich around this powerful and ironic Turning Point.

The effects of Turning Points are fourfold: *surprise, increased curiosity, insight,* and *new direction.*

When a gap opens between expectation and result, it jolts the audience with surprise. The world has reacted in a way neither character nor audience had foreseen. This moment of shock instantly provokes curiosity as the audience wonders "Why?" TRADING PLACES: Why are these two old men saving this beggar from the police? WALL STREET: Why is Gekko saying: "Tell me something I don't know." In an effort to satisfy its curiosity, the audience rushes back through what story it's seen so far, seeking answers. In a beautifully designed story, these answers have been quietly but carefully layered in.

TRADING PLACES: Our thoughts flit back to previous scenes with the Duke brothers and we realize that these old men are so bored with life they'll use their wealth to play sadistic games. Further, they must have seen a spark of genius in this beggar or they wouldn't have picked him to be their pawn.

WALL STREET: The "why?" provoked by Gekko's "Tell me something I don't know" is instantly answered by this insight: Of course Gekko's a billionaire, he's a crook. Almost no one becomes immensely rich honestly. He too likes games . . . of a criminal kind. When Bud joins him, our memory dashes back to previous scenes at his office, and we realize that Bud was too ambitious and greedy—ripe for a fall.

The nimble and perceptive mind of the audience finds these answers in a flash of understanding. The question "Why?" propels it back through the story, and what it's seen so far instantly clicks into a new configuration; it experiences a rush of insight into character and world, a satisfying layer of hidden truth.

Insight adds to curiosity. This new understanding amplifies the questions "What's going to happen next?" and "How will this turn out?" This effect, true in all genres, is vividly clear in *Crime Stories.* Someone goes to a closet for a clean shirt and a dead body falls out. This huge gap triggers a fusillade of questions: "Who committed this murder? How? When? Why? Will the killer be caught?" The writer must now satisfy the curiosity he's created. From each point of changed value, he must move his story in a new direction to create Turning Points yet to come.

KRAMER VS. KRAMER: The moment we see that a thirty-two-year-old man can't make breakfast the scene turns. The question "Why?" sends us back through the few minutes of film that precede the gap. Armed with our life experience and common sense, we seek answers.

First, Kramer's a workaholic, but many workaholics make excellent breakfasts at five A.M. before anyone else is up. More, he's never contributed to his family's domestic life, but many men don't and their wives remain loyal, respecting their husbands' efforts to provide income. Our deeper insight is this: Kramer is a child. He's a spoiled-rotten brat whose mother always made breakfast for him. Later her role was filled by girlfriends and waitresses. Now he's turned his wife into a waitress/mother. Women have spoiled Kramer all his life and he's been only too happy to let them. Joanna Kramer was, in essence, raising two children, and overwhelmed by the impossibility of a mature relationship, she abandoned the marriage. What's more, we feel she was right to do it. New direction: Kramer's growth into manhood.

The Climax of THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK propels the longest rush for insight I know. As Darth Vader (David Prowse/James Earl Jones) and Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) fight to the death with light sabers, Vader steps back and says: "You can't kill me, Luke, I'm your father." The word "father" explodes one of the most famous gaps in film history and hurls the audience back through two whole films separated by three years. Instantly we grasp why Ben Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) was so worried about what would happen if Darth and Luke ever met face to face. We know why Yoda (voice of Frank Oz) was so desperate to teach Luke command of the Force. We realize why Luke's had so many close escapes: His father has been secretly protecting him. Two films that made perfect sense to this moment now have a new, deeper layer of meaning. New direction: RETURN OF THE JEDI.

CHINATOWN: Before the Act Two Climax we believe that Mulwray was murdered either for financial gain or in a jealous rage. But when Evelyn says: "She's my sister and my daughter . . ." the gap splits with a shock. To understand her words, we race back through the film and gain a powerful set of insights: incest between father and daughter, the real motivation for the murder, and the identity of the killer. New direction: the corkscrew twists of Act Three.

The Question of Self-Expression

A storyteller puts a friendly arm around the audience, saying: "Let me show you something." He takes us to a scene, such as the one in CHINATOWN, and says: "Watch Gittes drive to Santa Monica, intent on arresting Evelyn. When he knocks on her door, do you think he'll be invited in? Watch this. Now the beautiful Evelyn comes downstairs, happy to see him. Think he'll soften and let her off the hook? Watch this. Next she fights to protect her secret. Think she'll keep it? Watch this. As he listens to her confession, will he help her or arrest her? Watch this."

The storyteller leads us into expectation, makes us think we understand, then cracks open reality, creating surprise and curiosity, sending us back through his story again and again. On each trip back, we gain deeper and deeper insight into the natures of his characters and their world—a sudden awareness of the ineffable truths that lie hidden beneath the film's images. He then takes his story in a new direction in an ever-escalating progression of such moments.

To tell story is to make a promise: If you give me your concentration, I'll give you surprise followed by the pleasure of discovering life, its pains and joys, at levels and in directions you have never imagined. And most important, this must be done with such seeming ease and naturalness that we lead the audience to these discoveries as if spontaneously. The effect of a beautifully turned moment is that filmgoers experience a rush of knowledge *as if they did it for themselves.* In a sense they did. Insight is the audience's reward for paying attention, and a beautifully designed story delivers this pleasure scene after scene after scene.

Yet, if we were to ask writers how they express themselves, more often than not they'll reply: "With my words. My descriptions of the world and the dialogue I create for my characters. I'm a writer. I express myself in language." But language is merely our text. First, last, and always, self-expression occurs in the flood of insight that pours out of a Turning Point. Here the writer opens his arms to the world, saying: "This is my vision of life, of the nature of the human beings that inhabit my world. This is what I think happens to people in these circumstances for these reasons. My ideas, my emotions. Me." Our most powerful means of self-expression is the unique way we turn the story.

Then come words. We apply our literary talent with vividness and skill, so that when a beautifully written scene is acted, the audience is carried willingly and pleasurably through our Turning Points. As important as language is, however, it's only the surface by which we capture the reader to lead him to the inner life of the story. Language is a tool for self-expression and must never become a decorative end of its own.

Imagine now the difficulties of designing a story so that thirty, forty, fifty times over, scenes turn in minor, moderate, or major ways, each expressing an aspect of our vision. This is why weak storytelling resorts to substituting information for insight. Why many writers choose to explain their meanings out of the mouths of their characters, or worse, in voice-over narration. Such writing is always inadequate. It forces characters to a phony, self-conscious knowledge rarely found in actuality. More important, even exquisite, perceptive prose cannot substitute for the global insight that floods the mind when we match our life experiences against an artist's well-placed setup.

SETUPS/PAYOFFS

To express our vision scene by scene we crack open the surface of our fictional reality and send the audience back to gain insight. These insights, therefore, must be shaped into *Setups* and *Payoffs*. To set up means to layer in knowledge; to pay off means to close the gap by delivering that knowledge to the audience. When the gap between expectation and result propels the audience back through the story seeking answers, it can only find them if the writer has prepared or planted these insights in the work.

CHINATOWN: When Evelyn Mulwray says: "She's my sister and my daughter," we instantly remember a scene between her father and Gittes in which the detective asks Noah Cross what he and his son-in-law were arguing about the day before Mulwray was murdered. Cross replies, "My daughter." The first time we hear this, we think he means Evelyn. In a flash, we now realize he meant Katherine, his daughter by his daughter. Cross said it knowing that Gittes would draw the wrong conclusion, and, by implication, would suspect Evelyn of the murder he committed.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: When Darth Vader reveals that he's Luke's father, we rush back to the scenes in which Ben Kenobi and Yoda are greatly troubled over Luke's command of the Force, fearing, we presume, for the young man's safety. We now realize that Luke's mentors were actually concerned for his soul, dreading that his father would seduce him to the "dark side."

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS: John L. Sullivan is a film director with a string of hits such as *So Long, Sarong* and *Ants in Your Pants of 1939*. Conscience-stricken by the appalling condition of the world, Sullivan determines that his next film must have "social significance." Angry studio bosses point out that he's from Hollywood and therefore doesn't know anything about "social significance."

So Sullivan decides to do research. He trudges off into America, followed by an air-conditioned travel van, equipped with his butler, cook, secretary, girlfriend, and a press agent intent on turning Sullivan's lunatic adventure into a publicity stunt. Then, in a case of mistaken identity, Sullivan's thrown on a chain gang in the swamps of Louisiana. Suddenly he's up to his nostrils in "social significance" without a dime to call his agent.

One evening Sullivan hears uproarious laughter coming from a building in the prison compound and discovers a makeshift movie theatre filled with his fellow prisoners laughing themselves helpless at a Mickey Mouse cartoon. His face drops as he realizes that these men do not need "social significance" from him. They have more than enough in their lives already. What they need is what he does best—good light entertainment.

With this brilliant reversal, we're swept back through the film coming to Sullivan's insight . . . and much more. As we gather in all the scenes that satirize Hollywood aristocracy, we realize that commercial films that presume to instruct society on how to solve its shortcomings are certain to be false. For, with few exceptions, most filmmakers, like Sullivan, are not interested in the suffering poor as much as the picturesque poor.

Setups must be handled with great care. They must be planted in such a way that when the audience first sees them, they have one meaning, but with a rush of insight, they take on a second, more important meaning. It's possible, in fact, that a single setup may have meanings hidden to a third or fourth level.

CHINATOWN: When we meet Noah Cross, he's a murder suspect, but he's also a father worried about his daughter. When Evelyn reveals their incest, we then realize Cross's true concern is Katherine. In Act Three, when Cross uses his wealth to block Gittes and capture Katherine, we realize that under Cross's previous scenes lurked a third level, a madness driven by the virtually omnipotent power to escape justice while committing murder. In the final scene, when Cross draws Katherine into the shadows of Chinatown, we realize that festering under all this grotesque corruption has been Cross's lust to have incest with the offspring of his own incest.

Setups must be planted firmly enough so that when the audience's mind hurls back, they're remembered. If setups are too subtle, the audience will miss the point. If too heavy-handed, the audience will see the Turning Point coming a mile away. Turning Points fail when we overprepare the obvious and underprepare the unusual.

Additionally, the firmness of the setup must be adjusted to the target audience. We set up more prominently for youth audiences, because they're not as story literate as middle-aged filmgoers. Bergman, for example, is difficult for the young—not because they couldn't grasp his ideas if they were explained, but because Bergman never explains. He dramatizes his ideas subtly, using setups intended for the well-educated, socially experienced, and psychologically sophisticated.

Once the setup closes the gap, that payoff will, in all probability, become yet another setup for payoffs ahead.

CHINATOWN: When Evelyn reveals her child by incest, she repeatedly warns Gittes that her father is dangerous, that Gittes doesn't know what he's dealing with. We then realize that Cross killed Mulwray in a fight for possession of the child. This Act Two payoff sets up an Act Three Climax in which Gittes fails to apprehend Cross, Evelyn is killed, and the father/grandfather pulls the terrified Katherine into the darkness.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: When Darth Vader reveals himself to Luke, this pays off multiple setups strung back through two films. In an instant, however, this also becomes the setup for Luke's next action. What will the young hero do? He chooses to try to kill his father, but Darth Vader cuts off his son's hand—a payoff to set up the next action. Now defeated, what will Luke do? He hurls himself out of the sky city, trying to commit an honorable suicide—a payoff to set up the next action. Will he die? No, he's rescued virtually in mid-air by his friends. This stroke of luck pays off the suicide and becomes the setup for a third film to resolve the conflict between father and son.

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS: When Sullivan realizes what a pretentious fool he's been, this pays off all the arrogant folly underlying the previous acts. It in turn sets up his next action. How will he escape the chain gang? His discovery of who he really is puts his head back in the Hollywood groove. He realizes, like any Hollywood pro, that the way out of prison, indeed out of any trouble, is publicity. Sullivan confesses to a murder he didn't commit to get back into court and the limelight of the press so the studio bosses and their powerhouse attorneys can rescue him. This payoff sets up the Resolution scene where we see Sullivan back in the Hollywood harness, making the fluffy entertainment films he has always made—but now he knows why.

The juggling act of setting up, paying off, setting up again and paying off again often sparks our most creative flashes.

Suppose you were developing a story about orphaned brothers, Mark and Michael, who are raised from infancy in a brutal institution. The brothers are inseparable, protecting and supporting each other through the years. Then they escape the orphanage. Now on the streets they struggle to survive while always defending each other. Mark and Michael love each other, and you love them. But you have a problem: no story. This is a portrait entitled: "Two brothers against the world." The only variation in the repetitious demonstration of their fraternal loyalty is its location. Nothing essential changes.

But, as you stare at your open-ended chain-link of episodes, you have a crazy idea: "What if Mark stabbed Michael in the back? Ripped him off, took his money, his girl . . ." Now you're pacing, arguing: "That's stupid! They love each other. Fought the world together. Makes no sense! Still, it'd be great. Forget it. But it'd be a hell of a scene. Cut it out. It's not logical!"

Then the light goes on: "I could make it logical. I could go back through everything and layer that in. Two brothers against the world? What about Cain and Abel? Sibling rivalry? I could rewrite from the opening and under every scene slip a bitter taste of envy in Mark, superiority and arrogance in Michael. All quietly there behind the sweet loyalty. If I do it well, when Mark betrays Mike, the audience will glimpse that repressed jealousy in Mark and it'll all make sense."

Now your characters aren't repeating but growing. Perhaps you realize you're finally expressing what you really feel toward your own brother and couldn't admit. Still, it's not over. Suddenly, out of the blue, a second thought: "If Mark betrays Mike, that could be the Penultimate Climax. And that Climax could set up a last act Story Climax in which Mike takes his revenge and . . ." You've found your story because you've allowed yourself to think the unthinkable. In storytelling, logic is retroactive.

In story, unlike life, you can always go back and fix it. You can set up what may seem absurd and make it rational. Reasoning is secondary and postcreativity. Primary and preconditional to everything else is imagination—the willingness to think any crazy idea, to let images that may or may not make sense find their way to you.

