S·T·O·R·Y

STORY

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Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting

ROBERT McKEE

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THE WRITER AND THE ART OF STORY

Stories are equipment for living.
— KENNETH BURKE

INTRODUCTION

Story **is about principles, not rules.**

A rule says, "You *must* do it *this way*." A principle says, "This *works* . . . and has through all remembered time." The difference is crucial. Your work needn't be modeled after the "well-made" play; rather, it must be *well made* within the principles that shape our art. Anxious, inexperienced writers obey rules. Rebellious, unschooled writers break rules. Artists master the form.

Story **is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas.**

All notions of paradigms and foolproof story models for commercial success are nonsense. Despite trends, remakes, and sequels, when we survey the totality of Hollywood film, we find an astounding variety of story designs, but no prototype. DIE HARD is no more typical of Hollywood than are PARENTHOOD, POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE, THE LION KING, THIS IS SPINAL TAP, REVERSAL OF FORTUNE, DANGEROUS LIAISONS, GROUNDHOG DAY, LEAVING LAS VEGAS, or thousands of other excellent films in dozens of genres and subgenres from farce to tragedy.

Story urges the creation of works that will excite audiences on the six continents and live in revival for decades. No one needs yet another recipe book on how to reheat Hollywood leftovers. We need a rediscovery of the underlying tenets of our art, the guiding principles that liberate talent. No matter where a film is made—Hollywood, Paris, Hong Kong—if it's of archetypal quality, it triggers a global and perpetual chain reaction of pleasure that carries it from cinema to cinema, generation to generation.

Story **is about archetypes, not stereotypes.**

The archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, culture-specific expression. A stereotypical story reverses this pattern: It suffers a poverty of both content and form. It confines itself to a narrow, culture-specific experience and dresses in stale, nonspecific generalities.

For example, Spanish custom once dictated that daughters must be married off in order from oldest to youngest. Inside Spanish culture, a film about the nineteenth-century family of a strict patriarch, a powerless mother, an unmarriageable oldest daughter, and a long-suffering youngest daughter may move those who remember this practice, but outside Spanish culture audiences are unlikely to empathize. The writer, fearing his story's limited appeal, resorts to the familiar settings, characters, and actions that have pleased audiences in the past. The result? The world is even less interested in these clichés.

On the other hand, this repressive custom could become material for a worldwide success if the artist were to roll up his sleeves and search for an archetype. An archetypal story creates settings and characters so rare that our eyes feast on every detail, while its telling illuminates conflicts so true to humankind that it journeys from culture to culture.

In Laura Esquivel's LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE, mother and daughter clash over the demands of dependence versus independence, permanence versus change, self versus others—conflicts every family knows. Yet Esquivel's observation of home and society, of relationship and behavior is so rich in never-before-seen detail, we're drawn irresistibly to these characters and fascinated by a realm we've never known, nor could imagine.

Stereotypical stories stay at home, archetypal stories travel. From Charlie Chaplin to Ingmar Bergman, from Satyajit Ray to Woody Allen, the cinema's master storytellers give us the double-edged encounter we crave. First, the discovery of a world we do not know. No matter how intimate or epic, contemporary or historical, concrete or fantasized, the world of an eminent artist always strikes

us as somewhat exotic or strange. Like an explorer parting forest leaves, we step wide-eyed into an untouched society, a cliché-free zone where the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Second, once inside this alien world, we find ourselves. Deep within these characters and their conflicts we discover our own humanity. We go to the movies to enter a new, fascinating world, to inhabit vicariously another human being who at first seems so unlike us and yet at heart *is* like us, to live in a fictional reality that illuminates our daily reality. We do not wish to escape life but to find life, to use our minds in fresh, experimental ways, to flex our emotions, to enjoy, to learn, to add depth to our days. *Story* was written to foster films of archetypal power and beauty that will give the world this dual pleasure.

Story **is about thoroughness, not shortcuts.**

From inspiration to last draft you may need as much time to write a screenplay as to write a novel. Screen and prose writers create the same density of world, character, and story, but because screenplay pages have so much white on them, we're often mislead into thinking that a screenplay is quicker and easier than a novel. But while scribomaniacs fill pages as fast as they can type, film writers cut and cut again, ruthless in their desire to express the absolute maximum in the fewest possible words. Pascal once wrote a long, drawn-out letter to a friend, then apologized in the postscript that he didn't have time to write a short one. Like Pascal, screenwriters learn that economy is key, that brevity takes time, that excellence means perseverance.

Story **is about the realities, not the mysteries of writing.**

There's been no conspiracy to keep secret the truths of our art. In the twenty-three centuries since Aristotle wrote *The Poetics*, the "secrets" of story have been as public as the library down the street. Nothing in the craft of storytelling is abstruse. In fact, at first glance telling story for the screen looks deceptively easy. But

moving closer and closer to the center, trying scene by scene to make the story work, the task becomes increasingly difficult, as we realize that on the screen there's no place to hide.

If a screenwriter fails to move us with the purity of a dramatized scene, he cannot, like a novelist in authorial voice, or the playwright in soliloquy, hide behind his words. He cannot smooth a coating of explanatory or emotive language over cracks in logic, blotchy motivation, or colorless emotion and simply *tell* us what to think or how to feel.

The camera is the dread X-ray machine of all things false. It magnifies life many times over, then strips naked every weak or phony story turn, until in confusion and frustration we're tempted to quit. Yet, given determination and study, the puzzle yields. Screenwriting is full of wonders but no unsolvable mysteries.

Story is about mastering the art, not second-guessing the marketplace.

No one can teach what will sell, what won't, what will be a smash or a fiasco, because *no one knows.* Hollywood's bombs are made with the same commercial calculation as its hits, whereas darkish dramas that read like a checklist of everything moneyed wisdom says you must never do—ORDINARY PEOPLE, THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST, TRAINSPOTTING—quietly conquer the domestic and international box office. Nothing in our art is guaranteed. That's why so many agonize over "breaking in," "making it," and "creative interference."

The honest, big-city answer to all these fears is that you'll get an agent, sell your work, and see it realized faithfully on screen when you write with surpassing quality . . . and not until. If you knock out a knockoff of last summer's hit, you'll join the ranks of lesser talents who each year flood Hollywood with thousands of cliché-ridden stories. Rather than agonizing over the odds, put your energies into achieving excellence. If you show a brilliant, original screenplay to agents, they'll fight for the right to represent you. The agent you hire will incite a bidding war among story-starved pro-

ducers, and the winner will pay you an embarrassing amount of money.

What's more, once in production, your *finished* screenplay will meet with surprisingly little interference. No one can promise that unfortunate conjunctions of personalities won't spoil good work, but be certain that Hollywood's best acting and directing talents are acutely aware that their careers depend on working within quality writing. Yet because of Hollywood's ravenous appetite for story, scripts are often picked before they're ripe, forcing changes on the set. Secure writers don't sell first drafts. They patiently rewrite until the script is as director-ready, as actor-ready as possible. Unfinished work invites tampering, while polished, mature work seals its integrity.

Story **is about respect, not disdain, for the audience.**

When talented people write badly it's generally for one of two reasons: Either they're blinded by an idea they feel compelled to prove or they're driven by an emotion they must express. When talented people write well, it is generally for this reason: They're moved by a desire to touch the audience.

Night after night, through years of performing and directing, I've stood in awe of the audience, of its capacity for response. As if by magic, masks fall away, faces become vulnerable, receptive. Filmgoers do not defend their emotions, rather they open to the storyteller in ways even their lovers never know, welcoming laughter, tears, terror, rage, compassion, passion, love, hate—the ritual often exhausts them.

The audience is not only amazingly sensitive, but as it settles into a darkened theatre its collective IQ jumps twenty-five points. When you go to the movies, don't you often feel you're more intelligent than what you're watching? That you know what characters are going to do before they do it? That you see the ending coming long before it arrives? The audience is not only smart, it's smarter than most films, and that fact won't change when you move to the other side of the screen. It's all a writer can do, using every bit of

craft he's mastered, to keep ahead of the sharp perceptions of a focused audience.

No film can be made to work without an understanding of the reactions and anticipations of the audience. You must shape your story in a way that both expresses your vision and satisfies the audience's desires. The audience is a force as determining of story design as any other element. For without it, the creative act is pointless.

Story is about originality, not duplication.

Originality is the confluence of content and form—distinctive choices of subject plus a unique shaping of the telling. Content (setting, characters, ideas) and form (selection and arrangement of events) require, inspire, and mutually influence one another. With content in one hand and a mastery of form in the other, a writer sculpts story. As you rework a story's substance, the telling reshapes itself. As you play with a story's shape, its intellectual and emotional spirit evolves.

A story is not only what you have to say but how you say it. If content is cliché, the telling will be cliché. But if your vision is deep and original, your story design will be unique. Conversely, if the telling is conventional and predictable, it will demand stereotypical roles to act out well-worn behaviors. But if the story design is innovative, then settings, characters, and ideas must be equally fresh to fulfill it. We shape the telling to fit the substance, rework the substance to support the design.

Never, however, mistake eccentricity for originality. Difference for the sake of difference is as empty as slavishly following commercial imperatives. After working for months, perhaps years, to gather facts, memories, and imagination into a treasury of story material, no serious writer would cage his vision inside a formula, or trivialize it into avant-garde fragmentations. The "well-made" formula may choke a story's voice, but "art movie" quirkiness will give it a speech impediment. Just as children break things for fun or throw tantrums to force attention on themselves, too many film-

makers use infantile gimmicks on screen to shout, "Look what I can do!" A mature artist never calls attention to himself, and a wise artist never does anything merely because it breaks convention.

Films by masters such as Horton Foote, Robert Altman, John Cassavetes, Preston Sturges, François Truffaut, and Ingmar Bergman are so idiosyncratic that a three-page synopsis identifies the artist as surely as his DNA. Great screenwriters are distinguished by a personal storytelling style, a style that's not only inseparable from their vision, but in a profound way is their vision. Their formal choices—number of protagonists, rhythm of progressions, levels of conflict, temporal arrangements, and the like—play with and against substantive choices of content—setting, character, idea—until all elements meld into a unique screenplay.

If, however, we were to put the content of their films aside for the moment, and study the pure patterning of their events, we'd see that, like a melody without a lyric, like a silhouette without a matrix, their story designs are powerfully charged with meaning. The storyteller's selection and arrangement of events is his master metaphor for the interconnectedness of all the levels of reality—personal, political, environmental, spiritual. Stripped of its surface of characterization and location, story structure reveals his personal cosmology, his insight into the deepest patterns and motivations for how and why things happen in this world—his map of life's hidden order.

No matter who your heroes may be—Woody Allen, David Mamet, Quentin Tarantino, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Oliver Stone, William Goldman, Zhang Yimou, Nora Ephron, Spike Lee, Stanley Kubrick—you admire them because they're unique. Each has stepped out of the crowd because each selects a content like no one else, designs a form like no one else, combining the two into a style unmistakably his own. I want the same for you.

But my hope for you goes beyond competence and skill. I'm starved for great films. Over the last two decades I've seen good films and a few very good films, but rarely, rarely a film of staggering power and beauty. Maybe it's me; maybe I'm jaded. But I

don't think so. Not yet. I still believe that art transforms life. But I know that if you can't play all the instruments in the orchestra of story, no matter what music may be in your imagination, you're condemned to hum the same old tune. I've written *Story* to empower your command of the craft, to free you to express an original vision of life, to lift your talent beyond convention to create films of distinctive substance, structure, and style.