Nine out of ten will be useless. Yet one illogical idea may put butterflies in your belly, a flutter that's telling you something wonderful is hidden in this mad notion. In an intuitive flash you see the connection and realize you can go back and make it make sense. Logic is child's play. Imagination takes you to the screen.

EMOTIONAL TRANSITIONS

We do not move the emotions of an audience by putting glistening tears in a character's eyes, by writing exuberant dialogue so an actor can recite his joy, by describing an erotic embrace, or by calling for angry music. Rather, we render the precise experience necessary to *cause* an emotion, then take the audience through that experience. For Turning Points not only deliver insight, they create the dynamics of emotion.

The understanding of how we create the audience's emotional experience begins with the realization that there are only two emotions—pleasure and pain. Each has its variations: joy, love, happiness, rapture, fun, ecstasy, thrill, bliss, and many others on one hand, and anguish, dread, anxiety, terror, grief, humiliation, malaise, misery, stress, remorse, and many others on the other hand. But at heart life gives us only one or the other.

As audience, we experience an emotion when the telling takes us through a transition of values. First, we must empathize with the character. Second, we must know what the character wants and want the character to have it. Third, we must understand the values at stake in the character's life. Within these conditions, a change in values moves our emotions.

Suppose a comedy were to begin with a poverty-stricken protagonist at the negative in terms of the value of wealth. Then over scene, sequence, or act, his life undergoes change to the positive, a transition from poor to rich. As the audience watches this character move toward his desire, the transition from less to more will lift it into a positive emotional experience.

As soon as this plateau is reached, however, emotion quickly dissipates. An emotion is a relatively short-term, energetic experience that peaks and burns and is over. Now the audience is thinking: "Terrific. He's rich. What happens next?"

Next, the story must turn in a new direction to shape a transition from positive to negative that's deeper than his previous penniless state. Perhaps the protagonist falls from riches into debt to the mafia, far worse than poverty. As this transition moves from more to less than nothing, the audience will have a negative emotional response. However, once the protagonist owes all to a loan shark, the audience's emotion wanes as it thinks: "Bad move. He blew the money and owes the mob. What's going to happen next?"

Now the story must turn in yet another new direction. Perhaps he escapes his debt by impersonating the Don and taking over the mob. As the telling makes the transition from the doubly negative to the ironically positive, the audience has an even stronger positive emotion. Story must create these dynamic alternations between positive and negative emotion in order to obey the *Law of Diminishing Returns.*

The Law of Diminishing Returns, true in life as well as in story, is this: *The more often we experience something, the less effect it has.* Emotional experience, in other words, cannot be repeated back-to-back with effect. The first ice cream cone tastes great; the second isn't bad; the third makes you sick. The first time we experience an emotion or sensation it has its full effect. If we try to repeat this experience immediately, it has half or less than half of its full effect. If we go straight to the same emotion for the third time, it not only doesn't have the original effect, it delivers the opposite effect.

Suppose a story contains three tragic scenes contiguously. What would be the effect? In the first, we shed tears; in the second, we sniffle; in the third, we laugh . . . loudly. Not because the third scene isn't sad—it may be the saddest of the three—but because the previous two have drained us of grief and we find it insensitive, if not ludicrous, of the storyteller to expect us to cry yet again. The repetition of "serious" emotion is, in fact, a favorite comic device.

Although comedy may seem the exception to this principle in that we often seem to laugh repeatedly, it's not. Laughter is not an emotion. Joy is an emotion. Laughter is a criticism we hurl at something we find ridiculous or outrageous. It may occur inside any emotion, from terror to love. Nor do we laugh without relief. A joke has two parts: setup and punch. The setup raises the tension in the audience, if only for a moment, through danger, sex, the scatological—a host of taboos—then the punch explodes laughter. This is the secret to comic timing: When is the setup ripe to hit the punchline or gag? The comic senses this intuitively, but one thing he learns objectively is that he can't deliver punch, punch, punch without wearing out his welcome.

There is, however, one exception: a story can go from positive to positive or negative to negative, *if* the contrast between these events is so great, in retrospect the first takes on shades of its opposite. Consider these two events: Lovers argue and break up. Negative. Next, one kills the other. The second turn is so powerfully negative that the argument begins to seem positive. In the light of the murder, the audience will look back at the breakup and think: "At least they were talking then."

If the contrast between emotional charges is great, events can move from positive to positive without sentimentality, or from negative to negative without forced seriousness. However, if the progression changes only by degree, as it normally would, then a repeated emotion has half its expected effect, and if repeated yet again, the charge unfortunately reverses itself.

The Law of Diminishing Returns is true of everything in life, except sex, which seems endlessly repeatable with effect.

Once a transition of value creates an emotion, feeling comes into play. Although they're often mistaken for each other, feeling is not emotion. Emotion is a short-term experience that peaks and burns rapidly. Feeling is a long-term, pervasive, sentient background that colors whole days, weeks, even years of our lives. Indeed, a specific feeling often dominates a personality. Each of the core emotions in life—pleasure and pain—has many variations. So which particular negative or positive emotion will we experience? The answer is found in the feeling that surrounds it. For, like adding pigment to a pencil sketch or an orchestra to a melody, feeling makes emotion specific.

Suppose a man is feeling good about life, his relationships and career both going well. Then he receives a message that his lover has died. He'll grieve but in time recover and go on with life. On the other hand, suppose his days are dark, stressed, and depressed by everything he tries. Then suddenly he receives a message that his lover has died. Well . . . he might join her.

In film, feeling is known as mood. Mood is created in the film's text: the quality of light and color, tempo of action and editing, casting, style of dialogue, production design, and musical score. The sum of all these textural qualities creates a particular mood. In general, mood, like setups, is a form of foreshadowing, a way of preparing or shaping the audience's anticipations. Moment by moment, however, while the dynamic of the scene determines whether the emotion it causes is positive or negative, the mood makes this emotion specific.

This sketch, for example, is designed to create a positive emotion: Estranged lovers haven't spoken to each other for over a year. Without her, his life's taken a dangerous turn. Desperate and broke, he comes to her, hoping to borrow money. The scene begins at the negative in two values: his survival and their love.

He knocks on her door. She sees him on the step and refuses to let him in. He makes a noise loud enough to disturb the neighbors, hoping to embarrass her into letting him in. She picks up a phone and threatens to call the police. He calls her bluff, shouting through the door that he is in such deep trouble prison may be the only safe place for him. She shouts back that that's fine with her.

Frightened and angry, he smashes through the door. But from the look on her face, he realizes this is no way to borrow money from anybody. He frantically explains that loan sharks are threatening to break his arms and his legs. Rather than sympathizing, she laughs and tells him she hopes they break his head as well. He bursts into tears and crawls to her, begging. The mad look on his face frightens her and she takes a gun out of a drawer to scare him off. He laughs, saying he remembers giving her the gun a year ago and the firing pin was broken. She laughs, saying she had it fixed and blows up the lamp next to him to prove it.

He grabs her wrist and they fall to floor wrestling for the gun, rolling over each other, until suddenly an emotion they haven't felt for over a year ignites and they start to make love on the floor next to the smashed lamp and shattered door. A little voice in his head says, "This could work," but then a gap opens between him . . . and his body. That, she thinks, smiling, is his real problem. Moved to pity and affection, she decides to take him back into her life. The scene ends on the positive: He has her help to survive, their love is restored.

If the audience empathizes with these characters, the movement from the negative to the positive will create a positive emotion. But *which?* There are many.

Suppose the writer calls for a summer's day, brightly colored flowers in window boxes, blossoms on the trees. The producer casts Jim Carrey and Mira Sorvino. The director composes them in head-to-foot shots. Together they've created a comic mood. Comedy likes bright light and color. Comics need full shots because they act with their whole bodies. Carrey and Sorvino are brilliant zanies. The audience will feel tingling fear spiced with laughter as Carrey bangs through the door, as Sorvino pulls a gun, as these two try to make love. Then a burst of joy when she takes him back.

But suppose the scene were set in the dead of night, the house spackled with shadows of trees blowing in the wind, moonlight, street light. The director shoots tight, canted angles and orders the lab to mute the colors. The producer casts Michael Madsen and Linda Fiorentino. Without changing a beat, the scene is now drenched in a *Thriller* mood. Our hearts will be in our throats as we fear that one of these two isn't getting out of this alive. Imagine Madsen bulling his way in, Fiorentino grabbing a gun, those two fighting for it. When they're finally in each other's arms, we'll breathe a sigh of relief.

The arc of the scene, sequence, or act determines the basic emotion. Mood makes it specific. *But mood will not substitute for emotion.* When we want mood experiences, we go to concerts or museums. When we want meaningful emotional experience, we go to the storyteller. It does the writer no good to write an exposition-filled scene in which nothing changes, then set it in a garden at sundown, thinking that a golden mood will carry the day. All the writer has done is dump weak writing on the shoulders of the director and cast. Undramatized exposition is boring in any light. Film is not about decorative photography.

THE NATURE OF CHOICE

A Turning Point is centered in the choice a character makes under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of desire. Human nature dictates that each of us will always choose the "good" or the "right" *as we perceive the "good" or the "right."* It is impossible to do otherwise. Therefore, if a character is put into a situation where he must choose between a clear good versus a clear evil, or right versus wrong, the audience, understanding the character's point of view, will know in advance how the character will choose.

> **The choice between good and evil or between right and wrong is no choice at all.**

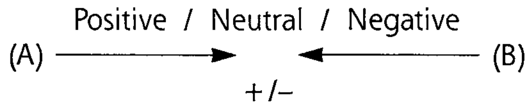
Imagine Attila, King of the Huns poised on the borders of fifth-century Europe, surveying his hordes and asking himself: "Should I invade, murder, rape, plunder, burn, and lay waste . . . or should I go home?" For Attila this is no choice at all. He must invade, slay, plunder, and lay waste. He didn't lead tens of thousands of warriors across two continents to turn around when he finally came within sight of the prize. In the eyes of his victims, however, his is an evil decision. But that's their point of view. For Attila his choice is not only the right thing to do, but probably the moral thing to do. No doubt, like many of history's great tyrants, he felt he was on a holy mission.

Or, closer to home: A thief bludgeons a victim on the street for the five dollars in her purse. He may know this isn't the moral thing to do, but moral/immoral, right/wrong, legal/illegal often have little to do with one another. He may instantly regret what he's done. But at the moment of murder, *from the thief's point of view,* his arm won't move until he's convinced himself that this is the right choice.

If we do not understand that much about human nature—that a human being is only capable of acting toward the right or the good as he has come to believe it or rationalize it—then we understand very little. Good/evil, right/wrong choices are dramatically obvious and trivial.

True choice is dilemma. It occurs in two situations. First, *a choice between irreconcilable goods:* From the character's view two things are desirable, he wants both, but circumstances are forcing him to choose only one. Second, *a choice between the lesser of two evils*: From the character's view two things are undesirable, he wants neither, but circumstances are forcing him to choose one. How a character chooses in a true dilemma is a powerful expression of his humanity and of the world in which he lives.

Writers since Homer have understood the principle of dilemma, and realized that the story of a two-sided relationship cannot be sustained, that the simple conflict between Character A and Character B cannot be told to satisfaction.

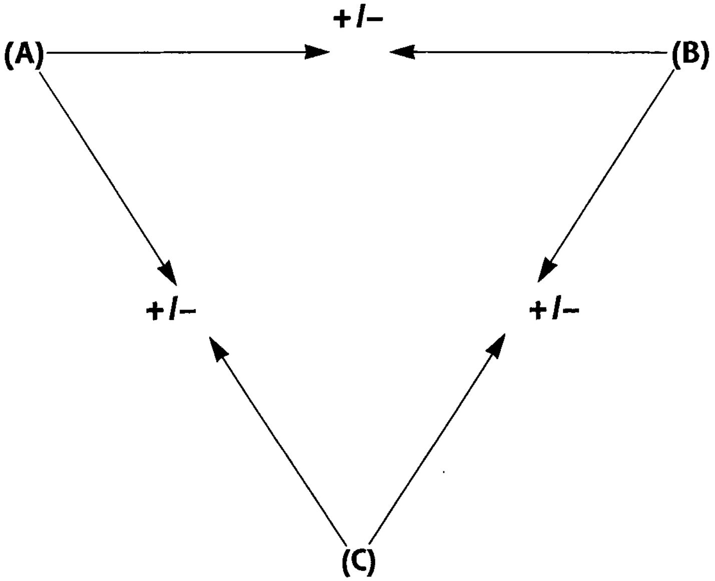


A two-sided conflict is not dilemma but vacillation between the positive and the negative. "She loves me/she loves me not, she loves me/she loves not," for example, swings back and forth between good and bad, and presents insoluble story problems. It isn't only tediously repetitious, but it has no ending.

If we try to climax this pattern on the positive with the protagonist believing "She loves me," the audience leaves thinking, "Wait till tomorrow when she'll love you not again." Or if on the negative "She loves me not," the audience exits thinking, "She'll come back. She always did." Even if we kill the loved one, it's not a true ending because the protagonist is left wondering, "She loved me? She loved me not?" and the audience exits groping for a point that was never made.

For example, here are two stories: one that wavers back and forth between inward states of pleasure and pain and one of inner dilemma. Compare BETTY BLUE with THE RED DESERT. In the former, Betty (Beatrice Dalle) slides from obsession to madness to catatonia. She has impulses but never makes a true decision. In the later Giuliana (Monica Vitti) faces profound dilemmas: retreat into comforting fantasies versus making meaning out of a harsh reality, madness versus pain. BETTY BLUE'S "mock-minimalism" is an over two-hour long snapshot of a helpless victim of schizophrenia that mistakes suffering for drama. IL DESERTO ROSSO is a minimalist masterpiece that delineates a human being grappling with the terrifying contradictions within her nature.

To construct and create genuine choice, we must frame a three-sided situation. As in life, meaningful decisions are triangular.