1

THE STORY PROBLEM

THE DECLINE OF STORY

Imagine, in one global day, the pages of prose turned, plays performed, films screened, the unending stream of television comedy and drama, twenty-four-hour print and broadcast news, bedtime tales told to children, barroom bragging, back-fence Internet gossip, humankind's insatiable appetite for stories. Story is not only our most prolific art form but rivals all activities—work, play, eating, exercise—for our waking hours. We tell and take in stories as much as we sleep—and even then we dream. Why? Why is so much of our life spent inside stories? Because as critic Kenneth Burke tells us, stories are equipment for living.

Day after day we seek an answer to the ageless question Aristotle posed in *Ethics*: How should a human being lead his life? But the answer eludes us, hiding behind a blur of racing hours as we struggle to fit our means to our dreams, fuse idea with passion, turn desire into reality. We're swept along on a risk-ridden shuttle through time. If we pull back to grasp pattern and meaning, life, like a Gestalt, does flips: first serious, then comic; static, frantic; meaningful, meaningless. Momentous world events are beyond our control while personal events, despite all effort to keep our hands on the wheel, more often than not control us.

Traditionally humankind has sought the answer to Aristotle's question from the four wisdoms—philosophy, science, religion, art—taking insight from each to bolt together a livable meaning.

But today who reads Hegel or Kant without an exam to pass? Science, once the great explicator, garbles life with complexity and perplexity. Who can listen without cynicism to economists, sociologists, politicians? Religion, for many, has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in traditional ideologies diminishes, we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of story.

The world now consumes films, novels, theatre, and television in such quantities and with such ravenous hunger that the story arts have become humanity's prime source of inspiration, as it seeks to order chaos and gain insight into life. Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience. In the words of playwright Jean Anouilh, "Fiction gives life its form."

Some see this craving for story as simple entertainment, an escape from life rather than an exploration of it. But what, after all, is entertainment? To be entertained is to be immersed in the ceremony of story to an intellectually and emotionally satisfying end. To the film audience, entertainment is the ritual of sitting in the dark, concentrating on a screen in order to experience the story's meaning and, with that insight, the arousal of strong, at times even painful emotions, and as the meaning deepens, to be carried to the ultimate satisfaction of those emotions.

Whether it's the triumph of crazed entrepreneurs over Hittite demons in GHOSTBUSTERS or the complex resolution of inner demons in SHINE; the integration of character in THE RED DESERT or its disintegration in THE CONVERSATION, all fine films, novels, and plays, through all shades of the comic and tragic, entertain when they give the audience a fresh model of life empowered with an affective meaning. To retreat behind the notion that the audience simply wants to dump its troubles at the door and escape reality is a cowardly abandonment of the artist's responsibility. Story isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence.

Yet, while the ever-expanding reach of the media now gives us the opportunity to send stories beyond borders and languages to hun-

dreds of millions, the overall quality of storytelling is eroding. On occasion we read or see works of excellence, but for the most part we weary of searching newspaper ads, video shops, and TV listings for something of quality, of putting down novels half-read, of slipping out of plays at the intermission, of walking out of films soothing our disappointment with "But it was beautifully photographed . . ." The art of story is in decay, and as Aristotle observed twenty-three hundred years ago, when storytelling goes bad, the result is decadence.

Flawed and false storytelling is forced to substitute spectacle for substance, trickery for truth. Weak stories, desperate to hold audience attention, degenerate into multimillion-dollar razzle-dazzle demo reels. In Hollywood imagery becomes more and more extravagant, in Europe more and more decorative. The behavior of actors becomes more and more histrionic, more and more lewd, more and more violent. Music and sound effects become increasingly tumultuous. The total effect transudes into the grotesque. A culture cannot evolve without honest, powerful storytelling. When society repeatedly experiences glossy, hollowed-out, pseudo-stories, it degenerates. We need true satires and tragedies, dramas and comedies that shine a clean light into the dingy corners of the human psyche and society. If not, as Yeats warned, ". . . the centre can not hold."

Each year, Hollywood produces and/or distributes four hundred to five hundred films, virtually a film per day. A few are excellent, but the majority are mediocre or worse. The temptation is to blame this glut of banality on the Babbitt-like figures who approve productions. But recall a moment from THE PLAYER: Tim Robbins's young Hollywood executive explains that he has many enemies because each year his studio accepts over twenty thousand story submissions but only makes twelve films. This is accurate dialogue. The story departments of the major studios pore through thousands upon thousands of scripts, treatments, novels, and plays searching for a great screen story. Or, more likely, something halfway to good that they could develop to better-than-average.

By the 1990s script development in Hollywood climbed to over $500 million per annum, three quarters of which is paid to writers for options and rewrites on films that will never be made. Despite a

half-billion dollars and the exhaustive efforts of development personnel, Hollywood cannot find better material than it produces. The hard-to-believe truth is that what we see on the screen each year is a reasonable reflection of the best writing of the last few years.

Many screenwriters, however, cannot face this downtown fact and live in the exurbs of illusion, convinced that Hollywood is blind to their talent. With rare exceptions, unrecognized genius is a myth. First-rate screenplays are at least optioned if not made. For writers who can tell a quality story, it's a seller's market—always has been, always will be. Hollywood has a secure international business for hundreds of films each year, and they will be made. Most will open, run a few weeks, close, and be mercifully forgotten.

Yet Hollywood not only survives, it thrives, because it has virtually no competition. This wasn't always the case. From the rise of Neo-realism to the high tide of the New Wave, North American cinemas were crowded with works by brilliant Continental filmmakers that challenged Hollywood's dominance. But with the death or retirement of these masters, the last twenty-five years have seen a slow decay in the quality of European films.

Today European filmmakers blame their failure to attract audience on a conspiracy of distributors. Yet the films of their predecessors—Renoir, Bergman, Fellini, Buñuel, Wajda, Clouzot, Antonioni, Resnais—were screened throughout the world. The system hasn't changed. The audience for non-Hollywood film is still vast and loyal. Distributors have the same motivation now they had then: money. What's changed is that contemporary "auteurs" cannot tell story with the power of the previous generation. Like pretentious interior decorators, they make films that strike the eye, and nothing more. As a result, the storm of European genius has become a slough of arid films that leave a vacuum for Hollywood to fill.

Asian works, however, now travel throughout North America and the world, moving and delighting millions, seizing the international spotlight with ease for one reason: Asian filmmakers tell superb stories. Rather than scapegoating distributors, non-Hollywood filmmakers would do well to look to the East, where artists have the passion to tell stories and the craft to tell them beautifully.

THE LOSS OF CRAFT

The art of story is the dominant cultural force in the world, and the art of film is the dominant medium of this grand enterprise. The world audience is devoted but thirsting for story. Why? Not from a poverty of effort. The Writers Guild of America script registration service logs over thirty-five thousand titles yearly. These are only those that are registered. Across America hundreds of thousands of screenplays are attempted each year, but only a handful are *quality* screenplays, for many reasons but this above all: Today's would-be writers rush to the typewriter without first learning their craft.

If your dream were to compose music, would you say to yourself: "I've heard a lot of symphonies . . . I can also play the piano . . . I think I'll knock one out this weekend"? No. But that's exactly how many screenwriters begin: "I've seen a lot of flicks, some good and some bad . . . I got A's in English . . . vacation time's coming . . . "

If you hoped to compose, you'd head for music school to study both theory and practice, focusing on the genre of symphony. After years of diligence, you'd merge your knowledge with your creativity, flex your courage, and venture to compose. Too many struggling writers never suspect that the creation of a fine screenplay is as difficult as the creation of a symphony, and in some ways more so. For while the composer scores with the mathematical purity of notes, we dip into the messy stuff known as human nature.

The novice plunges ahead, counting solely on experience, thinking that the life he's lived and the films he's seen give him something to say and the way to say it. Experience, however, is overrated. Of course we want writers who don't hide from life, who live deeply, observe closely. This is vital but never enough. For most writers, the knowledge they gain from reading and study equals or outweighs experience, especially if that experience goes unexamined. *Self-knowledge* is the key—life *plus* deep reflection on our reactions to life.

As for technique, what the novice mistakes for craft is simply his unconscious absorption of story elements from every novel, film, or play he's ever encountered. As he writes, he matches his

work by trial and error against a model built up from accumulated reading and watching. The unschooled writer calls this "instinct," but it's merely habit and it's rigidly limiting. He either imitates his mental prototype or imagines himself in the avant-garde and rebels against it. But the haphazard groping toward or revolt against the sum of unconsciously ingrained repetitions is not, in any sense, technique, and leads to screenplays clogged with clichés of either the commercial or the art house variety.

This hit-or-miss struggle wasn't always the case. In decades past screenwriters learned their craft either through university study or on their own in a library, through experience in the theatre or in writing novels, through apprenticeship to the Hollywood studio system, or through a combination of these means.

Early in this century a number of American universities came to believe that, like musicians and painters, writers need the equivalent of music or art school to learn the principles of their craft. To that end scholars such as William Archer, Kenneth Rowe, and John Howard Lawson wrote excellent books on dramaturgy and the prose arts. Their method was intrinsic, drawing strength from the big-muscle movements of desire, forces of antagonism, turning points, spine, progression, crisis, climax—*story seen from the inside out.* Working writers, with or without formal educations, used these texts to develop their art, turning the half-century from the Roaring Twenties through the protesting sixties into a golden age of the American story on screen, page, and stage.

Over the last twenty-five years, however, the method of teaching creative writing in American universities has shifted from the intrinsic to the extrinsic. Trends in literary theory have drawn professors away from the deep sources of story toward language, codes, text—*story seen from the outside.* As a result, with some notable exceptions, the current generation of writers has been undereducated in the prime principles of story.

Screenwriters abroad have had even less opportunity to study their craft. European academics generally deny that writing can, in any sense, be taught, and as a result, courses in Creative Writing have never been included in the curriculum of Continental univer-

sities. Europe does, of course, foster many of the world's most brilliant art and music academies. Why it's felt that one art is teachable, another not, is impossible to say. What's worse, disdain for screenwriting has, until recently, excluded it from study in all European film schools save Moscow and Warsaw.

Much can be said against the old Hollywood studio system, but to its credit it was a system of apprenticeship overseen by seasoned story editors. That day is gone. Every now and then a studio rediscovers apprenticeship, but in its zeal to bring back the golden days it forgets that an apprentice needs a master. Today's executives may recognize ability, but few have the skill or patience to turn a talent into an artist.

The final cause for the decline of story runs very deep. Values, the positive/negative charges of life, are at the soul of our art. The writer shapes story around a perception of what's worth living for, what's worth dying for, what's foolish to pursue, the meaning of justice, truth—the essential values. In decades past, writer and society more or less agreed on these questions, but more and more ours has become an age of moral and ethical cynicism, relativism, and subjectivism—a great confusion of values. As the family disintegrates and sexual antagonisms rise, who, for example, feels he understands the nature of love? And how, if you do have a conviction, do you express it to an ever-more skeptical audience?

This erosion of values has brought with it a corresponding erosion of story. Unlike writers in the past, we can assume nothing. First we must dig deeply into life to uncover new insights, new refinements of value and meaning, then create a story vehicle that expresses our interpretation to an increasingly agnostic world. No small task.

THE STORY IMPERATIVE

When I moved to Los Angeles, I did what many do to keep eating and writing—I read. I worked for UA and NBC, analyzing screen and teleplay submissions. After the first couple hundred analyses, I felt I could write up in advance an all-purpose Hollywood story ana-

lyst's coverage and just fill in title and writer. The report I wrote over and over again went like this:

> *Nice description, actable dialogue. Some amusing moments; some sensitive moments. All in all, a script of well-chosen words. The story, however, sucks. The first thirty pages crawl on a fat belly of exposition; the rest never get to their feet. The main plot, what there is of it, is riddled with convenient coincidence and weak motivation. No discernible protagonist. Unrelated tensions that could shape into subplots never do. Characters are never revealed to be more than they seem. Not a moment's insight into the inner lives of these people or their society. It's a lifeless collection of predictable, ill-told, and clichéd episodes that wander off into a pointless haze. PASS ON IT.*

But I never wrote this report:

> *Great story! Grabbed me on page one and held me in its embrace. The first act builds to a sudden climax that spins off into a superb weave of plot and subplot. Sublime revelations of deep character. Amazing insight into this society. Made me laugh, made me cry. Drove to an Act Two climax so moving that I thought the story was over. And yet, out of the ashes of the second act, this writer created a third act of such power, such beauty, such magnificence I'm writing this report from the floor. However, this script is a 270-page grammatical nightmare with every fifth word misspelled. Dialogue's so tangled Olivier couldn't get his tongue around it. Descriptions are stuffed with camera directions, subtextural explanations, and philosophical commentary. It's not even typed in the proper format. Obviously not a professional writer. PASS ON IT.*

If I'd written this report, I'd have lost my job.

The sign on the door doesn't read "Dialogue Department" or "Description Department." It reads "Story Department." A good story makes a good film possible, while failure to make the story work virtually guarantees disaster. A reader who can't grasp this fundamental deserves to be fired. It's surprisingly rare, in fact, to

find a beautifully crafted story with bad dialogue or dull description. More often than not, the better the storytelling, the more vivid the images, the sharper the dialogue. But lack of progression, false motivation, redundant characters, empty subtext, holes, and other such story problems are the root causes of a bland, boring text.

Literary talent is not enough. If you cannot tell a story, all those beautiful images and subtleties of dialogue that you spent months and months perfecting waste the paper they're written on. What we create for the world, what it demands of us, is story. Now and forever. Countless writers lavish dressy dialogue and manicured descriptions on anorexic yarns and wonder why their scripts never see production, while others with modest literary talent but great storytelling power have the deep pleasure of watching their dreams living in the light of the screen.

Of the total creative effort represented in a finished work, 75 percent or more of a writer's labor goes into designing story. Who are these characters? What do they want? Why do they want it? How do they go about getting it? What stops them? What are the consequences? Finding the answers to these grand questions and shaping them into story is our overwhelming creative task.

Designing story tests the maturity and insight of the writer, his knowledge of society, nature, and the human heart. Story demands both vivid imagination and powerful analytic thought. Self-expression is never an issue, for, wittingly or unwittingly, all stories, honest and dishonest, wise and foolish, faithfully mirror their maker, exposing his humanity . . . or lack of it. Compared to this terror, writing dialogue is a sweet diversion.

So the writer embraces the principle, *Tell Story* . . . then freezes. For what is story? The idea of story is like the idea of music. We've heard tunes all our lives. We can dance and sing along. We think we understand music until we try to compose it and what comes out of the piano scares the cat.

If both TENDER MERCIES and RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK are wonderful stories beautifully told for the screen—and they are—what on earth do they have in common? If HANNAH AND HER SISTERS and MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL are both

brilliant comic stories delightfully told, and they are, where do they touch? Compare THE CRYING GAME to PARENTHOOD, TERMINATOR to REVERSAL OF FORTUNE, UNFORGIVEN to EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN. Or A FISH CALLED WANDA to MAN BITES DOG, WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT to RESERVOIR DOGS. Moving back through the decades, compare VERTIGO to $8^1/_2$ to PERSONA to RASHOMON to CASABLANCA to GREED to MODERN TIMES to THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN—all superb screen stories, all vastly different, yet all produce the same result: an audience leaving the theatre exclaiming, "What a great story!"

Drowning in a sea of genres and styles, the writer may come to believe that if all these films tell story, then anything can be a story. But if we look deeply, if we strip away the surface, we find that at heart all are the same thing. Each is an embodiment of the universal form of story. Each articulates this form to the screen in a unique way, but in each the essential form is identical, and it is to this deep form that the audience is responding when it reacts with, "What a good story!"

Each of the arts is defined by its essential form. From symphony to hip-hop, the underlying form of music makes a piece music and not noise. Whether representational or abstract, the cardinal principles of visual art make a canvas a painting, not a doodle. Equally, from Homer to Ingmar Bergman, the universal form of story shapes a work into story, not portraiture or collage. Across all cultures and through all ages, this innate form has been endlessly variable but changeless.

Yet form does not mean "formula." There is no screenplay-writing recipe that guarantees your cake will rise. Story is far too rich in mystery, complexity, and flexibility to be reduced to a formula. Only a fool would try. Rather, a writer must grasp story *form*. This is inescapable.

GOOD STORY *WELL TOLD*

"Good story" means something worth telling that the world wants to hear. Finding this is your lonely task. It begins with talent. You

must be born with the creative power to put things together in a way no one has ever dreamed. Then you must bring to the work a vision that's driven by fresh insights into human nature and society, coupled with in-depth knowledge of your characters and your world. All that . . . and, as Hallie and Whit Burnett reveal in their excellent little book, a lot of love.

The love of story—the belief that your vision can be expressed only through story, that characters can be more "real" than people, that the fictional world is more profound than the concrete. The love of the dramatic—a fascination with the sudden surprises and revelations that bring sea-changes in life. The love of truth—the belief that lies cripple the artist, that every truth in life must be questioned, down to one's own secret motives. The love of humanity—a willingness to empathize with suffering souls, to crawl inside their skins and see the world through their eyes. The love of sensation—the desire to indulge not only the physical but the inner senses. The love of dreaming—the pleasure in taking leisurely rides on your imagination just to see where it leads. The love of humor—a joy in the saving grace that restores the balance of life. The love of language—the delight in sound and sense, syntax and semantics. The love of duality—a feel for life's hidden contradictions, a healthy suspicion that things are not what they seem. The love of perfection—the passion to write and rewrite in pursuit of the perfect moment. The love of uniqueness—the thrill of audacity and a stone-faced calm when it is met by ridicule. The love of beauty—an innate sense that treasures good writing, hates bad writing, and knows the difference. The love of self—a strength that doesn't need to be constantly reassured, that never doubts that you are indeed a writer. You must love to write and bear the loneliness.

But the love of a good story, of terrific characters and a world driven by your passion, courage, and creative gifts is still not enough. Your goal must be a good story *well told.*

Just as a composer must excel in the principles of musical composition, so you must master the corresponding principles of story composition. This craft is neither mechanics nor gimmicks. It is the concert of techniques by which we create a conspiracy of

interest between ourselves and the audience. Craft is the sum total of all means used to draw the audience into deep involvement, to hold that involvement, and ultimately to reward it with a moving and meaningful experience.

Without craft, the best a writer can do is snatch the first idea off the top of his head, then sit helpless in front of his own work, unable to answer the dreaded questions: *Is it good? Or is it sewage? If sewage, what do I do?* The conscious mind, fixated on these terrible questions, blocks the subconscious. But when the conscious mind is put to work on the objective task of executing the craft, the spontaneous surfaces. Mastery of craft frees the subconscious.

What is the rhythm of a writer's day? First, you enter your imagined world. As characters speak and act, you write. What's the next thing you do? You step out of your fantasy and read what you've written. And what do you do as you read? You analyze. "Is it good? Does it work? Why not? Should I cut? Add? Reorder?" You write, you read; create, critique; impulse, logic; right brain, left brain; re-imagine, rewrite. And the quality of your rewriting, the possibility of perfection, depends on a command of the craft that guides you to correct imperfection. An artist is never at the mercy of the whims of impulse; he willfully exercises his craft to create harmonies of instinct and idea.

STORY AND LIFE

Over the years I've observed two typical and persistent kinds of failed screenplay. The first is the "personal story" bad script:

> *In an office setting we meet a protagonist with a problem: She deserves a promotion but she's being passed over. Angry, she heads for her parents' home to discover that Dad's gone senile and Mom can't cope. Home to her apartment and a fight with her slobbish, conniving roommate. Now out on a date and smack into a failure to communicate: Her insensitive lover takes her to an expensive French restaurant, completely forgetting that she's on a diet. Back to the office where, amazingly, she gets her promotion . . . but new pres-*

sures arise. Back at her parents' place, where just as she solves Dad's problem, Mom goes over the edge. Coming home she discovers that her roommate has stolen her TV and vanished without paying the rent. She breaks up with her lover, raids the refrigerator, and gains five pounds. But chin up, she turns her promotion into a triumph. A nostalgic heart-to-heart over a dinner with her folks cures Mom's woes. Her new roommate not only turns out to be an anal-retentive gem who pays the rent weeks ahead with cashier's checks, but introduces her to Someone New. We're now on page ninety-five. She sticks to her diet and looks great for the last twenty-five pages, which are the literary equivalent of running in slow-mo through daisies as the romance with Someone New blossoms. At last she confronts her Crisis Decision: whether or not to commit? The screenplay ends on a tearful Climax as she decides she needs her space.

Second is the "guaranteed commercial success" bad script:

Through a luggage mix-up at the airport, a software salesman comes into possession of the-thing-that-will-end-civilization-as-we-know-it-today. The-thing-that-will-end-civilization-as-we-know-it-today is quite small. In fact, it's concealed inside a ballpoint pen unwittingly in the pocket of this hapless protagonist, who becomes the target of a cast of three dozen characters, all of whom have double or triple identities, all of whom have worked on both sides of the Iron Curtain, all of whom have known one another since the Cold War, all of whom are trying to kill the guy. This script is stuffed with car chases, shoot-outs, hair-raising escapes, and explosions. When not blowing things up or shooting folks down, it halts for dialogue-thick scenes as the hero tries to sort through these duplicitous people and find out just whom he can trust. It ends with a cacophony of violence and multimillion-dollar effects, during which the hero manages to destroy the-thing-that-will-end-civilization-as-we-know-it-today and thus save humanity.

The "personal story" is understructured, slice-of-life portraiture that mistakes verisimilitude for truth. This writer believes that the

more precise his observation of day-to-day facts, the more accurate his reportage of what actually happens, the more truth he tells. But fact, no matter how minutely observed, is truth with a small "t." Big "T" Truth is located behind, beyond, inside, below the surface of things, holding reality together or tearing it apart, and cannot be directly observed. Because this writer sees only what is visible and factual, he is blind to the truth of life.

The "guaranteed commercial success," on the other hand, is an overstructured, overcomplicated, overpopulated assault on the physical senses that bears no relationship to life whatsoever. This writer is mistaking kinesis for entertainment. He hopes that, regardless of story, if he calls for enough high-speed action and dazzling visuals, the audience will be excited. And given the Computer Generated Image phenomenon that drives so many summer releases, he would not be altogether wrong.

Spectacles of this kind replace imagination with simulated actuality. They use story as an excuse for heretofore unseen effects that carry us into a tornado, the jaws of a dinosaur, or futuristic holocausts. And make no mistake, these razzle-dazzle spectacles can deliver a circus of excitement. But like amusement park rides, their pleasures are short-lived. For the history of filmmaking has shown again and again that as fast as new kinetic thrills rise to popularity, they sink under a "been there, done that" apathy.

Every decade or so technical innovation spawns a swarm of ill-told movies, for the sole purpose of exploiting spectacle. The invention of film itself, a startling simulation of actuality, caused great public excitement, followed by years of vapid stories. In time, however, the silent film evolved into a magnificent art form, only to be destroyed by the advent of sound, a yet more realistic simulation of actuality. Films of the early 1930s took a step backward as audiences willingly suffered bland stories for the pleasure of hearing actors talk. The talkie then grew in power and beauty, only to be knocked off stride by the inventions of color, 3-D, wide-screen, and now Computer Generated Images, or CGI.