The moment we add C we generate ample material to avoid repetition. First, to the three possible relationships between A and B: positive/negative/neutral, love/hate/indifference, for example, we add the same three between A and C and between B and C. This gives us nine possibilities. Then we may join A and B against C; A and C against B; B and C against A. Or put them all in love or all in hate or all indifferent. By adding a third corner, the triangle breeds over twenty variations, more than enough material to progress without repetition. A fourth element would produce compound interlocking triangles, a virtual infinitude of changing relationships.

What's more, triangular design brings closure. If a telling is two-sided so that A vacillates between B and no-B, the ending is open. But if choice is three-sided so that A is caught between B and C, A's choice of one or the other closes the ending with satisfaction. Whether B and C represent the lesser of two evils or irreconcilable goods, the protagonist can't have both. A price must be paid. One must be risked or lost to gain the other. If, for example, A relinquishes C to have B, the audience feels a true choice has been taken. C has been sacrificed, and this irreversible change ends the story.

The most compelling dilemmas often combine the choice of irreconcilable goods with the lesser of two evils. In the *Supernatural Romance* DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS, for example, Dona (Sonia Braga) faces a choice between a new husband who's warm, secure, faithful, but dull versus an ex-husband who's sexy, exciting, but dead, yet his ghost appears to her in private as flesh and blood and sexually insatiable as ever. Is she hallucinating or not? What's the widow to do? She's caught in the dilemma between a boringly pleasant life of normality versus a bizarre, perhaps mad, life of emotional fulfillment. She makes the wise decision: She takes both.

An original work poses choices between unique but irreconcilable desires: It may be between two persons, a person and a lifestyle, two lifestyles, two ideals, two aspects of the innermost self—between any conflicting desires at any level of conflict, real or imagined, the writer may devise. But the principle is universal: Choice must not be doubt but dilemma, not between right/wrong or good/evil, but between either positive desires or negative desires of equal weight and value.

11

SCENE ANALYSIS

TEXT AND SUBTEXT

Just as a personality structure can be disclosed through psychoanalysis, the shape of a scene's inner life can be uncovered through a similar inquiry. If we ask the right questions, a scene that speeds past in the reading and hides its flaws brakes into ultra-slow motion, opens up, and reveals its secrets.

If you feel a scene plays, don't fix what works. But often a first draft falls flat or seems forced. Our tendency then is to rewrite dialogue over and over, hoping that by paraphrasing speeches we can bring it to life . . . until we hit a dead end. For the problem won't be in the scene's activity but in its action; not in how characters are talking or behaving on the surface, but in what they're *doing* behind their masks. Beats build scenes, and the flaws of an ill-designed scene are in these exchanges of behavior. To find out why a scene fails, the whole must be broken into its parts. An analysis begins, therefore, by separating the scene's text from its subtext.

Text means the sensory surface of a work of art. In film it's the images onscreen and the soundtrack of dialogue, music, and sound effects. What we see. What we hear. What people say. What people do. Subtext is the life under that surface—thoughts and feelings both known and unknown, hidden by behavior.

Nothing is what it seems. This principle calls for the screenwriter's constant awareness of the duplicity of life, his recognition that everything exists on at least two levels, and that, therefore, he must write a simultaneous duality: First, he must create a verbal description of the sensory surface of life, sight and sound, activity and talk. Second, he must create the inner world of conscious and unconscious desire, action and reaction, impulse and id, genetic and experiential imperatives. As in reality, so in fiction: He must veil the truth with a living mask, the actual thoughts and feelings of characters behind their saying and doing.

An old Hollywood expression goes: "If the scene is about what the scene is about, you're in deep shit." It means writing "on the nose," writing dialogue and activity in which a character's deepest thoughts and feelings are expressed by what the character says and does—writing the subtext directly into the text.

Writing this, for example: Two attractive people sit opposite each other at a candlelit table, the light glinting off the crystal wineglasses and the dewy eyes of the lovers. Soft breezes billow the curtains. A Chopin nocturne plays in the background. The lovers reach across the table, touch hands, look longingly in each others' eyes, say, "I love you, I love you" . . . *and actually mean it.* This is an unactable scene and will die like a rat in the road.

Actors are not marionettes to mime gestures and mouth words. They're artists who create with material from the subtext, not the text. An actor brings a character to life from the inside out, from unspoken, even unconscious thoughts and feelings out to a surface of behavior. The actors will say and do whatever the scene requires, but they find their sources for creation in the inner life. The scene above is unactable because it has no inner life, no subtext. It's unactable because there's nothing to act.

When we reflect on our filmgoing, we realize we've witnessed the phenomenon of subtext all our lives. The screen isn't opaque but transparent. When we look up at the screen, don't we have the impression that we're reading minds and feelings? We constantly say to ourselves, "I know what that character's *really* thinking and feeling. I know what's going on inside her better than she does, and I know it better than the guy she's talking to because he's busy with his own agenda."

In life our eyes tend to stop at the surface. We're so consumed by our own needs, conflicts, and daydreams that we rarely manage to take a step back and coolly observe what's going on inside other human beings. Occasionally we put a frame around a couple in the corner of a coffee shop and create a movie moment as we look through their smiles to the boredom beneath or through the pain in their eyes to the hope they have for each other. But rarely and only for a moment. In the ritual of story, however, we continuously see through the faces and activities of characters to depths of the unspoken, the unaware.

This is why we go to the storyteller, the guide who takes us beyond what seems to what *is* . . . at all levels and not for a mere moment but to the end of the line. The storyteller gives us the pleasure that life denies, the pleasure of sitting in the dark ritual of story, looking through the face of life to the heart of what is felt and thought beneath what's said and done.

How then might we write a love scene? Let two people change the tire on a car. Let the scene be a virtual textbook on how to fix a flat. Let all dialogue and action be about jack, wrench, hubcap, and lug nuts: "Hand me that, would ya?" "Watch out." "Don't get dirty." "Let me . . . whoops." The actors will interpret the real action of the scene, so leave room for them to bring romance to life wholly from the inside. As their eyes meet and sparks fly, we'll know what's happening because it's in the unspoken thoughts and emotions of the actors. As we see through the surface, we'll lean back with a knowing smile: "Look what happened. They're not just changing the tire on a car. He thinks she's hot and she knows it. Boy has met girl."

In other words, write as these things happen in life. For if we give that candlelit scene to fine actors, they'll smell the lie, refuse to act it, and walk off until the scene is cut or rewritten with an actable subtext. If the cast lacks the clout to demand a rewrite, then they'll do this: They will put a subtext in the scene whether or not it has anything to do with the story. Good actors will not step in front of a camera without their subtext.

For example, an actor forced to do the candlelit scene might attack it like this: "Why have these people gone out of their way to create this movie scene? What's with the candlelight, soft music, billowing curtains? Why don't they just take their pasta to the TV set like normal people? What's *wrong* with this relationship?" Because isn't that life? When do the candles come out? When everything's fine? No. When everything's fine we take our pasta to the TV set like normal people. So from that insight the actor will create a subtext. Now as we watch, we think: "He says he loves her and maybe he does, but look, he's scared he's losing her. He's desperate." Or from another subtext: "He says he loves her, but look, he's setting her up for bad news. He's getting ready to walk out."

The scene is not about what the scene seems to be about. It's about something else. And it's that something else—trying to regain her affection or softening her up for the breakup—that will make the scene work. There's always a subtext, an inner life that contrasts with or contradicts the text. Given this, the actor will create a multilayered work that allows us to see through the text to the truth that vibrates behind the eyes, voice, and gestures of life.

This principle does not mean that people are insincere. It's a commonsense recognition that we all wear a public mask. We say and do what we feel we should, while we think and feel something else altogether. As we must. We realize we can't go around saying and doing what we're actually thinking and feeling. If we all did that, life would be a lunatic asylum. Indeed, that's how you know you're talking to a lunatic. Lunatics are those poor souls who have lost their inner communication and so they allow themselves to say and do exactly what they are thinking and feeling and that's why they're mad.

In truth, it's virtually impossible for anyone, even the insane, to fully express what's going on inside. No matter how much we wish to manifest our deepest feelings, they elude us. We never fully express the truth, for in fact we rarely know it. Consider the situation in which we are desperate to express our truest thoughts and feelings—psychoanalysis: A patient lies on a couch, pouring his heart out. Wanting to be understood. No holds barred. No intimacy too private to reveal. And as he rips terrible thoughts and desires to the surface, what does the analyst do? Quietly nods and takes notes. And what's in those notes? What is not *being said*, the secret, unconscious truths that lie behind the patient's gut-wrenching confession. Nothing is what is seems. No text without a subtext.

Nor does this mean that we can't write powerful dialogue in which desperate people try to tell the truth. It simply means that the most passionate moments must conceal an even deeper level.

CHINATOWN: Evelyn Mulwray cries out: "She's my sister and my daughter. My father and I . . ." But what she doesn't say is: "Please help me." Her anguished confession is in fact a plea for help. Subtext: "I didn't kill my husband; my father did . . . to possess my child. If you arrest me, he'll take her. Please help me." In the next beat Gittes says, "We'll have to get you out of town." An illogical reply that makes perfect sense. Subtext: "I've understood everything you've told me. I now know your father did it. I love you and I'm going to risk my life to save you and your child. Then I'm going after the bastard." All this is underneath the scene, giving us truthful behavior without phony "on the nose" dialogue, and what's more, without robbing the audience of the pleasure of insight.

STAR WARS: When Darth Vader offers Luke the chance to join him in running the universe, bringing "order to things," Luke's reaction is to attempt suicide. Again not a logical reaction, but one that makes perfect sense, for both Luke and the audience read Darth Vader's subtext: Behind "bring order to things" is the unspoken implication ". . . and enslave billions." When Luke attempts to kill himself, we read a heroic subtext: "I'll die before I'd join your evil enterprise."

Characters may say and do anything you can imagine. But because it's impossible for any human being to tell or act the complete truth, because at the very least there's always an unconscious dimension, the writer must layer in a subtext. And when the audience senses that subtext, the scene plays.

This principle also extends to the first-person novel, theatrical soliloquy, and direct-to-camera or voice-over narration. For if characters talk privately to us, that doesn't mean for a moment that they know the truth or are capable of telling it.

ANNIE HALL: When Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) speaks directly to the audience "confessing" his fears and inadequacies, he also lies, dissembles, cajoles, exaggerates, and rationalizes, all in a self-deceived effort to win us over and convince himself his heart's in the right place.

Subtext is present even when a character is alone. For if no one else is watching us, we are. We wear masks to hide our true selves from ourselves.

Not only do individuals wear masks, but institutions do as well and hire public relations experts to keep them in place. Paddy Chayefsky's satire HOSPITAL cuts to the core of that truth. Hospital staffs all wear white and act as if professional, caring, and scientific. But if you've ever worked inside a medical institution, you know that greed and ego and a touch of madness are invisibly there. If you want to die, go to a hospital.

The constant duality of life is true even for the inanimate. In Robert Rossen's adaptation of Melville's BILLY BUDD a man-o-war rests in tropical waters at night. Uncountable stars gleam above, all magnificently reflected in a black, calm sea. A low, full moon trails its light from the horizon to the ship's prow. The limp sails tremble in the warm breezes. The cruel master-at-arms, Claggart (Robert Ryan) is holding watch. Billy (Terence Stamp) can't sleep, so he comes out on deck, stands at the gunnels with Claggart, and remarks on what a beautiful evening it is. Claggart answers, "Yes, Billy, yes, but remember, beneath that glittering surface is a universe of gliding monsters." Even Mother Nature wears her masks.

THE TECHNIQUE OF SCENE ANALYSIS

To analyze a scene you must slice into its pattern of behaviors at the levels of both text and subtext. Once properly examined, its flaws become vividly clear. Below is a five-step process designed to make a scene give up its secrets.

Step One: Define Conflict

First ask, who drives the scene, motivates it, and makes it happen? Any character or force might drive a scene, even an inanimate object or act of nature. Then look into both the text and subtext of this character or force, and ask: What does he (or it) want? Desire is always the key. Phrase this desire (or in the actor's idiom: scene objective) as an infinitive: such as, "to do this . . ." or "to get that . . . "

Next, look across the scene and ask: What forces of antagonism block this desire? Again, these forces may come from any level or combination. After identifying the source of antagonism, ask: What do the forces of antagonism want? This too is best expressed as an infinitive: "Not to do that . . ." or "To get this instead . . ." If the scene is well written, when you compare the set of phrases expressing the desires from each side, you'll see that they're in direct conflict—not tangential.

Step Two: Note Opening Value

Identify the value at stake in the scene and note its charge, positive or negative, at the opening of the scene. Such as: "Freedom. The protagonist is at the negative, a prisoner of his own obsessive ambition." Or: "Faith. The protagonist is at the positive, he trusts in God to get him out of this situation."

Step Three: Break the Scene into Beats

A beat is an exchange of action/reaction in character behavior. Look carefully at the scene's first action on two levels: outwardly, in terms of what the character seems to be doing, and, more important, look beneath the surface to what he is actually doing. Name this *subtextural action* with an active gerund phrase, such as "Begging." Try to find phrases that not only indicate action but touch the feelings of the character. "Pleading" for example, suggests a character acting with a sense of formality, whereas "Groveling at her feet" conveys a desperate servility.

The phrases that express the action in the subtext do not describe character activity in literal terms; they go deeper to name the character's essential action with emotive connotations.

Now look across the scene to see what reaction that action brought, and describe that reaction with an active gerund phrase. For example, "Ignoring the plea."

This exchange of action and reaction is a beat. As long as it continues, Character A is "Groveling at her feet" but Character B is "Ignoring the plea," it's one beat. Even if their exchange repeats a number of times, it's still one and the same beat. A new beat doesn't occur until behavior clearly changes.

If, for example, Character A's groveling changed to "Threatening to leave her" and in reaction Character B's ignoring changed to "Laughing at the threat," then the scene's second beat is "Threatening/Laughing" until A and B's behavior changes for a third time. The analysis then continues through the scene, parsing it into its beats.