CGI is neither a curse nor a panacea. It simply adds fresh hues to the story pallet. Thanks to CGI, anything we can imagine can be

done, and done with subtle satisfaction. When CGIs are motivated by a strong story, such as FORREST GUMP or MEN IN BLACK, the effect vanishes behind the story it's telling, enriching the moment without calling attention to itself. The "commercial" writer, however, is often dazzled by the glare of spectacle and cannot see that lasting entertainment is found only in the charged human truths beneath the image.

The writers of portraiture and spectacle, indeed all writers, must come to understand the relationship of story to life: *Story is metaphor for life.*

A storyteller is a life poet, an artist who transforms day-to-day living, inner life and outer life, dream and actuality into a poem whose rhyme scheme is events rather than words—a two-hour metaphor that says: Life is like *this*! Therefore, a story must abstract from life to discover its essences, but not become an abstraction that loses all sense of life-as-lived. A story must be *like* life, but not so verbatim that it has no depth or meaning beyond what's obvious to everyone on the street.

Writers of portraiture must realize that facts are neutral. The weakest possible excuse to include anything in a story is: "But it actually happened." Everything happens; everything imaginable happens. Indeed, the unimaginable happens. But story is not life in actuality. Mere occurrence brings us nowhere near the truth. What happens is fact, not truth. Truth is what we *think about* what happens.

Consider a set of facts known as "The Life of Joan of Arc." For centuries celebrated writers have brought this woman to the stage, page, and screen, and each Joan is unique—Anouilh's spiritual Joan, Shaw's witty Joan, Brecht's political Joan, Dreyer's suffering Joan, Hollywood's romantic warrior. In Shakespeare's hands she became the lunatic Joan, a distinctly British point of view. Each Joan is divinely inspired, raises an army, defeats the English, burns at the stake. Joan's facts are always the same, but whole genres shift while the "truth" of her life waits for the writer to find its meaning.

Likewise, writers of spectacle must realize that abstractions are neutral. By abstractions I mean strategies of graphic design, visual

effects, color saturation, sound perspective, editing rhythm, and the like. These have no meaning in and of themselves. The identical editing pattern applied to six different scenes results in six distinctively different interpretations. The aesthetics of film are the means to express the living content of story, but must *never* become an end in themselves.

POWERS AND TALENTS

Although the authors of portraiture or spectacle are weak in story, they may be blessed with one of two essential powers. Writers who lean toward reportage often have the power of the senses, the power to transport corporal sensations into the reader. They see and hear with such acuity and sensitivity that the reader's heart jumps when struck by the lucid beauty of their images. Writers of action extravaganzas, on the other hand, often have the imaginative power to lift audiences beyond what is to what could be. They can take presumed impossibilities and turn them into shocking certainties. They also make hearts jump. Both sensory perception and a lively imagination are enviable gifts, but, like a good marriage, one complements the other. Alone they are diminished.

At one end of reality is pure fact; at the other end, pure imagination. Spanning these two poles is the infinitely varied spectrum of fiction. Strong storytelling strikes a balance along this spectrum. If your writing drifts to one extreme or the other, you must learn to draw all aspects of your humanity into harmony. You must place yourself along the creative spectrum: sensitive to sight, sound, and feeling, yet balancing that with the power to imagine. Dig in a two-handed way, using your insight and instinct to move us, to express your vision of how and why human beings do the things they do.

Last, not only are sensory and imaginative powers prerequisite to creativity, writing also demands two singular and essential talents. These talents, however, have no necessary connection. A mountain of one does not mean a grain of the other.

The first is literary talent—the creative conversion of ordinary language into a higher, more expressive form, vividly describing

the world and capturing its human voices. Literary talent is, however, common. In every literate community in the world, hundreds, if not thousands of people can, to one degree or another, begin with the ordinary language of their culture and end with something extraordinary. They write beautifully, a few magnificently, in the literary sense.

The second is story talent—the creative conversion of life itself to a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. It seeks out the inscape of our days and reshapes it into a telling that enriches life. Pure story talent is rare. What writer, on instinct alone, creates brilliantly told stories year after year and never gives a moment's thought to how he does what he does or could do it better? Instinctive genius may produce a work of quality once, but perfection and prolificness do not flow from the spontaneous and untutored.

Literary and story talent are not only distinctively different but are unrelated, for stories do not need to be written to be told. Stories can be expressed any way human beings can communicate. Theatre, prose, film, opera, mime, poetry, dance are all magnificent forms of the story ritual, each with its own delights. At different times in history, however, one of these steps to the fore. In the sixteenth century it was the theatre; in the nineteenth century, the novel; in the twentieth century, the cinema, the grand concert of all the arts. The most powerful, eloquent moments on screen require no verbal description to create them, no dialogue to act them. They are image, pure and silent. The material of literary talent is words; the material of story talent is *life itself.*

CRAFT MAXIMIZES TALENT

Rare as story talent is, we often meet people who seem to have it by nature, those street-corner raconteurs for whom storytelling is as easy as a smile. When, for example, coworkers gather around the coffee machine, the storytelling begins. It's the currency of human contact. And whenever a half-dozen souls gather for this mid-morning ritual, there will always be at least one who has the gift.

Let's say that this morning our storyteller tells her friends the story of "How I Put My Kids on the School Bus." Like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, she hooks everyone's attention. She draws them into her spell, holding them slack-jawed over their coffee cups. She spins her tale, building them up, easing them down, making them laugh, maybe cry, holding all in high suspense until she pays it off with a dynamite last scene: "And that's how I got the little nosepickers on the bus this morning." Her coworkers lean back satisfied, muttering, "God, yes, Helen, my kids are just like that."

Now let's say the storytelling passes to the guy next to her who tells the others the heartrending tale of how his mother died over the weekend . . . and bores the hell out of everyone. His story is all on the surface, repetitious rambling from trivial detail to cliché: "She looked so good in her coffin." Halfway through his rendition, the rest head back to the coffee pot for another cup, turning a deaf ear to his tale of grief.

Given the choice between trivial material brilliantly told versus profound material badly told, an audience will always choose the trivial told brilliantly. Master storytellers know how to squeeze life out of the least of things, while poor storytellers reduce the profound to the banal. You may have the insight of a Buddha, but if you cannot tell story, your ideas turn dry as chalk.

Story talent is primary, literary talent secondary but essential. This principle is absolute in film and television, and truer for stage and page than most playwrights and novelists wish to admit. Rare as story talent is, you must have some or you wouldn't be itching to write. Your task is to wring from it all possible creativity. Only by using everything and anything you know about the craft of storytelling can you make your talent forge story. For talent without craft is like fuel without an engine. It burns wildly but accomplishes nothing.

PART 2

THE ELEMENTS OF STORY

A beautifully told story is a symphonic unity in which structure, setting, character, genre, and idea meld seamlessly. To find their harmony, the writer must study the elements of story as if they were instruments of an orchestra—first separately, then in concert.

2

THE STRUCTURE SPECTRUM

THE TERMINOLOGY OF STORY DESIGN

When a character steps into your imagination, he brings an abundance of story possibilities. If you wish, you could start the telling before the character is born, then follow him day after day, decade after decade until dead and gone. A character's life encompasses hundreds of thousands of living hours, hours both complex and multileveled.

From an instant to eternity, from the intracranial to the intergalactic, the life story of each and every character offers encyclopedic possibilities. The mark of a master is to select only a few moments but give us a lifetime.

Starting at the deepest level, you might set the story within the protagonist's inner life and tell the whole tale inside his thoughts and feelings, awake or dreaming. Or you could shift up to the level of personal conflict between protagonist and family, friends, lovers. Or expand into social institutions, setting the character at odds with school, career, church, the justice system. Or wider still, you could pit the character against the environment—dangerous city streets, lethal diseases, the car that won't start, time running out. Or any combination of all these levels.

But this complex expanse of *life story* must become *the story told.* To design a feature film, you must reduce the seething mass and rush of

life story to just two little hours, more or less, that somehow express everything you left out. And when a story is well told, isn't that the effect? When friends come back from a film and you ask them what it was about, have you noticed they often put *the story told* inside *life story*?

"Great! About a guy raised on a sharecropper's farm. As a kid he toiled with his family under the hot sun. He went to school but didn't do too well because he had to get up at dawn, all that weeding and hoeing. But somebody gave him a guitar and he learned to play, write his own songs . . . finally, fed up with this backbreaking life, he ran away, living hand to mouth playing in honky-tonk bars. Then he met a beautiful gal with a great voice. They fell in love, teamed up, and, bang, their careers skyrocketed. But the trouble was the spotlight was always on her. He wrote their songs, arranged, backed her up, but people only came to see her. Living in her shadow, he turned to drink. Finally she throws him out, and there he is back on the road again, until he hits rock bottom. He wakes up in a cheap motel in a dusty Midwest town, middle of nowhere, penniless, friendless, a hopeless drunk, not a dime for the phone and no one to call if he had one."

In other words, TENDER MERCIES told from birth. But nothing of the above is in the film. TENDER MERCIES begins the morning Robert Duvall's Mac Sledge wakes up at rock bottom. The next two hours cover the next year in Sledge's life. Yet, in and between scenes, we come to know all of his past, everything of significance that happens to Sledge in that year, until the last image gives us a vision of his future. A man's life, virtually from birth to death, is captured between the FADE IN and FADE OUT of Horton Foote's Oscar-winning screenplay.

Structure

From the vast flux of *life story* the writer must make choices. Fictional worlds are not daydreams but sweatshops where we labor in search of material to tailor a film. Yet when asked "What do you choose?" no two writers agree. Some look for character, others for action or strife, perhaps mood, images, dialogue. But no one element, in and of itself, will build a story. A film isn't just moments of conflict or activity, per-

sonality or emotionality, witty talk or symbols. What the writer seeks are *events*, for an event contains all the above and more.

STRUCTURE is a selection of events from the characters' life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life.

An event is caused by or affects people, thus delineating characters; it takes place in a setting, generating image, action, and dialogue; it draws energy from conflict producing emotion in characters and audience alike. But event choices cannot be displayed randomly or indifferently; they must be composed, and "to compose" in story means much the same thing it does in music. What to include? To exclude? To put before and after what?

To answer these questions you must know your purpose. Events composed to do what? One purpose may be to express your feelings, but this becomes self-indulgence if it doesn't result in arousing emotions in the audience. A second purpose may be to express ideas, but this risks solipsism if the audience cannot follow. So the design of events needs a dual strategy.

Event

"Event" means *change*. If the streets outside your window are dry, but after a nap you see they're wet, you assume an event has taken place, called rain. The world's changed from dry to wet. You cannot, however, build a film out of nothing but changes in weather—although there are those who have tried. *Story Events* are meaningful, not trivial. To make change meaningful it must, to begin with, happen to a character. If you see someone drenched in a downpour, this has somewhat more meaning than a damp street.

A STORY EVENT creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a VALUE.

To make change meaningful you must express it, and the audience must react to it, in terms of a value. By values I don't mean virtues or the narrow, moralizing "family values" use of the word. Rather, *Story Values* refers to the broadest sense of the idea. Values are the soul of storytelling. Ultimately ours is the art of expressing to the world a perception of values.

STORY VALUES are the universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive, from one moment to the next.

For example: alive/dead (positive/negative) is a story value, as are love/hate, freedom/slavery, truth/lie, courage/cowardice, loyalty/betrayal, wisdom/stupidity, strength/weakness, excitement/boredom and so on. All such binary qualities of experience that can reverse their charge at any moment are Story Values. They may be moral, good/evil; ethical, right/wrong; or simply charged with value. Hope/despair is neither moral nor ethical, but we certainly know when we are at one end of the experience or the other.

Imagine that outside your window is 1980s East Africa, a realm of drought. Now we have a value at stake: survival, life/death. We begin at the negative: This terrible famine is taking lives by the thousands. If then it should rain, a monsoon that brings the earth back to green, animals to pasture, and people to survival, this rain would be deeply meaningful because it switches the value from negative to positive, from death to life.

However, as powerful as this event would be, it still does not qualify as a Story Event because it happened by coincidence. Rain finally fell in East Africa. Although there's a place for coincidence in storytelling, a story cannot be built out of nothing but accidental events, no matter how charged with value.

A Story Event creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and ACHIEVED THROUGH CONFLICT.

Again, a world of drought. Into it comes a man who imagines himself a "rainmaker." This character has deep inner conflict between his passionate belief that he can bring rain, although he has never been able to do it, and his terrible fear that he's a fool or mad. He meets a woman, falls in love, then suffers as she tries to believe in him, but turns away, convinced he's a charlatan or worse. He has a strong conflict with society—some follow him as if he's a messiah; others want to stone him out of town. Lastly, he faces implacable conflict with the physical world—the hot winds, empty skies, parched earth. If this man can struggle through all his inner and personal conflicts, against social and environmental forces and finally coax rain out of a cloudless sky, that storm would be majestic and sublimely meaningful—for it is *change motivated through conflict.* What I have described is THE RAINMAKER, adapted to the screen by Richard Nash from his own play.

Scene

For a typical film, the writer will choose forty to sixty Story Events or, as they're commonly known, scenes. A novelist may want more than sixty, a playwright rarely as many as forty.

A SCENE is an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance. Ideally, every scene is a STORY EVENT.

Look closely at each scene you've written and ask: What value is at stake in my character's life at this moment? Love? Truth? What? How is that value charged at the top of the scene? Positive? Negative? Some of both? Make a note. Next turn to the close of the scene and ask, Where is this value now? Positive? Negative? Both? Make a note and compare. If the answer you write down at the end of the scene is the same note you made at the opening, you now have another important question to ask: Why is this scene in my script?

If the value-charged condition of the character's life stays unchanged from one end of a scene to the other, nothing meaningful happens. The scene has activity—talking about this, doing that—but nothing changes in value. It is a nonevent.

Why then is the scene in the story? The answer is almost certain to be "exposition." It's there to convey information about characters, world, or history to the eavesdropping audience. If exposition is a scene's sole justification, a disciplined writer will trash it and weave its information into the film elsewhere.

No scene that doesn't turn. This is our ideal. We work to round every scene from beginning to end by turning a value at stake in a character's life from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive. Adherence to this principle may be difficult, but it's by no means impossible.

DIE HARD, THE FUGITIVE, and STRAW DOGS clearly meet this test, but the ideal is also kept in subtler, though no less rigorous ways, in REMAINS OF THE DAY and THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. The difference is that *Action* genres turn on public values such as freedom/slavery or justice/injustice; the *Education* genre turns on interior values such as self-awareness/self-deception or life as meaningful/meaningless. Regardless of genre, the principle is universal: If a scene is not a true event, cut it.

For example:

> *Chris and Andy are in love and live together. They wake up one morning and start to squabble. Their spat builds in the kitchen as they hurry to make breakfast. In the garage, the fight becomes nastier as they climb into their car to drive to work together. Finally words explode into violence on the highway. Andy wrenches the car to the shoulder and jumps out, ending their relationship. This series of actions and locations creates a scene: It takes the couple from the positive (in love and together) to the negative (in hate and apart).*

The four shifts of place—bedroom to kitchen to garage to highway—are camera setups but not true scenes. Although they intensify behavior and make the critical moment credible, they do

not change the values at stake. As the argument moves through the morning, the couple is still together and presumably in love. But when the action reaches its Turning Point—a slamming car door and Andy's declaration, "It's over!"—life turns upside down for the lovers, activity changes to action, and the sketch becomes a complete scene, a **Story Event.**

Generally the test of whether a series of activities constitutes a true scene is this: Could it have been written "in one," in a unity of time and place? In this case the answer is yes. Their argument could begin in a bedroom, build in the bedroom, and end the relationship in the bedroom. Countless relationships have ended in bedrooms. Or the kitchen. Or the garage. Or not on the highway but in the office elevator. A playwright might write the scene "in one" because the staging limitations of the theatre often force us to keep the unities of time and place; the novelist or screenwriter, on the other hand, might travel the scene, parsing it out in time and space to establish future locations, Chris's taste in furniture, Andy's driving habits—for any number of reasons. This scene could even cross-cut with another scene, perhaps involving another couple. The variations are endless, but in all cases this is a single Story Event, the "lovers break up" scene.

Beat

Inside the scene is the smallest element of structure, the *Beat.* (Not to be confused with [beat], an indication within a column of dialogue meaning "short pause".)

> **A BEAT is an exchange of behavior in action/reaction. Beat by Beat these changing behaviors shape the turning of a scene.**

Taking a closer look at the "lovers break up" scene: As the alarm goes off, Chris teases Andy and he reacts in kind. As they dress, teasing turns to sarcasm and they throw insults back and forth. Now in the kitchen Chris threatens Andy with: "If I left you, baby, you'd be so miserable . . ." but he calls her bluff with "That's

a misery I'd love." In the garage Chris, afraid she's losing him, begs Andy to stay, but he laughs and ridicules her plea. Finally, in the speeding car, Chris doubles her fist and punches Andy. A fight, a squeal of brakes. Andy jumps out with a bloody nose, slams the door and shouts, "It's over," leaving her in shock.

This scene is built around six beats, six distinctively different behaviors, six clear changes of action/reaction: teasing each other, followed by a give-and-take of insults, then threatening and daring each other, next pleading and ridiculing, and finally exchanges of violence that lead to the last Beat and Turning Point: Andy's decision and action that ends the relationship, and Chris's dumbfounded surprise.

Sequence

Beats build scenes. Scenes then build the next largest movement of story design, the *Sequence.* Every true scene turns the value-charged condition of the character's life, but from event to event the degree of change can differ greatly. Scenes cause relatively minor yet significant change. The capping scene of a sequence, however, delivers a more powerful, determinant change.

A SEQUENCE is a series of scenes—generally two to five—that culminates with greater impact than any previous scene.

For example, this three-scene sequence:

Setup: A young business woman who's had a notable career in the Midwest has been approached by headhunters and interviewed for a position with a New York corporation. If she wins this post, it'll be a huge step up in her career. She wants the job very much but hasn't won it yet (negative). She is one of six finalists. The corporate heads realize that this position has a vital public dimension to it, so they want to see these applicants on their feet in an informal setting before making the final decision. They invite all six to a party on Manhattan's East Side.

Scene One: A West Side Hotel where our protagonist prepares for the evening. The value at stake is self-confidence/self-doubt. She'll need all her confidence to pull off this evening successfully, but she's filled with doubts (negative). Fear knots her middle as she paces the room, telling herself she was a fool to come East, these New Yorkers will eat her alive. She flings clothes out of her suitcase, trying on this, trying on that, but each outfit looks worse than the one before. Her hair is an uncombable tangle of frizz. As she grapples with her clothes and hair, she decides to pack it in and save herself the humiliation.

Suddenly, the phone rings. It's her mother, calling to lace a good-luck toast with guilt trips about loneliness and her fear of abandonment. Barbara hangs up, realizing that the piranhas of Manhattan are no match for the great white shark at home. *She needs this job!* She then amazes herself with a combination of clothes and accessories she's never tried before. Her hair falls magically into place. She plants herself in front of the mirror, looking great, eyes bright, glowing with confidence (positive).

Scene Two: Under the hotel marquee. Thunder, lightning, pelting rain. Because Barbara's from Terre Haute, she didn't know to tip the doorman five bucks when she registered, so he won't go out into the storm to find a cab for a stiff. Besides, when it rains in New York there are no cabs. So she studies her visitors' map, pondering what to do. She realizes if she tries to run from the West Eighties over to Central Park West, then all the way down CPW to Fifty-ninth Street, across Central Park South to Park Avenue, and up into the East Eighties, she'll never get to the party on time. So she decides to do what they warn never, ever to do—to run through Central Park at night. This scene takes on a new value: life/death.

She covers her hair with a newspaper and darts into the night, daring death (negative). A lightning flash and, bang, she's surrounded by that gang that is always out there, rain

or shine, waiting for the fools who run through the park at night. But she didn't take karate classes for nothing. She kick-fights her way through the gang, breaking jaws, scattering teeth on the concrete, until she stumbles out of the park, alive (positive).

Scene Three: Mirrored lobby—Park Avenue apartment building. The value at stake now switches to social success/social failure. She's survived. But then she looks in the mirror and sees a drowned rat: newspaper shredded in her hair; blood all over her clothes—the gang's blood—but blood nonetheless. Her self-confidence plummets past doubt and fear until she bows in personal defeat (negative), crushed by her social disaster (negative).

Taxis pull up with the other applicants. All found cabs; all get out looking New York chic. They take pity on the poor loser from the Midwest and usher her into an elevator.

In the penthouse they towel off her hair and find mismatched clothes for her to wear, and because she looks like this, the spotlight's on her all night. Because she knows she has lost anyway, she relaxes into her natural self and from deep within comes a chutzpah she never knew she had; she not only tells them about her battle in the park but makes jokes about it. Mouths go slack with awe or wide with laughter. At end of the evening, all the executives know exactly who they want for the job: Anyone who can go through that terror in the park and display this kind of cool is clearly the person for them. The evening ends on her personal and social triumphs as she is given the job (doubly positive).

Each scene turns on its own value or values. Scene One: self-doubt to self-confidence. Scene Two: death to life; self-confidence to defeat. Scene Three: social disaster to social triumph. But the three scenes become a sequence of another, greater value that overrides and subordinates the others, and that is *THE JOB*. At the beginning of the sequence she has *NO JOB*. The third scene becomes a Sequence Climax because here social success wins her

THE JOB. From her point of view *THE JOB* is a value of such magnitude she risked her life for it.

It's useful to title each sequence to make clear to yourself why it's in the film. The story purpose of this "getting the job" sequence is to take her from *NO JOB* to *JOB*. It could have been accomplished in a single scene with a personnel officer. But to say more than "she's qualified," we might create a full sequence that not only gets her the job but dramatizes her inner character and relationship to her mother, along with insights into New York City and the corporation.

Act

Scenes turn in *minor* but significant ways; a series of scenes builds a sequence that turns in a *moderate*, more impactful way; a series of sequences builds the next largest structure, the *Act*, a movement that turns on a *major* reversal in the value-charged condition of the character's life. The difference between a basic scene, a scene that climaxes a sequence, and a scene that climaxes an act is the degree of change, or, more precisely, the degree of impact that change has, for better or worse, on the character—on the character's inner life, personal relationships, fortunes in the world, or some combination of all these.

An ACT is a series of sequences that peaks in a climactic scene which causes a major reversal of values, more powerful in its impact than any previous sequence or scene.

Story

A series of acts builds the largest structure of all: the *Story*. A story is simply one huge master event. When you look at the value-charged situation in the life of the character at the beginning of the story, then compare it to the value-charge at the end of the story, you should see the *arc of the film*, the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end. This final condition, this end change, must be *absolute* and *irreversible*.

Change caused by a scene could be reversed: The lovers in the previous sketch could get back together; people fall in and out and back in love again every day. A sequence could be reversed: The Midwest businesswoman could win her job only to discover that she reports to a boss she hates and wishes she were back in Terre Haute. An act climax could be reversed: A character could die, as in the Act Two climax of E.T., and then come back to life. Why not? In a modern hospital, reviving the dead is commonplace. So, scene by sequence by act, the writer creates minor, moderate, and major change, but conceivably, each of those changes could be reversed. This is not, however, the case in the climax of the last act.

STORY CLIMAX: A story is a series of acts that build to a last act climax or story climax which brings about absolute and irreversible change.