Step Four: Note Closing Value and Compare with Opening Value

At the end of the scene, examine the value-charged condition of the character's situation and describe it in positive/negative terms. Compare this note to the one made in Step Two. If the two notations are the same, the activity between them is a nonevent. Nothing has changed, therefore nothing has happened. Exposition may have been passed to the audience, but the scene is flat. If, on the other hand, the value has undergone change, then the scene has turned.

Step Five: Survey Beats and Locate Turning Point

Start from the opening beat and review the gerund phrases describing the actions of the characters. As you trace action/reaction to the end of the scene, a shape or pattern should emerge. In a well-designed scene, even behaviors that seem helter-skelter will have an arc and a purpose. In fact, in such scenes, it's their careful design that makes the beats feel random. Within the arc locate the moment when the major gap opens between expectation and result, turning the scene to its changed end values. This precise moment is the Turning Point.

An analysis of the design of the following two scenes illustrates this technique.

CASABLANCA

Casablanca's Mid-Act Climax is played within a unity of time and place that puts emphasis on personal conflict and expresses its primary action verbally.

SYNOPSIS

Rick Blaine, an antifascist freedom fighter, and Ilsa Lund, a Norwegian expatriate, meet in Paris in 1940. They fall in love and begin an affair. He asks her to marry him, but she avoids an answer. Rick is on the Gestapo arrest list. On the eve of the Nazi invasion the lovers agree to meet at the train station and escape the city together. But Ilsa doesn't show. Instead, she sends a note saying she loves Rick but will never see him again.

A year later, Rick runs a cafe in Casablanca. He's become an isolate, determinedly neutral, uninvolved in all matters personal and political. As he says, "I stick my neck out for no man." He drinks too much and feels as if he has killed his former self. Then Ilsa walks in on the arm of Victor Laszlo, a renowned resistance leader. The lovers meet again. Behind their cocktail chat their passion is palpable. Ilsa leaves with Laszlo, but Rick sits in the dark cafe drinking through the night, waiting.

Hours after midnight she reappears. By now Rick is very maudlin and equally drunk. Ilsa tells him guardedly that she admires but doesn't love Laszlo. Then, before she can tell him that she loves him, Rick, in drunken bitterness, belittles her story by comparing it to one told in a brothel. Staring at her with a twisted smile he adds insult to injury: "Tell me. Who'd you leave me for? Was it Laszlo? Or were there others in between? Or aren't you the kind that tells?" This slur, implying she's a whore, sends her out the door as he collapses in drunken tears.

THE MID-ACT CLIMAX

The next day Ilsa and Laszlo go in search of black market exit visas. While he tries to make a deal in a cafe, she waits at a linen stall on the street. Seeing her alone, Rick approaches.

Step One: Define Conflict

Rick initiates and drives the scene. Despite inner conflict over the pain he has suffered since she abandoned him in Paris, and the anger he suppresses at seeing her with another man, Rick's desire is clear: "To win Ilsa back." His source of antagonism is equally clear: Ilsa. Her feelings are very complex and clouded by mixed emotions of guilt, regret, and duty. She loves Rick passionately and would go back to him if she could; but for reasons only she knows, she can't. Caught between irreconcilable needs, Ilsa's desire can be phrased as "To keep her affair with Rick in the past and move on with her life." Although entangled with inner conflicts, their desires are in direct opposition.

Step Two: Note Opening Value

Love governs the scene. Rick's insulting behavior in their last scene turned the value toward the negative, yet it leans to the positive because the audience and Rick see a ray of hope. In previous scenes Ilsa has been addressed as "Miss Ilsa Lund," a single woman traveling with Laszlo. Rick wants to change that.

Step Three: Break the Scene into Beats

BEAT #1

EXT. BAZAAR—LINEN STALL

The sign over the Arab Vendor's stall reads LINGERIE. He shows Ilsa a lace bed sheet.

Vendor's action: SELLING.

ARAB

You'll not find a treasure
like this in all Morocco,
Mademoiselle.

Just then, Rick walks up behind her.

Rick's action: APPROACHING HER.

Without looking Ilsa senses his prescence. She feigns interest in the lace.

Ilsa's reaction: IGNORING HIM.

The Vendor holds up a sign reading 700 FRANCS.

ARAB

Only seven hundred francs.

BEAT #2

RICK

You're being cheated.

Rick's action: PROTECTING HER.

Ilsa takes a second to compose herself. She glances at Rick, then with polite formality turns to the Vendor.

ILSA

It doesn't matter, thank you.

Ilsa's reaction: REJECTING RICK'S ADVANCE.

To win Ilsa away from Lazlo, Rick's first task is to break the ice—no easy task given the recriminations and angry emotions of their last scene. His warning seems to insult the Arab Vendor, who takes no offense, but in the subtext it hints at more: her relationship with Lazlo.

BEAT #3

ARAB

Ah . . . the lady is a friend of Rick's? For friends of Rick we have a small discount. Seven hundred francs, did I say?

(holding up a new sign)

You can have it for two hundred.

RICK

I'm sorry I was in no condition to receive visitors when you called on me last night.

Rick's action: APOLOGIZING.

ILSA

It doesn't matter.

Ilsa's reaction: REJECTING HIM AGAIN.

ARAB

Ah! For special friends of Rick's we have a special discount.

He replaces the second sign with a third, reading 100 FRANCS.

Rick's protective action of the first beat comes naturally; the apology in the second beat is more difficult and rare. He masks his embarassment by using an excessive formality to make light of it. Ilsa is unmoved.

BEAT *4

RICK
Your story left me a little
confused. Or maybe it was
the bourbon.

Rick's action: EXCUSE MAKING.

ARAB
I have some tablecloths, some
napkins . . .

ILSA
Thank you, I'm really not
interested.

Ilsa's reaction: REJECTING RICK FOR THE FOURTH TIME.

ARAB
(exiting hurriedly)
Only one moment . . .please . . .

The Arab vendor enriches the scene in a number of ways. He opens it in a comic tone to counterpoint a dark ending; he sells lace which adds connotations of weddings and the sexuality of lingerie; most importantly, however, he tries to sell Rick to Ilsa. The vendor's first line declares Rick a treasure. To demonstrate the power of Rick, the vendor drops his *price for "friends of Rick's." Then, hearing something about last night, the vendor cuts it even more for "special friends of Rick's."*

This is followed by Rick's second reference to his drinking, as he tries to make this take the blame for his insulting behavior. Ilsa will hear none of it, and yet she stands and waits and it's safe to assume she isn't waiting to buy lace.

BEAT #5

A small silence as she pretends to examine the lace goods.

RICK
Why'd you come back? To
tell me why you ran out on
me at the railway station?

Rick's action: GETTING HIS FOOT IN THE DOOR.

ILSA
(quietly)
Yes.

Ilsa's reaction: OPENING THE DOOR A CRACK.

After hearing no four times in a row, Rick wants her to say yes to anything. So he asks a question that supplies its own answer. Her quiet yes opens the door—keeping the chain on, perhaps, but indicating she's willing to talk.

BEAT #6

RICK
Well, you can tell me now. I'm
reasonably sober.

Rick's action: GETTING DOWN ON HIS KNEES.

ILSA

I don't think I will, Rick.

Ilsa's reaction: ASKING FOR MORE.

The taciturn Rick insults himself over his drinking for the third time. In his tough guy manner, this is begging, and it works. Ilsa demurs, opposing him in a mild, polite way, yet continuing her lace-buying guise. To paraphrase her subtext: "That begging was nice for a change. Could I hear a little more, please?"

BEAT #7

RICK

Why not? After all, I was
stuck with the railroad ticket.
I think I'm entitled to know.

Rick's action: GUILT-TRIPPING HER.

ILSA

Last night I saw what has
happened to you. The Rick I
knew in Paris, I could tell
him. He'd understand—but
the Rick who looked at me
with such hatred . . .

Ilsa's reaction: GUILT-TRIPPING HIM BACK.

These two people have a relationship. Each feels like the injured party, and each knows the sensitivity of the other so well that they hurt each other with ease.

BEAT #8

ILSA
(turning to look at
Rick)
I'll be leaving Casablanca
soon. We'll never see each
other again. We knew very
little about each other when
we were in love in Paris. If we
leave it that way, maybe we'll
remember those days—not
Casablanca—not last night—

Ilsa's action: SAYING GOODBYE.

Rick simply stares at her.

Rick's reaction: REFUSING TO REACT.

In the subtext, Ilsa's kind, forgiving prose is a clear goodbye. No matter how well-mannered, no matter how much her language implies her love for Rick, this is the kiss-off: "Let's be friends, let's remember the good times, and forget the bad."

Rick will have none of this. He reacts by refusing to react; for ignoring someone's action is, of course, a reaction. Instead he starts the next beat.

BEAT #9

RICK
(voice low and
intense)
Did you run out on me
because you couldn't take it?

Because you knew what it
would be like, hiding from the
police, running away all the
time?

Rick's action: CALLING HER A COWARD.

ILSA

You can believe that if you
want to.

Ilsa's reaction: CALLING HIM A FOOL.

Rick's had a year to figure out why she left him, and his best guess is that she was a coward. She, however, dares death with Laszlo every day, and so she insults him in return with a cool sarcasm that implies: "I don't care what you think; fools believe such nonsense; if you want to join them, believe it too."

BEAT #10

RICK

Well, I'm not running away
anymore. I'm settled now—
above a saloon, it's true—but
walk up a flight. I'll be
expecting you.

Rick's action: SEXUALLY PROPOSITIONING HER.

Ilsa drops her eyes and turns away from Rick, her face shaded by the wide brim of her hat.

Ilsa's reaction: HIDING HER REACTION.

Despite her denials, he senses that her feelings lean the other way. He well remembers their sex life in Paris, and has seen the cold, aloof Laszlo. So he takes a chance and propositions her on the street. Again, it works. Ilsa too remembers, and hides her blush under her hat brim. For a moment Rick feels she's within reach, but he can't resist sticking his foot in his mouth.

BEAT #11

RICK
All the same, some day you'll
lie to Laszlo—you'll be there.

Rick's action: CALLING HER A WHORE.

ILSA
No, Rick. You see, Victor
Laszlo is my husband.
And was . . .
(pause, coolly)
. . . even when I knew you in
Paris.

Ilsa's reaction: CRUSHING HIM WITH THE NEWS.

With dignity and poise, Ilsa walks away, leaving the stunned Rick to stare after her.

Rick can't contain the pain caused by Ilsa's abandonment. As in the climax of their previous scene, he strikes out with a sexual slur, implying that she'll betray Laszlo to come back to his bed. Called a slut for a second time, Ilsa reaches back for the hardest thing she has, and strikes Rick with it as hard as she can. Notice, however, that this is a half-truth; she doesn't add that she thought her husband was

> *dead. Instead, she leaves a terrible implication in her wake: She was a married woman who used Rick in Paris, then walked out on him when her husband came back. Therefore, her love was never real. We know from the subtext that the opposite is the truth, but Rick is devastated.*

Step Four: Note Closing Value and Compare with Opening Value

The Central Plot turns sharply from a hopeful positive to a negative at a darker depth than Rick could have imagined. For not only does Ilsa make it clear she doesn't love him now; she implies she never did. Her secret marriage turns their Paris romance into a sham and Rick into a cuckold.

Step Five: Survey the Beats and Locate the Turning Point

1. Approaching Her/Ignoring Him
2. Protecting Her/Rejecting Him (and Arab)
3. Apologizing/Rejecting Him
4. Excuse Making/Rejecting Him (and Arab)
5. Getting His Foot in the Door/Opening the Door
6. Getting Down on His Knees/Asking for More
7. Guilt-Tripping Her/Guilt-Tripping Him
8. Saying Goodbye/Refusing to React
9. Calling Her a Coward/Calling Him a Fool
10. Sexually Propositioning Her/Hiding Her Reaction
11. Calling Her a Slut/Destroying His Hope

The action/reaction pattern builds a rapid progression of beats. Each exchange tops the previous beat, placing their love in greater and greater risk, demanding more and more willpower and capacity to take painful, even cruel actions, but at the same time remain in cool control.

The gap opens in the middle of the eleventh beat, on the revelation that Ilsa was married to Laszlo while having an affair with Rick. Until this moment, Rick has hopes of winning her over, but with this Turning Point his hope is shattered.

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

In contrast to the stationary dialogue duet in CASABLANCA, the Climax of the Karin/God plot in THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY shifts from place to place with slight ellipses of time, involves four characters, anchors itself at the level of inner conflict, and conveys its primary action physically.

SYNOPSIS

For this film Bergman designed a Multiplot of six interconnected stories. The most powerful is the conflict between Karin and her "God." She suffers from delusional schizophrenia. During a period of lucidity, she's released from a hospital to join her family for a brief holiday at their cottage on an island in the Baltic. While she struggles to hold on to her sanity, she's surrounded by weak, troubled men who turn to her for support.

David, Karin's father, is outwardly kind but emotionally repressed. He's a popular novelist but hounded by his lack of critical recognition. He prefers to observe life at a safe distance before cannibalizing it for his art. Karin wants her father to be happy and prays for his artistic success.

Karin's husband, Martin, is an MD. She craves his understanding and approval; instead, he patronizes her like one of his patients and pesters her for sex.

Karin's brother, Minus, is her only true intimate. She confides in him, telling him the secrets of her terrifying delusions, but he's so troubled with adolescent sexuality and estrangement from his father that he gives her little consolation. Instead, Karin, sensing his fears, offers Minus comfort.

Soon Karin's acute sensitivity (perhaps even psychic awareness) gives way to hallucination. She hears voices from behind an attic wall, telling her that God will appear. Scared, she turns to Martin, but he humiliates her over the lack of sex in their marriage. When she seeks out her father, he gently dismisses her like a child. Alone, Karin sneaks a look at her father's diary and discovers that his only interest in her is as a character study for his next novel. She tries to tell her brother about the coming miracle of God's visitation, but Minus is so confused and tormented by his cravings that he doesn't understand. Suddenly, Karin's madness takes a sexual turn. With feral intensity, she drags her brother down into incest.

When David discovers what has happened, he's moved more by self-pity than by concern for his children. Amazingly, Karin sympathizes with him, and knowing that he's only interested in her as story material, gives her father insights into her illness. Martin interrupts, declaring that he must take Karin back to the mental hospital. He calls for an ambulance and starts to pack.