If you make the smallest element do its job, the deep purpose of the telling will be served. Let every phrase of dialogue or line of description either turn behavior and action or set up the conditions for change. Make your beats build scenes, scenes build sequences, sequences build acts, acts build story to its climax.

The scenes that turn the life of the Terre Haute protagonist from self-doubt to self-confidence, from danger to survival, from social disaster to success combine into a sequence that takes her from *NO JOB* to JOB. To arc the telling to a Story Climax, perhaps this opening sequence sets up a series of sequences that takes her from *NO JOB* to *PRESIDENT OF THE CORPORATION* at the Act One climax. This Act One climax sets up an Act Two in which internecine corporate wars lead to her betrayal by friends and associates. At the Act Two climax she's fired by the board of directors and *out on the street.* This major reversal sends her to a rival corporation where, armed with business secrets gleaned while she was president, she quickly reaches the top again so she can enjoy *destroying her previous employers.* These acts arc her from the *hardworking, optimistic,* and *honest* young professional who opens the film to the *ruthless, cynical,* and *corrupt* veteran of corporate wars who ends the film—absolute, irreversible change.

THE STORY TRIANGLE

In some literary circles "plot" has become a dirty word, tarred with a connotation of hack commercialism. The loss is ours, for plot is an accurate term that names the internally consistent, interrelated pattern of events that move through time to shape and design a story. While no fine film was ever written without flashes of fortuitous inspiration, a screenplay is not an accident. Material that pops up willy-nilly cannot remain willy-nilly. The writer redrafts inspiration again and again, making it look as if an instinctive spontaneity created the film, yet knowing how much effort and unnaturalness went into making it look natural and effortless.

To PLOT means to navigate through the dangerous terrain of story and when confronted by a dozen branching possibilities to choose the correct path. Plot is the writer's choice of events and their design in time.

Again, what to include? Exclude? Put before and after what? Event choices must be made; the writer chooses either well or ill; the result is plot.

When TENDER MERCIES premiered, some reviewers described it as "plotless," then praised it for that. TENDER MERCIES not only has a plot, it is exquisitely plotted through some of the most difficult film terrain of all: a story in which the arc of the film takes place within the mind of the protagonist. Here the protagonist experiences a deep and irreversible revolution in his attitude toward life and/or toward himself.

For the novelist such stories are natural and facile. In either third-person or first-person, the novelist can directly invade thought and feeling to dramatize the tale entirely on the landscape of the protagonist's inner life. For the screenwriter such stories are by far the most fragile and difficult. We cannot drive a camera lens through an actor's forehead and photograph his thoughts, although there are those who would try. Somehow we must lead the audience to interpret the inner life from outer behavior without loading

the soundtrack with expositional narration or stuffing the mouths of characters with self-explanatory dialogue. As John Carpenter said, "Movies are about making mental things physical."

To begin the great sweep of change within his protagonist, Horton Foote opens TENDER MERCIES with Sledge drowning in the meaninglessness of his life. He is committing slow suicide with alcohol because he no longer believes in anything—neither family, nor work, nor this world, nor the hereafter. As Foote progresses the film, he avoids the cliché of finding meaning in one overwhelming experience of great romance, brilliant success, or religious inspiration. Instead he shows us a man weaving together a simple yet meaningful life from the many delicate threads of love, music, and spirit. At last Sledge undergoes a quiet transformation and finds a life worth living.

We can only imagine the sweat and pains Horton Foote invested in plotting this precarious film. A single misstep—one missing scene, one superfluous scene, a slight misordering of incident—and like a castle of cards, the riveting inner journey of Mac Sledge collapses into portraiture. Plot, therefore, doesn't mean ham-handed twists and turns, or high-pressure suspense and shocking surprise. Rather, events must be selected and their patterning displayed through time. In this sense of composition or design, all stories are plotted.

Archplot, Miniplot, Antiplot

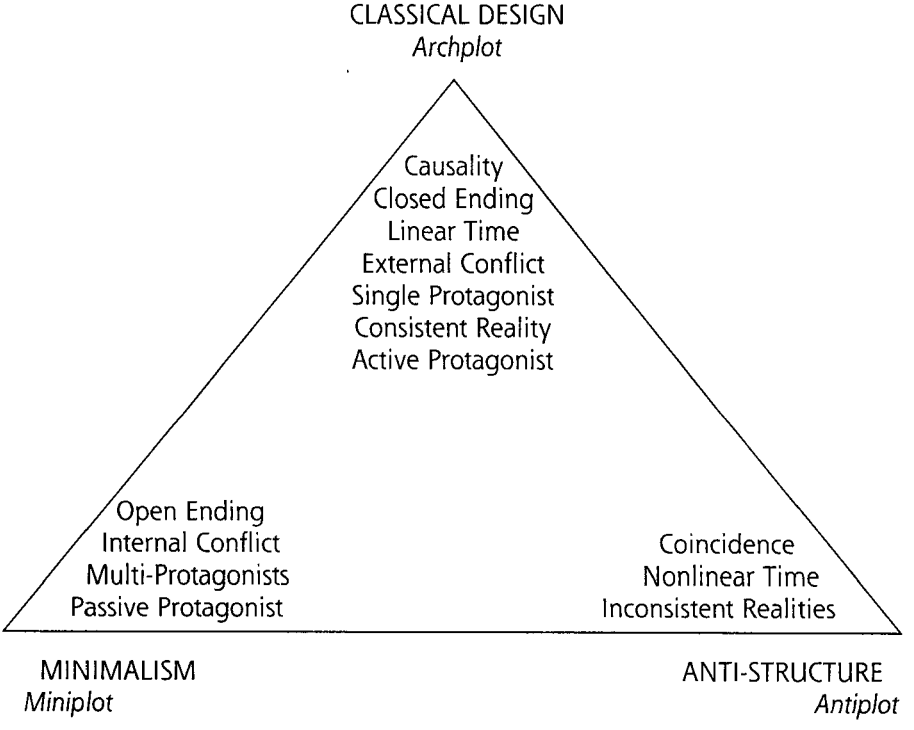
Although the variations of event design are innumerable, they are not without limits. The far corners of the art create a triangle of formal possibilities that maps the universe of stories. Within this triangle is the totality of writers' cosmologies, all their multitudinous visions of reality and how life is lived within it. To understand your place in this universe, study the coordinates of this map, compare them to your work-in-progress, and let them guide you to that point you share with other writers of a similar vision.

At the top of the story triangle are the principles that constitute *Classical Design*. These principles are "classical" in the truest sense:

timeless and transcultural, fundamental to every earthly society, civilized and primitive, reaching back through millennia of oral storytelling into the shadows of time. When the epic *Gilgamesh* was carved in cuneiform on twelve clay tablets 4,000 years ago, converting story to the written word for the first time, the principles of Classical Design were already fully and beautifully in place.

CLASSICAL DESIGN means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change.

This collection of timeless principles I call the Archplot: Arch (pronounced "ark" as in archangel) in the dictionary sense of "eminent above others of the same kind."



The Archplot, however, is not the limit of storytelling shapes. In the left corner, I place all examples of minimalism. As the word suggests, minimalism means that the writer begins with the elements of Classical Design but then reduces them—shrinking or compressing, trimming or truncating the prominent features of the Archplot. I call this set of minimalist variations *Miniplot.* Miniplot does not mean *no plot,* for its story must be as beautifully executed as an Archplot. Rather, minimalism strives for simplicity and economy while retaining enough of the classical that the film will still satisfy the audience, sending them out of the cinema thinking, "What a good story!"

In the right corner is *Antiplot,* the cinema counterpart to the antinovel or Nouveau Roman and Theatre of the Absurd. This set of antistructure variations doesn't reduce the Classical but reverses it, contradicting traditional forms to exploit, perhaps ridicule the very idea of formal principles. The Antiplot-maker is rarely interested in understatement or quiet austerity; rather, to make clear his "revolutionary" ambitions, his films tend toward extravagance and self-conscious overstatement.

The Archplot is the meat, potatoes, pasta, rice, and couscous of world cinema. For the past one hundred years it has informed the vast majority of films that have found an international audience. If we skim through the decades—THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY (USA/1904), THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII (Italy/1913), THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (Germany/1920), GREED (USA/1924), THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN (USSR/1925), M (Germany/1931), TOP HAT (USA/1935), LA GRANDE ILLUSION (France/1937), BRINGING UP BABY (USA/1938), CITIZEN KANE (USA/1941), BRIEF ENCOUNTER (UK/1945), THE SEVEN SAMURAI (Japan/1954), MARTY (USA/1955), THE SEVENTH SEAL (Sweden/1957), THE HUSTLER (USA/1961), 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (USA/1968), THE GODFATHER, PART II (USA/1974), DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS (Brazil/1978), A FISH CALLED WANDA (UK/1988), BIG (USA/1988), JU DOU (China/1990), THELMA & LOUISE (USA/1991), FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL (UK/1994), SHINE (Australia/1996)—we glimpse the staggering variety of story embraced within the Archplot.

Miniplot, though less various, is equally international: NANOOK OF THE NORTH (USA/1922), LA PASSION DE JEANNE D'ARC (France/1928), ZERO DE CONDUITE (France/1933), PAISAN (Italy/1946), WILD STRAWBERRIES (Sweden/1957), THE MUSIC ROOM (India/1964), THE RED DESERT (Italy/1964), FIVE EASY PIECES (USA/1970), CLAIRE'S KNEE (France/1970), IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES (Japan/1976), TENDER MERCIES (USA/1983), PARIS, TEXAS (West Germany/France/1984), THE SACRIFICE (Sweden/France/1986), PELLE THE CONQUEROR (Denmark/1987), STOLEN CHILDREN (Italy/1992), A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT (USA/1993), TO LIVE (China/1994), and SHALL WE DANCE (Japan/1997). Miniplot also embraces narrative documentaries such as WELFARE (USA/1975).

Examples of Antiplot are less common, predominantly European, and post-World War II: UN CHIEN ANDALOU (France/1928), BLOOD OF THE POET (France/1932), MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON (USA/1943), THE RUNNING, JUMPING AND STANDING STILL FILM (UK/1959), LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD (France/1960), 8½ (Italy/1963), PERSONA (Sweden/1966), WEEKEND (France/1967), DEATH BY HANGING (Japan/1968), CLOWNS (Italy/1970), MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL (UK/1975), THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE (France/Spain/1977), BAD TIMING (UK/1980), STRANGER THAN PARADISE (USA/1984), AFTER HOURS (USA/1985), A ZED & TWO NOUGHTS (UK/Netherlands/1985), WAYNE'S WORLD (USA/1993), CHUNGKING EXPRESS (Hong Kong/1994), LOST HIGHWAY (USA/1997). Antiplot also includes the documentary-cum-collage such as Alain Resnais's NIGHT AND FOG (France/1955) and KOYAANISQATSI (USA/1983).

FORMAL DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE STORY TRIANGLE

Closed Versus Open Endings

The Archplot delivers a closed ending—all questions raised by the story are answered; all emotions evoked are satisfied. The audience

leaves with a rounded, closed experience—nothing in doubt, nothing unsated.

Miniplot, on the other hand, often leaves the ending somewhat open. Most of the questions raised by the telling are answered, but an unanswered question or two may trail out of the film, leaving the audience to supply it subsequent to the viewing. Most of the emotion evoked by the film will be satisfied, but an emotional residue may be left for the audience to satisfy. Although Miniplot may end on a question mark of thought and feeling, "open" doesn't mean the film quits in the middle, leaving everything hanging. The question must be answerable, the emotion resolvable. All that has gone before leads to clear and limited alternatives that make a degree of closure possible.

A Story Climax of absolute, irreversible change that answers all questions raised by the telling and satisfies all audience emotion is a CLOSED ENDING.