Step One: Define Conflict

Karin drives the scene. She believes in her voices and desperately hopes to see God, not only for her own needs but for her men. She wants to give them her epiphany, perhaps to win acceptance, but more importantly to help their troubled lives. Her sources of antagonism are two: first, her husband. Martin is drawn to her sexually and pities her, but he can no longer cope with her madness, so he wants to take her away from her "God" and put her safely back in the hospital. The second, and more powerful, is herself. While she hopes to have a glimpse of heaven, her subconscious waits to give her a vision of hell.

Step Two: Note Opening Value

Hope, in a strange way, fills the opening of the scene. Karin is the most empathetic character in the film. We want her desire to see God to be fulfilled. Even if it's a mad fantasy, it would give joy to a tormented woman. Furthermore, her many psychic experiences earlier in the film have led us to suspect that she may not be hallucinating. We hold out hope for a supernatural event; Karin's triumph over the self-centered men around her.

Step Three: Break the Scene into Beats

BEAT #1

INT. COTTAGE BEDROOM—DAY

Karin and Martin pack for the ambulance. Martin rummages through a chest of drawers, searching for a shirt. Karin's thoughts seem far away as she struggles with an overstuffed suitcase.

KARIN
Your shirts are washed but
not ironed.

Karin's action: PLANNING HER ESCAPE.

MARTIN
I've got shirts in town
anyway.

Martin's reaction: CONCEALING HIS GUILT.

KARIN
Help me shut the case, please.

Martin wrestles with the lid, but a pair of shoes keeps the latch from catching. He takes them out and looks at them.

MARTIN
It's my shoes. I can leave
them here.

KARIN

Why not wear these and leave
those?

MARTIN

(indicating the pair
he is wearing)

These have to be mended.

He drops the shoes on the floor and hurriedly puts on his jacket. Karin slowly closes the suitcase lid.

> *This beat is almost comic. Karin's dressed and packed, but Martin, like a boy needing a mother, fumbles around. She's a psychiatric patient returning to electric shock treatments, yet remains practical and composed; he's a doctor flustered over which shoes to wear. On the text Karin seems to be packing, but in the subtext she's planning her next move. He's so distracted by his guilty conscience, he doesn't see that her outward calm conceals a mind scheming to pursue her "miracle" in the attic.*

BEAT #2

Karin fingers the suitcase, quietly and thoughtfully. Then:

KARIN

Have you a headache pill?

Karin's action: ESCAPING TO HER "GOD."

MARTIN

(looking around the
room)

Where's the brown case?

Martin's reaction: HELPING HER.

KARIN

In the kitchen.

MARTIN

(remembering)

Yes, so it is.

Martin rushes into the

INT. KITCHEN—SAME

and finds his medical case on the table. He takes out some pills, fills a glass with water, then pads through the

INT. MAIN HALL—SAME

back to the

INT. BEDROOM—SAME

As he enters, a quick glance tells him that Karin's gone. Martin puts down the water and pills and rushes back into the

INT. MAIN HALL—SAME

looking for her.

Karin is more perceptive than Martin, but it's a measure of his self-absorption that she gives him the slip so easily. He knows schizophrenics can't be left alone, but his guilt over taking her back to the hospital has him doing everything possible to please her. His caring attitude isn't about her suffering but his.

BEAT #3

He glances outside, then runs to

INT. DAVID'S BEDROOM—SAME

and opens the door, surprising David at the window.

MARTIN

Seen Karin?

Martin's action: SEARCHING FOR KARIN.

DAVID

No.

David's reaction: HELPING HIM SEARCH.

As Martin leaves in a panic, David follows out into the

INT. MAIN HALL—SAME

where he and Martin exchange uncertain glances.

BEAT #4

Then suddenly they hear Karin's voice in WHISPERS . . . upstairs.

Karin's action: PRAYING.

Martin prepares a sedative while David climbs the stairs.

David's reaction: RUSHING TO HER.

Martin's reaction: PREPARING TO RECAPTURE HER.

UPPER HALL

Karin's WHISPERS grow louder.

KARIN
(repeating the
phrase)
Yes, I see, I see . . .

Karin's hallucination gives these men what they want. For Martin, the chance to play doctor; for David, the chance to observe his daughter's illness at its most dramatic.

BEAT *5

David quietly steps to an unused

INT. ATTIC ROOM—SAME

and opens the door a few inches to peer inside.

DAVID'S POV

through the half-opened door of Karin standing in the middle of the room, staring at a wall with a closed closet door. Her voice is formal and prayerlike as she nearly chants the words.

KARIN
(talking to the wall)
Yes, I quite see.

Karin's action: PREPARING FOR HER EPIPHANY.

ON DAVID

staring at his daughter, transfixed by the scene she's creating.

KARIN (OFFSCREEN)
I know it won't be long now.

David's reaction: OBSERVING KARIN'S MADNESS.

Martin, carrying his medical bag, joins David at the door. He glares at the sight of Karin talking to her imaginary listener.

KARIN (OS)
It's good to know that. But
we've been happy to wait.

Martin's reaction: FIGHTING HIS EMOTIONS.

Karin supplicates before the voices behind the cracked wallpaper, but she's been well aware of the efforts to find her and of the now watchful eyes of her father, the suppressed anger of her husband.

BEAT #6

Martin hurries into the room and over to Karin, who anxiously twists the beads around her neck and stares fixedly, reverently, at the wall and closet door.

Martin's action: STOPPING HER HALLUCINATION.

KARIN
(to Martin)
Walk quietly! They say he'll
be here very soon. We must
be ready.

Karin's reaction: PROTECTING HER VISION.

BEAT #7

MARTIN

Karin, we're going to town.

Martin's action: PULLING HER AWAY.

KARIN

I can't leave now.

Karin's reaction: STANDING HER GROUND.

BEAT #8

MARTIN

You're wrong, Karin.
(looking at the
closed door)
Nothing is happening in there.
(taking her
shoulders)
No God will come through the
door.

Martin's action: DENYING THE EXISTENCE OF HER GOD.

KARIN

He'll come at any moment.
And I must be here.

Karin's reaction: DEFENDING HER FAITH.

MARTIN

Karin, it's not so.

BEAT #9

KARIN

Not so loud! If you can't be
quiet, go.

Karin's action: ORDERING MARTIN AWAY.

MARTIN

Come with me.

KARIN

Must you spoil it? Leave me
alone.

As David watches from the door, Karin pulls away from Martin, who withdraws to a chair, sits down, and cleans his glasses.

Martin's reaction: RETREATING.

Karin is simply stronger than Martin. Unable to match her powerful will, he gives up and withdraws.

BEAT #10

Karin kneels to face the wall and clasps her hands in prayer.

KARIN

Martin, dearest, forgive me
for being so cross. But can't
you kneel down beside me?
You look so funny sitting
there. I know you don't
believe, but for my sake.

Karin's action: DRAWING MARTIN INTO HER RITUAL.

Tears well up in Martin's eyes, as in helpless anguish, he comes back to her and kneels.

Martin's reaction: SURRENDERING TO HER.

All the while David watches from the doorway.

Karin wants everything to be perfect for the arrival of her God, so she brings the unbelieving Martin into her strange ritual.

BEAT #11

Martin takes Karin by the shoulders and buries himself in the crook of her neck, rubbing his tearful face against her skin.

MARTIN

Karin, dearest, dearest,
dearest.

Martin's action: CARESSING HER.

Karin is repulsed. She pries his hand off and yanks away.

Karin's reaction: FIGHTING HIM OFF.

Helpless in the face of her madness, Martin instinctively tries to seduce her out of her mania, but his caresses fail miserably.

BEAT #12

Karin folds her hands in front of her in prayer.

Karin's action: PRAYING WITH ALL HER POWER.

Suddenly an ear-splitting ROAR fills the room. Karin's eyes shift along the wall to the closet.

"God's" reaction: ANNOUNCING "GOD'S" ARRIVAL.

BEAT #13

The closet door swings open, seemingly of its own accord.

"God's" action: APPEARING TO KARIN.

Karin stands respectfully and smiles at something that seems to be emerging from the empty closet.

Karin's reaction: RECEIVING HER "GOD."

Outside the window, an ambulance helicopter descends from the sky.

In the background, David eyes the scene intently.

How and why does the door open by itself? Vibrations from the helicopter perhaps, but that's not a satisfactory explanation. By pure coincidence, just as Karin prays for a miracle, door and helicopter join forces to give it to her. Yet, amazingly, the action doesn't seem contrived. For Bergman's created, in Jungian terms, an event of Synchronicity: the fusion of meaningful coincidence around a center of tremendous emotion. By allowing us to hear Karin's voices, by showing us her acute sensitivity to nature, and by dramatizing her burning need for a miracle, we come to expect the supernatural. Karin's religious passion is at such a fever pitch that it creates a synchronous event that gives us a glimpse of something beyond the real.

BEAT #14

Karin stares into the closet; her face freezes as she sees something startling.

Karin's "God's" action: ATTACKING HER.

Suddenly, she screams in terror, and as if being pursued, runs across the room, jamming herself into a corner, bringing her legs and arms up to protect herself.

Karin's reaction: FIGHTING OFF HER "GOD."

BEAT #15

Martin grabs her.

Martin's action: RESTRAINING HER.

She pushes him off and flees to another corner.

Karin's reaction: ESCAPING MARTIN.

BEAT #16

As if something were crawling up her body, she presses her fists into her groin, then flails wildly at an unseen assailant.

"God's" action: TRYING TO RAPE KARIN.

Karin's reaction: BATTLING "GOD'S" RAPE.

Now David joins Martin and tries to hold her.

David's reaction: HELPING HOLD HER.

BEAT #17

But she breaks away and rushes out of the door into the

INT. UPSTAIRS HALL—SAME

and down the stairs.

Karin's action: FLEEING.

INT. ON THE STAIRS—SAME

Suddenly, Minus appears at the bottom.

Minus blocks her way. Karin stops and stares at her brother.

Minus's reaction: TRAPPING HER.

BEAT #18

David grabs her and pulls her down onto the stairs. Martin arrives with a syringe. Karin fights like a trapped animal.

Martin's and David's action: SEDATING HER.

MARTIN

Hold her legs.

She thrashes in their arms as Martin struggles to give her an injection.

Karin's reaction: WILDLY RESISTING THE NEEDLE.

BEAT #19

She leans against her father and looks steadily into the anxious face of her brother.

The sedative's action: CALMING HER.

Karen's reaction: SURRENDERING TO THE DRUG.

David's and Martin's reaction: CALMING THEMSELVES.

Minus's reaction: TRYING TO UNDERSTAND.

BEAT #20

KARIN
I was suddenly afraid.

Karin's action: WARNING MINUS.

All three men's reaction: LISTENING QUIETLY.

KARIN
(slowly explaining
to her brother)
The door opened. But the god that came out was a spider. He came towards me and I saw his face. It was a horrible, stony face. He crawled up me and tried to force himself into me. But I defended myself. The whole time I saw his eyes. They were calm and cold. As he couldn't force his way into me, he climbed up onto my breast, onto my face and went up the wall.
(a long look into
Minus's eyes)
I have seen God.

Although the spider-god rape is a delusion thrown up from her subconscious, once back in reality she treats the hallucination with ironic respect. She offers her terrifying discovery to all three men, but primarily to Minus as a cautionary tale, warning her brother that prayers will not be answered.

Step Four: Note Closing Value and Compare with Opening Value

Karin's encounter with the spider-god turns the scene from hope to hopelessness. She prays for an epiphany and gives this "miracle" to her father, knowing that because of his own incapacity for authentic emotion, he's hungry for the life experiences of others to fill the pages of his novels. She offers faith to her husband, but his responses are limited to sexual gestures and medical posturing. Her "miracle" then explodes into a nightmare and her trust in God is shattered.

In the final beat, Karin gives her grotesque vision to her brother as a warning, but this last gesture is slight, compared to the scene's dramatization of overwhelming despair. We're left with the feeling that intellectualizing love, as the novelist and doctor do throughout the film, is pitifully weak in the face of the incomprehensible forces that inhabit our natures.

Step Five: Survey the Beats and Locate the Turning Point

1. Planning Her Escape/Concealing His Guilt
2. Escaping Her "God"/Helping Her
3. Searching for Karin/Helping Him Search
4. Praying/Rushing to Her and Preparing to Recapture Her
5. Preparing for Her Epiphany/Observing Her Madness and Fighting His Emotions.
6. Stopping Her Hallucination/Protecting Her Dream
7. Pulling Her Away/Standing Her Ground

8. Denying the Existence of God/Defending Her Faith
9. Ordering Martin Away/Retreating
10. Drawing Martin to Her Ritual/Surrendering to Her
11. Caressing Her/Fighting Him Off
12. Praying with All Her Power/Announcing "God's" Arrival
13. Appearing to Karin/Receiving Her "God"
14. Attacking Karin/Fighting Off Her "God"
15. Restraining Her/Escaping Martin
16. Trying to Rape Karin/Battling "God"
17. Fleeing/Trapping Her
18. Sedating Her/Resisting the Needle
19. Calming Her/Calming Themselves and Trying to Understand
20. Warning Minus/Listening Quietly

Beats begin lightly, almost comically, then progress rapidly. Each action/reaction tops the previous exchange, demanding more from all the characters, and, in particular, demanding more and more willpower from Karin to survive her horrifying visions. The gap opens between Beats #13 and #14 when Karin's expectation of God results in a sexual attack by a hallucinatory spider. Unlike the revelation that turns the scene from CASABLANCA, the Turning Point of this Climax pivots on action—in this case, an action of appalling power taken by the protagonist's subconscious mind.

These superb scenes have been used to demonstrate the technique of analysis. Although they differ in levels of conflict and quality of actions, they share the same essential form. What is virtually perfect in them would be flawed in others of lesser worth. Ill-written scenes may lack conflict because desires are not opposed, may be antiprogressive because they're repetitious or circular, lopsided because their Turning Points come too early or too late, or lacking credibility because dialogue and action are "on the nose." But an analysis of a problematic scene that tests beats against scene objectives, altering behavior to fit desire or desire to fit behavior, will lead to a rewrite that brings the scene to life.