A Story Climax that leaves a question or two unanswered and some emotion unfulfilled is an OPEN ENDING.

At the climax of PARIS, TEXAS father and son are reconciled; their future is set and our hope for their happiness satisfied. But the husband/wife, mother/son relationships are left unresolved. The questions "Will this family have a future together? If so, what kind of future will it be?" are open. The answers will be found in the privacy of postfilm thoughts: If you want this family to get together, but your heart tells you they aren't going to make it, it's a sad evening. If you can convince yourself that they will live happily ever after, you walk out pleased. The minimalist storyteller deliberately gives this last critical bit of work to the audience.

External Versus Internal Conflict

The Archplot puts emphasis on external conflict. Although characters often have strong inner conflicts, the emphasis falls on their

struggles with personal relationships, with social institutions, or with forces in the physical world. In Miniplot, to the contrary, the protagonist may have strong external conflicts with family, society, and environment, but emphasis will fall on the battles within his own thoughts and feelings, conscious or unconscious.

Compare the journeys of the protagonists in THE ROAD WARRIOR and THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. In the former, Mel Gibson's Mad Max undergoes an inner transformation from self-sufficient loner to self-sacrificing hero, but the emphasis of the story falls on the survival of the clan. In the latter, the life of William Hurt's travel writer changes as he remarries and becomes the much-needed father to a lonely boy, but the emphasis of the film falls on the resurrection of this man's spirit. His transformation from a man suffering a paralysis of emotions to a man free to love and feel is the film's dominant arc of change.

Single Versus Multiple Protagonists

The classically told story usually places a single protagonist—man, woman, or child—at the heart of the telling. One major story dominates screentime and its protagonist is the star role. However, if the writer splinters the film into a number of relatively small, subplot-sized stories, each with a separate protagonist, the result minimalizes the roller-coaster dynamic of the Archplot and creates the Multiplot variation of Miniplot that's grown in popularity since the 1980s.

In THE FUGITIVE's highly charged Archplot the camera never loses sight of Harrison Ford's protagonist: no glances sideways, not even a hint of a subplot. PARENTHOOD, on the other hand, is a tempered weave of no fewer than six tales of six protagonists. As in an Archplot, the conflicts of these six characters are predominantly external; none of them undergoes the deep suffering and inner change of THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. But because these family battles draw our feelings in so many directions and because each story receives a brief fifteen or twenty minutes of screentime, their multiple design softens the telling.

The Multiplot dates from INTOLERANCE (USA/1916), GRAND HOTEL (USA/1932), THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY (Sweden/1961), and SHIP OF FOOLS (USA/1965) to its common use today—SHORT CUTS, PULP FICTION, DO THE RIGHT THING, and EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN.

Active Versus Passive Protagonist

The single protagonist of an Archplot tends to be active and dynamic, willfully pursuing desire through ever-escalating conflict and change. The protagonist of a Miniplot design, although not inert, is relatively reactive and passive. Generally this passivity is compensated for either by giving the protagonist a powerful inner struggle as in THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST or by surrounding him with dramatic events as in the Multiplot design of PELLE THE CONQUEROR.

An ACTIVE PROTAGONIST, in the pursuit of desire, takes action in direct conflict with the people and the world around him.

A PASSIVE PROTAGONIST is outwardly inactive while pursuing desire inwardly, in conflict with aspects of his or her own nature.

The title character of PELLE THE CONQUEROR is an adolescent under the control of the adult world and therefore has little choice but to be reactive. Writer Bille August, however, takes advantage of Pelle's alienation to make him the passive observer of tragic stories around him: Illicit lovers commit infanticide, a woman castrates her husband for adultery, the leader of a workers' revolt is bludgeoned into a cretin. Because August controls the telling from the child's point of view, these violent events are kept offscreen or at a distance, so that we rarely see the cause, only the aftermath. The design softens or minimalizes what could have been melodramatic, even distasteful.

Linear Versus Nonlinear Time

An Archplot begins at a certain point in time, moves elliptically through more or less continuous time, and ends at a later date. If flashbacks are used, they are handled so that the audience can place the story's events in their temporal order. An antiplot, on the other hand, is often disjunctive, scrambling or fragmenting time to make it difficult, if not impossible, to sort what happened into any linear sequence. Godard once remarked that in his aesthetic a film must have a beginning, middle, and end . . . but not necessarily in that order.

A story with or without flashbacks and arranged into a temporal order of events that the audience can follow is told in LINEAR TIME.

A story that either skips helter-skelter through time or so blurs temporal continuity that the audience cannot sort out what happens before and after what is told in NONLINEAR TIME.

In the aptly titled Antiplot BAD TIMING a psychoanalyst (Art Garfunkel) meets a woman (Theresa Russell) while vacationing in Austria. The first third of the film contains scenes that seem to come from the early going of the affair, but between them flash-forwards leap to scenes from the relationship's middle and late stages. The center third of the film is spattered with scenes that we assume are from their middle period, but interspersed with flashbacks to the beginning and flash-forwards to the end. The last third is dominated by scenes that seem to come from the couple's final days but are spliced with flashbacks to middle and beginning. The film ends on an act of necrophilia.

BAD TIMING is a contemporary reworking of the ancient idea of "character as destiny"—the notion that your fate equals who you are, that the final consequences of your life will be determined by the unique nature of your character and nothing else—not family,

society, environment, or chance. By tossing time like a salad, BAD TIMING's antistructure design disconnects the characters from the world around them. What difference does it make whether they went to Salzburg one weekend or Vienna the next; whether they had lunch here or dinner there; quarreled over this or that or didn't? What matters is the poisonous alchemy of their personalities. The moment this couple met they stepped on a bullet train to their grotesque fate.

Causality Versus Coincidence

The Archplot stresses how things happen in the world, how a cause creates an effect, how this effect becomes a cause that triggers yet another effect. Classical story design charts the vast interconnectedness of life from the obvious to the impenetrable, from the intimate to the epic, from individual identity to the international infosphere. It lays bare the network of chain-linked causalities that, when understood, gives life meaning. The Antiplot, on the other hand, often substitutes coincidence for causality, putting emphasis on the random collisions of things in the universe that break the chains of causality and lead to fragmentation, meaninglessness, and absurdity.

CAUSALITY drives a story in which motivated actions cause effects that in turn become the causes of yet other effects, thereby interlinking the various levels of conflict in a chain reaction of episodes to the Story Climax, expressing the interconnectedness of reality.

COINCIDENCE drives a fictional world in which unmotivated actions trigger events that do not cause further effects, and therefore fragment the story into divergent episodes and an open ending, expressing the disconnectedness of existence.

In AFTER HOURS a young man (Griffin Dunne) makes a date with a woman he meets by chance in a Manhattan coffee shop. On

the trip to her Soho apartment his last twenty bucks is blown out the taxi window. He then seems to find his money stapled to a bizarre statue-in-progress in her loft. His date suddenly commits a well-planned suicide. Trapped in Soho without money for the subway, he's mistaken for a burglar and hunted by a vigilante mob. Lunatic characters and an overflowing toilet block his escape, until he's hidden inside a statue, stolen by real burglars, and finally falls out of their getaway truck, smack onto the steps of the building where he works, right on time for his day at the word processor. He's a pool ball on the table of God, randomly bouncing around until he drops into a pocket.

Consistent Versus Inconsistent Realities

Story is a metaphor for life. It takes us beyond the factual to the essential. Therefore, it's a mistake to apply a one-for-one standard from reality to story. The worlds we create obey their own internal rules of causality. An Archplot unfolds within a consistent reality . . . but reality, in this case, doesn't mean actuality. Even the most naturalistic, "life as lived" Miniplot is an abstracted and rarefied existence. Each fictional reality uniquely establishes how things happen within it. In an Archplot these rules cannot be broken—even if they are bizarre.

CONSISTENT REALITIES are fictional settings that establish modes of interaction between characters and their world that are kept consistently throughout the telling to create meaning.

Virtually all works in the *Fantasy* genre, for example, are Archplots in which whimsical rules of "reality" are strictly obeyed. Suppose that in WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT a human character were to chase Roger, a cartoon character, toward a locked door. Suddenly Roger flattens into two dimensions, slides under the sill, and escapes. The human slams into the door. Fine. But now this becomes a story rule: No human can catch Roger because he can

switch to two dimensions and escape. Should the writer want Roger caught in a future scene, he would have to devise a non-human agent or go back to rewrite the previous chase. Having created story rules of causality, the writer of an Archplot must work within his self-created discipline. Consistent Reality, therefore, means an internally consistent world, true to itself.

INCONSISTENT REALITIES are settings that mix modes of interaction so that the story's episodes jump inconsistently from one "reality" to another to create a sense of absurdity.

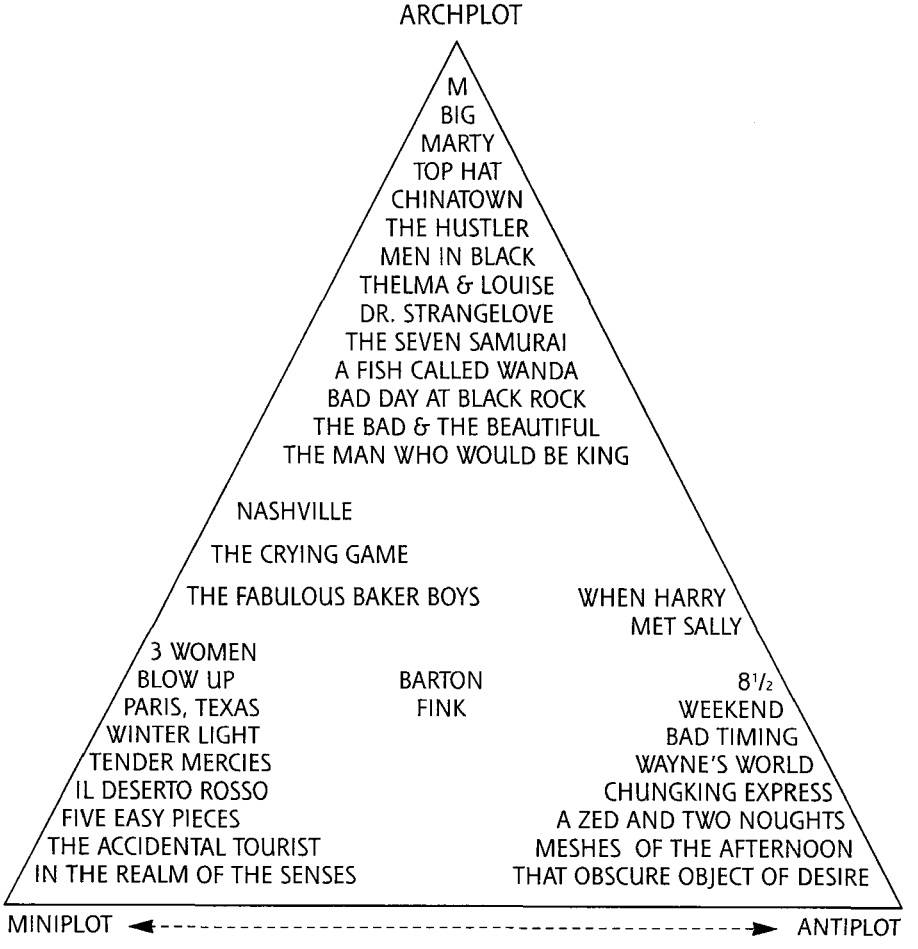
In an Antiplot, however, the only rule is to break rules: In Jean-Luc Godard's WEEKEND a Parisian couple decides to murder an elderly aunt for her insurance money. On the way to the aunt's country home an accident, more hallucinatory than real, destroys their red sports car. Later, as the couple trudges on foot down a lovely shaded lane, Emily Brontë suddenly appears, plucked out of nineteenth-century England and dropped onto a twentieth-century French path, reading her novel *Wuthering Heights*. The Parisians hate Emily on sight, whip out a Zippo lighter, set her crinoline skirts on fire, burn her to a crisp . . . and walk on.