12

COMPOSITION

Composition means the ordering and linking of scenes. Like a composer choosing notes and chords, we shape progressions by selecting what to include, to exclude, to put before and after what. The task can be harrowing, for as we come to know our subject, every story possibility seems alive and squirming in a different direction. The disastrous temptation is to somehow include them all. Fortunately, to guide our efforts the art has evolved canons of composition: *Unity and Variety, Pacing, Rhythm and Tempo, Social and Personal Progression, Symbolic and Ironic Ascension,* and the *Principle of Transition.*

UNITY AND VARIETY

A story, even when expressing chaos, must be unified. This sentence, drawn from any plot, should be logical: "Because of the Inciting Incident, the Climax *had to happen.*" JAWS: "Because the shark killed a swimmer, the sheriff had to destroy the shark." KRAMER VS. KRAMER: "Because Kramer's wife left him and her child, only husband and wife could finally settle custody." We should sense a causal lock between Inciting Incident and Story Climax. The Inciting Incident is the story's most profound cause, and, therefore, the final effect, the Story Climax, should seem inevitable. The cement that binds them is the Spine, the protagonist's deep desire to restore the balance of life.

Unity is critical, but not sufficient. Within this unity, we must induce as much variety as possible. CASABLANCA, for example, is not only one of the most loved films of all time, it's also one of the most various. It's a brilliant *Love Story*, but more than half the film is *Political Drama*. Its excellent action sequences are counterpointed by urbane comedy. And it's the next thing to a *Musical*. Over a dozen tunes, strategically placed throughout, comment on or set up event, meaning, emotion.

Most of us are not capable of this much variety, nor would our stories warrant it, but we don't want to hit the same note over and over, so that every scene sounds like every other. Instead, we seek the tragic in the comic, the political in the personal, the personal driving the political, the extraordinary behind the usual, the trivial in the exalted. The key to varying a repetitious cadence is research. Superficial knowledge leads to a bland, monotonous telling. With authorial knowledge we can prepare a feast of pleasures. Or at the very least, add humor.

PACING

If we slowly turn the screw, increasing tension a little more, a little more, a little more, scene by scene by scene, we wear the audience out long before the ending. It goes limp and has no energy to invest in the Story Climax. Because a story is a metaphor for life, we expect it to feel like life, to have the rhythm of life. This rhythm beats between two contradictory desires: On one hand, we desire serenity, harmony, peace, and relaxation, but too much of this day after day and we become bored to the point of ennui and need therapy. As a result, we also desire challenge, tension, danger, even fear. But too much of this day after day and again we end up in the rubber room. So the rhythm of life swings between these poles.

The rhythm of a typical day, for example: You wake up full of energy, meet your gaze in the morning mirror, and say: "Today I'm going to get something done. No, I mean it for a change. Today I'm definitely getting something done." Off you go to "get something done" through a minefield of missed appointments, unreturned calls, pointless errands, and unrelenting hassle until you take a welcome midday lunch with friends to chat, sip wine, relocate your sanity, relax and gather your energies so you can go off to do battle with the demons of the afternoon, hoping to get done all the things you didn't get done in the morning—more missed calls, more useless tasks, and never, never enough time.

Finally you hit the highway home, a road packed with cars with only one person in each. Do you car pool? No. After a hard day on the job, the last thing you want is to jump into a car with three other jerks from work. You escape into your car, snap on the radio, and get in the proper lane according to the music. If classical, you hug the right; if pop, down the middle of the road; if rock, head left. We moan about traffic but never do anything about it because, in truth, we secretly enjoy rush hour; drive-time is the only time most of us are ever alone. You relax, scratch what needs scratching, and add a primal scream to the music.

Home for a quick shower, then off into the night looking for fun. What's fun? Amusement park rides that scare the life out of you, a film that makes you suffer emotions you'd never want in life, a singles bar and the humiliation of rejection. Weary, you fall into the rack and next dawn start this rhythm all over again.

This alternation between tension and relaxation is the pulse of living, the rhythm of days, even years. In some films it's salient, in others subtle. TENDER MERCIES eases dramatic pressure gently up, then gently down, each cycle slowly increasing the overall tension to Climax; THE FUGITIVE sculpts tension to sharp peaks, then ebbs briefly before accelerating higher still. Each film speaks in its natural accent, but never in flat, repetitious, passive nonevents, or in unrelenting, bludgeoning action. Whether Archplot, Miniplot, or Antiplot, all fine stories flux with the rhythm of life.

We use our act structure to start at a base of tension, then rise scene by sequence to the Climax of Act One. As we enter Act Two, we compose scenes that reduce this tension, switching to comedy, romance, a counterpointing mood that lowers the Act One intensity so that the audience can catch its breath and reach for more energy. We coach the audience to move like a long-distance runner who, rather than loping at a constant pace, speeds, slows, then speeds again, creating cycles that allow him to reach the limit of his reserves.

After retarding pace, we build the progressions of the following act until we top the previous Climax in intensity and meaning. Act by act, we tighten and release tension until the final Climax empties out the audience, leaving it emotionally exhausted but fulfilled. Then a brief Resolution scene to recuperate before going home.

It's just like sex. Masters of the bedroom arts pace their lovemaking. They begin by taking each other to a state of delicious tension short of—and we use the same word in both cases—climax, then tell a joke and shift positions before building each other to an even higher tension short of climax; then have a sandwich, watch TV, and gather energy to then reach greater and greater intensity, making love in cycles of rising tension until they finally climax simultaneously and the earth moves and they see colors. The gracious storyteller makes love to us. He knows we're capable of a tremendous release . . . if he paces us to it.

RHYTHM AND TEMPO

Rhythm is set by the length of scenes. How long are we in the same time and place? A typical two-hour feature plays forty to sixty scenes. This means, on average, a scene lasts two and a half minutes. But not every scene. Rather, for every one-minute scene there's a four-minute scene. For every thirty-second scene, a six-minute scene. In a properly formatted screenplay a page equals a minute of screen time. Therefore, if as you turn through your script, you discover a two-page scene followed by an eight-page scene, a seven-page scene, three-page scene, four-page, six-page, five-page, one-page, nine-page—in other words, if the average length of scene in your script is five pages, your story will have the pace of a postal worker on Valium.

Most directors' cameras drink up whatever is visually expressive in one location within two or three minutes. If a scene goes on longer, shots become redundant. The editor keeps coming back to the same establishing shot, same two-shot, close-up. When shots repeat, expressivity drains away; the film becomes visually dull and the eye loses interest and wanders from the screen. Do this enough and you'll lose the audience for good. The average scene length of two to three minutes is a reaction to the nature of cinema and the audience's hunger for a stream of expressive moments.

When we study the many exceptions to this principle, they only prove the point. TWELVE ANGRY MEN takes place over two days in a jury room. In essence, it consists of two fifty-minute scenes in one location, with a brief break for a night's sleep. But because it's based on a play, director Sidney Lumet could take advantage of its *French Scenes.*

In the Neoclassical period (1750–1850) the French theatre strictly obeyed the *Unities*: A set of conventions that restricted a play's performance to one basic action or plot, taking place in one location within the time it takes to perform. But the French realized that within this unity of time and space the entrance or exit of principal characters radically changes the dynamics of relationships and in effect creates a new scene. For example, in a garden setting young lovers play a scene together, then her mother discovers them. Her entrance so alters character relationships that it effects a new scene. This trio has a scene, then the young man exits. His exit so rearranges the relationship between mother and daughter that masks fall and a new scene begins.

Understanding the principle of *French scenes,* Lumet broke the jury room into sets within the set—the drinking fountain, cloakroom, window, one end of the table versus the other. Within these sublocations, he staged *French Scenes:* First jury members #1 and #2, then #2 exits while #5 and #7 enter, CUT TO #6 alone, CUT TO all twelve, CUT TO five of them off in a corner, and so on. The over eighty *French Scenes* in TWELVE ANGRY MEN build an exciting *rhythm.*

MY DINNER WITH ANDRE is even more contained: a two-hour film about a two-hour dinner with two characters and therefore no *French Scenes.* Yet the film pulses with *rhythm* because it's paced with scenes created, as in literature, by painting word pictures on the imagination of the listener: the adventure in the Polish forest, Andre's friends burying him alive in a bizarre ritual, the synchronistic phenomenon he encounters in his office. These erudite recountings wrap an *Education Plot* around an *Education Plot.* As Andre (Andre Gregory) relates his quixotic adventure toward spiritual development, he so cants his friend's view of life that Wally (Wallace Shawn) leaves the restaurant a changed man.

Tempo is the level of activity within a scene via dialogue, action, or a combination. For example, lovers talking quietly from pillow to pillow may have low tempo; an argument in a courtroom, high tempo. A character staring out a window coming to a vital life decision may have low tempo; a riot, high tempo.

In a well-told story, the progression of scenes and sequences accelerates pace. As we head toward act climaxes, we take advantage of *rhythm* and *tempo* to progressively shorten scenes while the activity in them becomes more and more brisk. Like music and dance, story is kinetic. We want to use cinema's sensory power to hurl the audience toward act climaxes because scenes of major reversal are, in fact, generally long, slow, and tense. "Climactic" doesn't mean short and explosive; it means *profound change.* Such scenes are not to be skimmed over. So we open them and let them breathe; we retard pace while the audience holds its breath, wondering what's going to happen next.

Again, the Law of Diminishing Returns applies: The more often we pause, the less effective a pause is. If the scenes before a major Climax are long and slow, the big scene in which we want the tension to hold falls flat. Because we've dragged the energies of the audience through sluggish scenes of minor importance, events of great moment are greeted with a shrug. Instead, we must "earn the pause" by telescoping *rhythm* while spiraling *tempo,* so that when the Climax arrives, we can put the brakes on, stretch the playing time, and the tension holds.

The problem with this design, of course, is that it's a cliché. D. W. Griffith mastered it. Filmmakers of the Silent Era knew that something as trivial as another chase to collar the bad guys can feel tremendous if pace is excited by making scenes ever shorter and *tempo* ever hasty. But techniques don't become clichés unless they have something important going for them in the first place. We, therefore, cannot, out of ignorance or arrogance, ignore the principle. If we lengthen and slow scenes prior to a major reversal, we cripple our Climax.

Pace begins in the screenplay. Cliché or not, we must control *rhythm* and *tempo*. It needn't be a symmetrical swelling of activity and shaving of scene lengths, but progressions must be shaped. For if we don't, the film editor will. And if to trim our sloppy work he cuts some of our favorite moments, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We're screenwriters, not refugees from the novel. Cinema is a unique art form. The screenwriter must master the aesthetics of motion pictures and create a screenplay that prepares the way for the artists who follow.

EXPRESSING PROGRESSION

When a story genuinely progresses it calls upon greater and greater human capacity, demands greater and greater willpower, generates greater and greater change in characters' lives, and places them at greater and greater jeopardy. How are we to express this? How will the audience sense the progressions? There are four primary techniques.

SOCIAL PROGRESSION

Widen the impact of character actions into society.

Let your story begin intimately, involving only a few principal characters. But as the telling moves forward, allow their actions to ramify outward into the world around them, touching and changing the lives of more and more people. Not all at once. Rather, spread the effect gradually through the progressions.

LONE STAR: Two men searching for spent shells on a deserted rifle range in Texas uncover the skeletal remains of a sheriff who vanished decades before. Evidence at the scene leads the current sheriff to suspect that his own father may have committed the murder. As he investigates, the story spreads outward into society and back through time, tracing a pattern of corruption and injustice that has touched and changed the lives of three generations of Texan-, Mexican- and African Americans—virtually every citizen in Rio County.

MEN IN BLACK: A chance encounter between a farmer and a fugitive alien searching for a rare gem slowly ramifies outward to jeopardize all of creation.

This principle of starting with intimate problems that ramify outward into the world to build powerful progressions explains why certain professions are overrepresented in the roles of protagonists. This is why we tend to tell stories about lawyers, doctors, warriors, politicians, scientists—people so positioned in society by profession that if something goes haywire in their private lives, the writer can expand the action into society.

Imagine a story that begins like this: The President of the United States gets up one morning to shave and as he stares in the mirror, he hallucinates about imaginary enemies around the globe. He tells no one, but soon his wife realizes he's gone mad. His close associates too. They gather and decide that since he has only six months left in office, why spoil things now? They'll cover up for him. But we know he has "his finger on the button" and a madman in this position could turn our troubled world into universal hell.

PERSONAL PROGRESSION

Drive actions deeply into the intimate relationships and inner lives of the characters.

If the logic of your setting doesn't allow you to go wide, then you must go deep. Start with a personal or inner conflict that demands balancing, yet seems relatively solvable. Then, as the work progresses, hammer the story downward—emotionally, psychologically, physically, morally—to the dark secrets, the unspoken truths that hide behind a public mask.

ORDINARY PEOPLE is confined to the family, a friend, and a doctor. From a tension between mother and son that seems solvable with communication and love, it descends to grievous pain. As the father slowly comes to realize he must choose between the sanity of his son and the unity of his family, the story drives the child to the brink of suicide, the mother to reveal her hatred of her own child, and the husband to lose a wife he deeply loves.

CHINATOWN is an elegant design that combines both techniques, reaching simultaneously wide and deep. A private eye is hired to investigate a man for adultery. Then, like an oil slick, the story moves outward in an ever-widening circle that engulfs city hall, millionaire conspirators, farmers of the San Fernando Valley, until it contaminates all the citizens of Los Angeles. At the same time it plunges inward. Gittes is under constant assault: kicks to the groin, blows to the head, his nose split open. Mulwray is killed, incest exposed between father and daughter until the protagonist's tragic past repeats to trigger the death of Evelyn Mulwray and throw an innocent child into the hands of an insane father/grandfather.

SYMBOLIC ASCENSION

Build the symbolic charge of the story's imagery from the particular to the universal, the specific to the archetypal.

A good story well told fosters a good film. But a good story well told with the added power of subliminal symbolism lifts the telling to the next level of expressivity, and the payoff may be a *great* film. Symbolism is very compelling. Like images in our dreams, it invades the unconscious mind and touches us deeply—as long as we're unaware of its presence. If, in a heavy-handed way, we label images as "symbolic," their effect is destroyed. But if they are slipped quietly, gradually, and unassumingly into the telling, they move us profoundly.

Symbolic progression works in this way: start with actions, locations, and roles that represent only themselves. But as the story progresses, chose images that gather greater and greater meaning, until by the end of the telling characters, settings, and events stand for universal ideas.

THE DEER HUNTER introduces steel workers in Pennsylvania who like to hunt, drink beer, and carouse. They're as ordinary as the town they live in. But as events progress, sets, roles, and actions become more and more symbolically charged, building from the tiger cages in Vietnam to the highly symbolic scenes in a Saigon casino where men play Russian Roulette for money, culminating in a Crisis at the top of a mountain. The protagonist, Michael (Robert De Niro) progresses from factory worker to warrior to "The Hunter," the man who kills.

The film's Controlling Idea is: *We save our own humanity when we stop killing other living beings.* If the hunter spills enough blood, sooner or later he runs out of targets and turns the gun on himself. He either literally kills himself, as does Nick (Christopher Walken), or more likely, he kills himself in the sense that he stops feeling anything and falls dead inside. The Crisis sends Michael in his hunter's garb, armed with a weapon, to a mountaintop. There, on a precipice, the prey, a magnificent elk, comes out of the mist. An archetypal image: *hunter and prey at the top of a mountain.* Why the top of a mountain? Because tops of mountains are places where "great things happen." Moses is given the Ten Commandments, not in his kitchen, but *at the top of a mountain.*

THE TERMINATOR takes symbolic progression in a different direction, not up the mountain but into the maze. Opening with step-down imagery of commonplace people in commonplace settings, it tells the story of Sarah Connor, a fast-food waitress in Los Angeles. Suddenly, the Terminator and Reese explode into the present from the year 2029, and pursue Sarah through the streets of L.A., one trying to kill her, the other to save her.

We learn that in the future robots become self-aware and try to stamp out the human race that created them. They nearly succeed when the remnants of humanity are led in a revolt by the charismatic John Connor. He turns the tide against the robots and all but stamps them out, when the robots invent a time machine and send into the past an assassin to kill Connor's mother before he's born, thus eliminating Connor from existence and winning the war for the robots. Connor captures the time machine, discovers the plan, and sends back his lieutenant, Reese, to kill this monster before it kills his mother.

The streets of Los Angeles conspire into the ancient archetype of the labyrinth. Freeways, alleyways, cul-de-sacs, and corridors of buildings twist and turn the characters until they work their way down to its tangled heart. There Sarah, like Theseus at the center of the Minoan maze battling the half-man/half-bull Minotaur, confronts the half-man/half-robot Terminator. If she vanquishes the demon, she will, like the Virgin Mary, give birth to the savior of humanity, John Connor (JC), and raise him to lead humanity to deliverance in the coming holocaust. Sarah progresses from waitress to goddess, and the film's symbolic progression lifts it above almost all others in its genre.

IRONIC ASCENSION

Turn progression on irony.

Irony is the subtlest manifestation of story pleasure, that delicious sense of "Ah, life is just like that." It sees life in duality; it plays with our paradoxical existence, aware of the bottomless chasm between what seems and what is. Verbal irony is found in the discrepancy between words and their meanings—a primary source of jokes. But in story, irony plays between actions and results—the primary source of story energy, between appearance and reality—the primary source of truth and emotion.

An ironic sensibility is a precious asset, a razor to cut to the truth, but it can't be used directly. It does us no good to have a character wander the story saying, "How ironic!" Like symbolism, to point at irony destroys it. Irony must be coolly, casually released with a seemingly innocent unawareness of the effect it's creating and a faith that the audience will get it. Because irony is by nature slippery, it defies a hard and fast definition, and is best explained by example. Below are six ironic story patterns with an example for each.

1. **He gets at last what he's always wanted . . . but too late to have it.**

OTHELLO: The Moor finally gets what he always wanted, a wife who is true to him and who never betrayed him with another man . . . but when he finds that out, it's too late, because he just killed her.

2. **He's pushed further and further from his goal . . . only to discover that in fact he's been led right to it.**

RUTHLESS PEOPLE: The greedy businessman, Sam (Danny Devito), steals an idea from Sandy (Helen Slater) and makes a fortune without paying her a cent of royalties. Sandy's husband, Ken (Judge Reinhold), decides to kidnap Sam's wife, Barbara (Bette Midler), and ransom her for the two million dollars he feels his wife is owed. But when Ken abducts Barbara, he doesn't know that Sam is coming home to murder his shrewish and overweight wife. Ken calls Sam demanding millions, but the gleeful Sam puts him off. Ken keeps lowering the price until at ten thousand dollars Sam says, "Oh, why don't you just kill her and get it over with."

Meanwhile, Barbara, held captive in the Kessler basement, has turned her prison into a spa. She's following all the exercise programs on TV, Sandy's an excellent natural foods cook, and as a result, Barbara loses more weight than she ever did at the best fat farms in America. Consequently, she loves her kidnappers. And when they tell her they'll have to let her go because her husband won't pay the ransom, she turns to them and says, "I'll get the money for ya." That was Act One.

3. **He throws away what he later finds is indispensable to his happiness.**

MOULIN ROUGE: The crippled artist Toulouse-Lautrec (Jose Ferrer) falls in love with the beautiful Suzanne (Myriamme Hayem) but can't bring himself to tell her this. She accompanies him as a friend around Paris. Lautrec becomes convinced that the only reason she spends time with him is that it gives her the opportunity to meet handsome men. In a drunken rage he accuses her of using him and storms out of her life.

Some time later he receives a letter from Suzanne: "Dear Toulouse, I always hoped that some day you might love me. Now I realize that you never will. So I have taken the offer of another man. I don't love him, but he's kind and as you know my situation is desperate. Adieu." Lautrec frantically searches for her, but indeed she's left to marry another. So he drinks himself to death.

4. **To reach a goal he unwittingly takes the precise steps necessary to lead him away.**

TOOTSIE: Michael (Dustin Hoffman), an out-of-work actor whose perfectionism has alienated every producer in New York, impersonates a woman and is cast in a soap opera. On the set he meets and falls in love with Julie (Jessica Lange). But he's such a brilliant actor, her father (Charles Durning) wants to marry him while Julie suspects he's a lesbian.

5. **The action he takes to destroy something becomes exactly what are needed to be destroyed by it.**

RAIN: The religious bigot Reverend Davidson (Walter Huston) battles to save the soul of the prostitute Sadie Thompson (Joan Crawford), but falls into lust for her, rapes her, then kills himself in shame.

6. **He comes into possession of something he's certain will make him miserable, does everything possible to get rid of it . . . only to discover it's the gift of happiness.**

BRINGING UP BABY: When the madcap socialite Susan (Katharine Hepburn) inadvertently steals the car of the naive and repressed paleontologist Dr. David Huxley (Cary Grant), she likes what she sees and sticks to him like glue. He tries everything possible to get rid of her, but she foils his lunatic evasions, chiefly by stealing his bone, the "intercostal clavicle" of a brontosaurus. (If there were such a thing as an "intercostal clavicle," it would belong to a creature with its head attached well below its shoulders.)

Susan's persistence pays off as she transforms David from fossilized child to life-embracing adult.

The key to ironic progression is certainty and precision. Like CHINATOWN, SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS, and many other superb films, these are stories of protagonists who feel they know for certain what they must do and have a precise plan how to do it. They think life is A, B, C, D, E. That's just when life likes to turn you around, kick you in the butt, and grin: "Not today, my friend. Today it's E, D, C, B, A. Sorry."

PRINCIPLE OF TRANSITION

A story without a sense of progression tends to stumble from one scene to the next. It has little continuity because nothing links its events. As we design cycles of rising action, we must at the same time transition the audience smoothly through them. Between two scenes, therefore, we need a third element, the link that joins the tail of Scene A with the head of Scene B. Generally, we find this third element in one of two places: what the scenes have in common or what they have in opposition.

The third element is the hinge for a transition; something held in common by two scenes or counterpointed between them.

Examples:

1. *A characterization trait.* In common: cut from a bratty child to a childish adult. In opposition: cut from awkward protagonist to elegant antagonist.
2. *An action.* In common: From the foreplay of lovemaking to savoring the afterglow. In opposition: From chatter to cold silence.
3. *An object.* In common: From greenhouse interior to woodland exterior. In opposition: From the Congo to Antarctica.

4. *A word.* In common: A phrase repeated from scene to scene. In opposition: From compliment to curse.
5. *A quality of light.* In common: From shadows at dawn to shade at sunset. In opposition: From blue to red.
6. *A sound.* In common: From waves lapping a shore to the rise and fall of a sleeper's breath. In opposition: From silk caressing skin to the grinding of gears.
7. *An idea.* In common: From a child's birth to an overture. In opposition: From a painter's empty canvas to an old man dying.

After a century of filmmaking, transition clichés abound. Yet we can't put down the task. An imaginative study of almost any two scenes will find a link.

13

CRISIS, CLIMAX, RESOLUTION

CRISIS

Crisis is the third of the five-part form. It means decision. Characters make spontaneous decisions each time they open this mouths to say "this" not "that." In each scene they make a decision to take one action rather than another. But Crisis with a capital C is the ultimate decision. The Chinese ideogram for Crisis is two terms: Danger/Opportunity—"danger" in that the wrong decision at this moment will lose forever what we want; "opportunity" in that the right choice will achieve our desire.

The protagonist's quest has carried him through the Progressive Complications until he's exhausted all actions to achieve his desire, save one. He now finds himself at the end of the line. His next action is his last. No tomorrow. No second chance. This moment of dangerous opportunity is the point of greatest tension in the story as both protagonist and audience sense that the question "How will this turn out?" will be answered out of the next action.

The Crisis is the story's Obligatory Scene. From the Inciting Incident on, the audience has been anticipating with growing vividness the scene in which the protagonist will be face to face with the most focused, powerful forces of antagonism in his existence. This is the dragon, so to speak, that guards the Object of Desire: be it the literal dragon of JAWS or the metaphorical dragon of meaninglessness in TENDER MERCIES. The audience leans into the Crisis filled with expectation mingled with uncertainty.

The Crisis must be true dilemma—a choice between irreconcilable goods, the lesser of two evils, or the two at once that places the protagonist under the maximum pressure of his life.

This dilemma confronts the protagonist who, when face-to-face with the most powerful and focused forces of antagonism in his life, must make a decision to take one action or another in a last effort to achieve his Object of Desire.

How the protagonist chooses here gives us the most penetrating view of his deep character, the ultimate expression of his humanity.

This scene reveals the story's most important value. If there's been any doubt about which value is central, as the protagonist makes the Crisis Decision, the primary value comes to the fore.

At Crisis the protagonist's willpower is most severely tested. As we know from life, decisions are far more difficult to make than actions are to take. We often put off doing something for as long as possible, then as we finally make the decision and step into the action, we're surprised by its relative ease. We're left to wonder why we dreaded doing it until we realize that most of life's actions are within our reach, but decisions take willpower.

CRISIS WITHIN THE CLIMAX

The action the protagonist chooses to take becomes the story's consummate event, causing a positive, negative, or ironically positive/negative Story Climax. If, however, as the protagonist takes the climactic action, we once more pry apart the gap between expectation and result, if we can split probability from necessity just one more time, we may create a majestic ending the audience will treasure for a lifetime. For a Climax built around a Turning Point is the most satisfying of all.

We've taken the protagonist through progressions that exhaust one action after another until he reaches the limit and thinks he finally understands his world and knows what he must do in a last effort. He draws on the dregs of his willpower, chooses an action he believes will achieve his desire, but, as always, his world won't cooperate. Reality splits and he must improvise. The protagonist may or may not get what he wants, but it won't be the way he expects.

Compare STAR WARS with THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: At the Crisis of STAR WARS Luke Skywalker attacks the "Death Star," a manmade fortress as huge as a planet. But it's not fully constructed. A vulnerable slot lies open on one side of the sphere. Luke must not only attack into the slot, but hit a vulnerable spot within it. He's an expert fighter pilot but tries without success to hit the spot. As he maneuvers his craft by computer, he hears the voice of Obi-Wan Kenobi: "Go with the Force, go with the Force."

A sudden dilemma of irreconcilable goods: the computer versus the mysterious "Force." He wrestles with the anguish of choice, then pushes his computer aside, flies by instinct into the slot, and fires a torpedo that hits the spot. The destruction of the Death Star climaxes the film, a straight action out of the Crisis.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, by contrast, corkscrews its Climax: Face to face with Darth Vader, Luke is met by a Crisis of courage. Irreconcilable goods: He could attack and kill Vader, or he could flee and save his life. The lesser of two evils: He could attack Vader and be killed, or he could flee, making him a coward and betraying his friends. Luke musters his courage and chooses to fight. However, when Vader suddenly steps back and says: "You can't kill me, Luke . . . I'm your father," Luke's reality splinters. In a flash he realizes the truth and now must make yet another Crisis Decision: whether to kill his father.

Luke confronts the agony of this decision and chooses to fight. But Vader cuts off his hand and Luke drops to the deck. Still, it's not over. Vader announces that he wants Luke to join his campaign to bring "order to things" in the universe. A second Gap opens as Luke realizes that his father doesn't want him dead, he's offering him a job. He must make a third Crisis Decision, a lesser-of-two-evils dilemma: to join the "dark side" or take his own life? He makes the heroic choice, and as these Gaps explode, the Climax delivers deep rushes of insight uniting two films.

Placement of the Crisis

The location of the Crisis is determined by the length of the climactic action.

Generally, Crisis and Climax happen in the last minutes and in the same scene.

THELMA & LOUISE: At Crisis the women brave the lesser of two evils: imprisonment versus death. They look at each other and make their *Crisis Decision* to "go for it," a courageous choice to take their own lives. They immediately drive their car into the Grand Canyon—an unusually brief Climax elongated by filming it in slow-motion and freeze-framing on the car suspended over the abyss.

However, in other stories the Climax becomes an expansive action with its own progressions. As a result, it's possible to use the Crisis Decision to turn the Penultimate Act Climax, filling all of the final act with climactic action.

CASABLANCA: Rick pursues Ilsa until she surrenders to him in the Act Two Climax, saying that he must make the decisions for everyone. In the next scene, Laszlo urges Rick to rejoin the antifascist cause. This irreconcilable-goods dilemma turns the act on Rick's selfless Crisis Decision to return Ilsa to Laszlo and put wife and husband on the plane to America, a character-defining choice that reverses his conscious desire for Ilsa. The third act of CASABLANCA is fifteen minutes of climactic action that unravels Rick's surprise-filled scheme to help the couple escape.

In rarer examples the Crisis Decision immediately follows the Inciting Incident and the entire film becomes climactic action.

JAMES BOND: Inciting Incident: Bond is offered the task of hunting down an arch-villain. Crisis Decision: Bond takes the assignment—a right/wrong choice and not a true dilemma, for it would never occur to him to choose otherwise. From this point on, all Bond films are an elaborate progression of a single action: the pursuit of the villain. Bond never makes another decision of substance, simply choices of which ploys to use in the pursuit.

LEAVING LAS VEGAS has the identical form. Inciting Incident: the protagonist is fired and given a sizable severance check. He immediately makes his Crisis Decision to go to Las Vegas and drink himself to death. From this point on the film becomes a sad progression toward death as he follows his desire.

IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES: Inciting Incident: Lovers meet within the first ten minutes and decide to abandon society and normalcy for a life of sexual obsession. The remaining hundred minutes are devoted to sexual experimentations that eventually lead to death.

The great risk of placing the Crisis on the heels of the Inciting Incident is repetitiousness. Whether it's high-budget action repeating patterns of chase/fight, chase/fight, or low-budget repetitions of drinking/drinking/drinking or lovemaking/lovemaking/lovemaking, the problems of variety and progression are staggering. Yet mastery of this task may produce brilliance, as it did in the examples above.

Design of the Crisis

Although the Crisis Decision and climactic action usually take place in continuous time within the same location at the very end of the telling, it's not uncommon for the Crisis decision to occur in one location, the Story Climax later in another setting.

The value of love in KRAMER VS. KRAMER turns negative at the Act Two Climax as a judge awards custody to Kramer's ex-wife. As Act Three opens Kramer's lawyer lays out the situation: Kramer has lost, but he could win on appeal. To do so, however, he'll have to put his son on the witness stand and make the child choose with whom he wants to live. The boy will probably choose his father, and Kramer will win. But to put a child at this tender age in public and force him to choose between his mother and his father will psychologically scar him for life. A double dilemma of the needs of self versus the needs of another, the suffering of the self versus the suffering of another. Kramer looked up and said, "No, I can't do that." Cut to the Climax: a walk in Central Park and a river of tears as the father explains to his son how their life will be now that they'll live apart.

If the Crisis takes place in one location and the Climax later in another, we must splice them together on a cut, fusing them in filmic time and space. If we do not, if we cut from the Crisis to other material—a subplot, for example—we drain the pent-up energy of the audience into an anticlimax.

The Crisis decision must be a deliberately static moment.

This is the Obligatory Scene. *Do not put it offscreen, or skim over it.* The audience wants to suffer with the protagonist through the pain of this dilemma. We freeze this moment because the rhythm of the last movement depends on it. An emotional momentum has built to this point, but the Crisis dams its flow. As the protagonist goes through this decision, the audience leans in, wondering: "What's he going to do? What's he going to do?" Tension builds and builds, then as the protagonist makes a choice of action, that compressed energy explodes into the Climax.

THELMA & LOUISE: This Crisis is masterfully delayed as the women stutter over the word "go." "I say, let's go." "Go? What do you mean 'go'?" "Well . . . just go." "You mean . . . go?" They hesitate and hesitate as tension builds and the audience prays they won't kill themselves but at the same time is thrilled by their courage. As they put the car in gear, the dynamite of compacted anxiety blasts into the Climax.

THE DEER HUNTER: Michael stalks to the top of a mountain. But with his prey in his sights, he pauses. Tension builds and tightens as the moment extends and the audience dreads the killing of this beautiful elk. At this Crisis point the protagonist makes a decision that takes him through a profound change of character. He lowers his weapon and transforms within from a man who takes life to a man who saves life. This stunning reversal turns the Penultimate Act Climax. The pent-up compassion in the audience pours into the story's last movement as Michael now rushes back to Vietnam to save his friend's life, filling the final act with rising climactic action.

CLIMAX

Story Climax is the fourth of the five-part structure. This crowning Major Reversal is not necessarily full of noise and violence. Rather, it must be full of meaning. If I could send a telegram to the film producers of the world, it would be these three words: "*Meaning Produces Emotion.*" Not money; not sex; not special effects; not movie stars; not lush photography.

> **MEANING: A revolution in values from positive to negative or negative to positive with or without irony—a value swing at maximum charge that's absolute and irreversible. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience.**

The action that creates this change must be "pure," clear, and self-evident, requiring no explanation. Dialogue or narration to spell out it out is boring and redundant.

This action must be appropriate to the needs of the story. It may be catastrophic: The sublime battle sequence that climaxes GLORY, or outwardly trivial: A woman rises from a quiet talk with her husband, packs a suitcase, and goes out the door. That action, in the context of ORDINARY PEOPLE, is overwhelming. At Crisis, the values of family love and unity tip toward the positive as the husband desperately exposes his family's bitter secret. But at Climax, the moment his wife walks out, they swing to an absolute, irreversible negative. If, on the other hand, she were to stay, her hatred of her son might finally drive the boy to suicide. So her leaving is then toned with a positive counterpoint that ends the film on a painful, but overall negative, irony.

The Climax of the last act is your great imaginative leap. Without it, you have no story. Until you have it, your characters wait like suffering patients praying for a cure.

Once the Climax is in hand, stories are in a significant way rewritten backward, not forward. The flow of life moves from cause to effect, but the flow of creativity often flows from effect to cause. An idea for the Climax pops unsupported into the imagination. Now we must work backward to support it in the fictional reality, supplying the hows and whys. We work back from the ending to make certain that by Idea and Counter-Idea every image, beat, action, or line of dialogue somehow relates to or sets up this grand payoff. All scenes must be thematically or structurally justified in the light of the Climax. If they can be cut without disturbing the impact of the ending, they must be cut.

If logic allows, climax subplots within the Central Plot's Climax. This is a wonderful effect; one final action by the protagonist settles everything. When Rick puts Laszlo and Ilsa on the plane in CASABLANCA, he settles the *Love Story* main plot and the *Political Drama* subplot, converts Captain Renault to patriotism, kills Major Strasser, and, we feel, is the key to winning World War II . . . now that Rick is back in the fight.

If this multiplying effect is impossible, the least important subplots are best climaxed earliest, followed by the next most important, building overall to Climax of the Central Plot.

William Goldman argues that *the key to all story endings is to give the audience what it wants, but not the way it expects.* A very provocative principle: First of all, what does the audience want? Many producers state without blinking that the audience wants a happy ending. They say this because up-ending films tend to make more money than down-ending films.

The reason for this is that a small percentage of the audience won't go to any film that might give it an unpleasant experience. Generally their excuse is that they have enough tragedy in their lives. But if we were to look closely, we'd discover that they not only avoid negative emotions in movies, they avoid them in life. Such people think that happiness means never suffering, so they never feel anything deeply. The depth of our joy is in direct proportion to what we've suffered. Holocaust survivors, for example, don't avoid dark films. They go because such stories resonate with their past and are deeply cathartic.

In fact, down-ending films are often huge commercial successes: DANGEROUS LIAISONS, eighty million dollars; THE WAR OF THE ROSES, one hundred fifty million; THE ENGLISH PATIENT, two hundred twenty-five million. No one can count THE GODFATHER, PART II's money. For the vast majority doesn't care if a film ends up or down. *What the audience wants is emotional satisfaction*—a *Climax* that fulfills anticipation. How should THE GODFATHER, PART II end? Michael forgives Fredo, quits the mob, and moves to Boston with his family to sell insurance? The Climax of this magnificent film is truthful, beautiful, and very satisfying.

Who determines which particular emotion will satisfy an audience at the end of a film? The writer. From the way he tells his story from the beginning, he whispers to the audience: "Expect an up-ending" or "Expect a down-ending" or "Expect irony." Having pledged a certain emotion, it'd be ruinous not to deliver. So we give the audience the experience we've promised, but not in the way it expects. This is what separates artist from amateur.

In Aristotle's words, an ending must be both "inevitable and unexpected." Inevitable in the sense that as the Inciting Incident occurs, everything and anything seems possible, but at Climax, as the audience looks back through the telling, it should seem that the path the telling took was the *only* path. Given the characters and their world as we've come to understand it, the Climax was inevitable and satisfying. But at the same time it must be unexpected, happening *in a way* the audience could not have anticipated.

Anyone can deliver a happy ending—just give the characters everything they want. Or a downer—just kill everybody. An artist gives us the emotion he's promised . . . but with a rush of unexpected insight that he's withheld to a Turning Point within the Climax itself. So that as the protagonist improvises his final effort, he may or may not achieve his desire, but the flood of insight that pours from the gap delivers the hoped-for emotion but in a way we could never have foreseen.

The Turning Point within the Climax of LOVE SERENADE is a recent and perfect example. This brilliant Gap hurls the audience back through the entire film to glimpse with shock and delight the maniacal truth that has been lurking beneath every scene.

The key to a great film ending, as François Truffaut put it, is to create a combination of "Spectacle and Truth." When Truffaut says "Spectacle," he doesn't mean explosive effects. He means a Climax written, not for the ear, but the eye. By "Truth" he means Controlling Idea. In other words, Truffaut is asking us to create the *Key Image* of the film—a single image that sums up and concentrates all meaning and emotion. Like the coda of a symphony, the Key Image within the climactic action echoes and resonates all that has gone before. It is an image that is so tuned to the telling that when it's remembered the whole film comes back with a jolt.

GREED: McTeague collapsing into the desert, chained to the corpse he just killed. THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE: Fred C. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) dying as the wind blows his gold dust back into the mountains. LA DOLCE VITA: Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni) smiling good-bye to his ideal woman—an ideal, he realizes, that doesn't exist. THE CONVERSATION: The paranoid Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) gutting his apartment in search of a hidden microphone. THE SEVENTH SEAL: The Knight (Max von Sydow) leading his family into oblivion. THE KID: The Little Chap (Charlie Chaplin) taking the Kid (Jackie Coogan) by the hand to lead him to a happy future. SLING BLADE: Karl Childers (Billy Bob Thornton) staring in blood-chilling silence out of the window of the lunatic asylum. Key Images of this quality are rarely achieved.

RESOLUTION

The *Resolution,* the fifth of the five-part structure, is any material left after Climax and has three possible uses.

First, the logic of the telling may not provide an opportunity to climax a subplot before or during the Climax of the Central Plot, so it'll need a scene of its own at the very end. This, however, can be awkward. The story's emotional heart is in the main plot. Moreover, the audience will be leaning toward the exits, yet forced to sit through a scene of secondary interest.

The problem can be solved, however.

THE IN-LAWS: The daughter of Dr. Sheldon Kornpett (Alan Arkin) is engaged to be married to the son of Vince Ricardo (Peter Falk). Vince is a crazed CIA agent who virtually kidnaps Sheldon out of his dental office and carries him off on a mission to stop a lunatic dictator from destroying the international monetary system with counterfeit twenty-dollar bills. The Central Plot climaxes with Vince and Sheldon fending off a firing squad, bringing down the dictator, then secretly pocketing five million dollars each.

But the marriage subplot has been left open. So writer Andrew Bergman cut from the firing squad to a Resolution scene outside the wedding. As the party waits impatiently, the fathers arrive by parachute, wearing tuxedos. Each gives his respective son and daughter a cash gift of $1 million. Suddenly a car screeches up and an angry CIA agent gets out. Tension tightens. It looks as if the main plot is back and the fathers will be busted for stealing the ten million. The stern-faced CIA agent stalks up and is indeed angry. Why? Because he wasn't invited to the wedding. What's more, he took up a collection at the office and has a fifty-dollar U.S. Savings Bond for bride and groom. The fathers accept his lavish gift and welcome him to the festivities. FADE OUT.

Bergman tweaked the main plot in the Resolution. Imagine if it had ended in front of the firing squad, then cut to a garden wedding with happy families reunited. The scene would have dragged on as the audience squirmed in its seats. But by bringing the Central Plot back to life for just a moment, the screenwriter gave it a comic false twist, yoked his Resolution back to the body of the film, and held tension to the end.

A second use of a Resolution is to show the spread of climactic effects. If a film expresses progressions by widening into society, its Climax may be restricted to the principal characters. The audience, however, has come to know many supporting roles whose lives will be changed by the climactic action. This motivates a social event that satisfies our curiosity by bringing the entire cast to one location where the camera can track around to show us how these lives have been changed: the birthday party, the picnic at the beach, an Easter Egg hunt in STEEL MAGNOLIAS, a satiric title roll in ANIMAL HOUSE.

Even if the first two uses don't apply, all films need a Resolution as a courtesy to the audience. For if the Climax has moved the filmgoers, if they're laughing helplessly, riveted with terror, flushed with social outrage, wiping away tears, it's rude suddenly to go black and roll the titles. This is the cue to leave, and they will attempt to do so jangling with emotion, stumbling over one another in the dark, dropping their car keys on the Pepsi-sticky floor. A film needs what the theatre calls a "slow curtain." A line of description at the bottom of the last page that sends the camera slowly back or tracking along images for a few seconds, so the audience can catch its breath, gather its thoughts, and leave the cinema with dignity.