A slap in the face for classical literature? Perhaps, but it doesn't happen again. This isn't a time-travel movie. Nobody else shows up out of the past or future; just Emily; just once. A rule made to be broken.

The desire to turn the Archplot on its head began early in this century. Writers such as August Strindberg, Ernst Toller, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and William S. Burroughs felt the need to sever the links between the artist and external reality, and with it, between the artist and the greater part of the audience. Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Stream of Consciousness, Theatre of the Absurd, the antinovel, and cinematic antistructure may differ in technique but share the same result: a retreat inside the artist's private world to which the audience is admitted at the artist's discretion. These are worlds in which not only are events

atemporal, coincidental, fragmented, and chaotic, but characters do not operate within a recognizable psychology. Neither sane nor insane, they are either deliberately inconsistent or overtly symbolic.

Films in this mode are not metaphors for "life as lived," but for "life as thought about." They reflect not reality, but the solipsism of the filmmaker, and in doing so, stretch the limits of story design toward didactic and ideational structures. However, the inconsistent reality of an Antiplot such as WEEKEND has a unity of sorts. When done well, it's felt to be an expression of the subjective state of mind of the filmmaker. This sense of a single perception, no matter how incoherent, holds the work together for audiences willing to venture into its distortions.



The seven formal contradictions and contrasts listed above are not hard and fast. There are unlimited shades and degrees of openness/closedness, passivity/activity, consistent/inconsistent reality, and the like. All storytelling possibilities are distributed inside the story design triangle, but very few films are of such purity of form that they settle at its extreme corners. Each side of the triangle is a spectrum of structural choices, and writers slide their stories along these lines, blending or borrowing from each extreme.

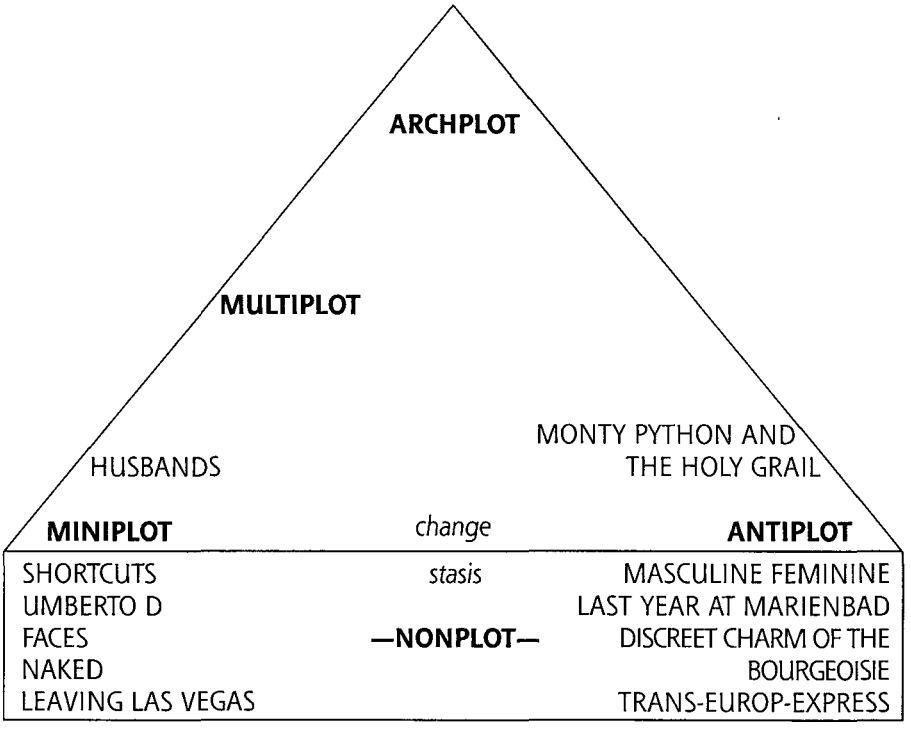
THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS and THE CRYING GAME fall halfway between Archplot and Miniplot. Each tells the tale of a rather passive isolate; each leaves its ending open as the future of the subplot's love story goes unanswered. Neither is as classically designed as CHINATOWN or THE SEVEN SAMURAI, nor as minimalistic as FIVE EASY PIECES or THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA.

Multiplot films are also less than classical and more than minimal. The works of Robert Altman, a master of this form, span a spectrum of possibilities. A Multiplot work may be "hard," tending toward Archplot, as individual stories turn frequently with strong external consequences (NASHVILLE), or "soft," leaning toward Miniplot, as plot lines slow their pace and action becomes internalized (3 WOMEN).

A film could be quasi-Antiplot. When, for example, Nora Ephron and Rob Reiner inserted scenes of *Mockumentary* into WHEN HARRY MET SALLY, his film's overall "reality" came into question. The documentary-styled interviews of older couples looking back on how they met are in fact delightfully scripted scenes with actors working in a documentary style. These false realities sandwiched inside an otherwise conventional love story pushed the film toward the inconsistent reality of antistructure and self-reflexive satire.

A film like BARTON FINK sits at the center, drawing qualities from each of the three extremes. It begins as the story of a young New York playwright (single protagonist) who's trying to make his mark in Hollywood (active conflict with external forces)—*Archplot.* But Fink (John Turturro) becomes more and more reclusive and suffers a severe writer's block (inner conflict)—*Miniplot.* When

that progresses into hallucination, we grow less and less sure of what's real, what's fantasy (inconsistent realities), until nothing can be trusted (fractured temporal and causal order)—*Antiplot.* The ending is rather open, with Fink staring out to sea, but it's fairly certain he'll never write in that town again.



Change Versus Stasis

Above the line drawn between Miniplot and Antiplot are stories in which life clearly changes. At the limits of Miniplot, however, change may be virtually invisible because it occurs at the deepest level of inner conflict: HUSBANDS. Change at the limits of Antiplot may explode into a cosmic joke: MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL. But in both cases stories arc and life changes for better or worse.

Below this line stories remain in stasis and do not arc. The value-charged condition of the character's life at the end of the

film is virtually identical to that at the opening. Story dissolves into portraiture, either a portrait of verisimilitude or one of absurdity. I term these films *Nonplot.* Although they inform us, touch us, and have their own rhetorical or formal structures, they do not tell story. Therefore, they fall outside the story triangle and into a realm that would include everything that could be loosely called "narrative."

In slice-of-life works such as UMBERTO D, FACES, and NAKED, we discover protagonists leading lonely, troubled lives. They're tested by even more suffering, but by the film's end they seem resigned to the pain of life, even ready for more. In SHORT CUTS, individual lives are altered within its many story lines, but a soulless malaise bookends the film and permeates everything, until murder and suicide seem a natural part of the landscape. Although nothing changes within the universe of a Nonplot, we gain a sobering insight and hopefully something changes within us.

Antistructured Nonplots also trace a circular pattern but turn it with absurdity and satire done in an supra-unnaturalistic style. MASCULINE FEMININE (France/1966), THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE (France/1972), and PHANTOM OF LIBERTY (France/1974) string together scenes that ridicule bourgeois antics, sexual and political, but the blind fools of the opening scenes are just as blind and foolish when the closing titles roll.

THE POLITICS OF STORY DESIGN

In an ideal world art and politics would never touch. In reality they can't keep their hands off each other. So as in all things, politics lurks inside the story triangle: the politics of taste, the politics of festivals and awards, and, most important, the politics of artistic versus commercial success. And as in all things political, the distortion of truth is greatest at the extremes. Each of us has a natural address somewhere on the story triangle. The danger is that for reasons more ideological than personal, you may feel compelled to leave home and work in a distant corner, trapping yourself into designing stories you

don't in your heart believe. But if you take an honest look at film's often specious polemics, you won't lose your way.

Over the years the primary political issue in cinema has been "Hollywood film" versus "art film." Although the terms seem dated, their partisans are very contemporary and vocal. Traditionally, their arguments have been framed in terms of big budget versus low budget, special effects versus painterly composition, the star system versus ensemble acting, private finance versus government support, and auteurs versus guns-for-hire. But hiding inside these debates are two diametrically opposed visions of life. The crucial frontier stretches across the bottom of story triangle: stasis versus change, a philosophical contradiction with profound implications for the writer. Let's begin by defining terms:

The concept "Hollywood film" does not include REVERSAL OF FORTUNE, Q & A, DRUGSTORE COWBOY, POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE, SALVADOR, RUNNING ON EMPTY, BLUE VELVET, BOB ROBERTS, JFK, DANGEROUS LIAISONS, THE FISHER KING, DO THE RIGHT THING, or EVERYBODY SAYS I LOVE YOU. These films, and many more like them, are acclaimed international successes produced by Hollywood studios. THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST made more than $250 million worldwide, surpassing most *Action* films, but doesn't fall within the definition. The political meaning of "Hollywood film" is narrowed to thirty or forty special effects–dominated flicks and an equal number of farces and romances that Hollywood makes each year—far less than half of the town's output.

"Art film," in the broadest sense, means non-Hollywood, more specifically foreign film, even more specifically European film. Each year western Europe produces over four hundred films, generally more than Hollywood. "Art film," however, doesn't refer to the large number of European productions that are blood-spattered action, hard-core pornography, or slapstick farce. In the language of cafe criticism "art film" (a silly phrase—imagine "art novel" or "art theatre") is restricted to that trickle of excellent films, like BABETTE'S FEAST, IL POSTINO, or MAN BITES DOG, that manage to cross the Atlantic.

These terms were coined in the wars of cultural politics and point to vastly different, if not contradictory, views of reality. Hollywood filmmakers tend to be overly (some would say foolishly) optimistic about the capacity of life to change—especially for the better. Consequently, to express this vision they rely on the Archplot and an inordinately high percentage of positive endings. Non-Hollywood filmmakers tend to be overly (some would say chicly) pessimistic about change, professing that the more life changes, the more it stays the same, or, worse, that change brings suffering. Consequently, to express the futility, meaninglessness, or destructiveness of change, they tend to make static, Nonplot portraiture or extreme Miniplots and Antiplots with negative endings.

These are tendencies, of course, with exceptions on both sides of the Atlantic, but the dichotomy is real and deeper than the seas that separate the Old World from the New. Americans are escapees from prisons of stagnant culture and rigid class who crave change. We change and change again, trying to find what, if anything, works. After weaving the trillion-dollar safety net of the Great Society, we're now shredding it. The Old World, on the other hand, has learned through centuries of hard experience to fear such change, that social transformations inevitably bring war, famine, chaos.

The result is our polarized attitude toward story: The ingenuous optimism of Hollywood (not naive about change but about its insistence on positive change) versus the equally ingenuous pessimism of the *art film* (not naive about the human condition but about its insistence that it will never be other than negative or static). Too often Hollywood films force an up-ending for reasons more commercial than truthful; too often non-Hollywood films cling to the dark side for reasons more fashionable than truthful. The truth, as always, sits somewhere in the middle.

The art film's focus on inner conflict draws the interest of those with advanced degrees, because the inner world is where the highly educated spend a large amount of time. Minimalists, however, often overestimate the appetite of even the most self-absorbed minds for a diet of nothing but inner conflict. Worse, they also

overestimate their talent to express the unseeable on screen. By the same token, Hollywood's action filmmakers underestimate the interest of their audience in character, thought, and feeling, and, worse, overestimate their ability to avoid *Action* genre clichés.

Because story in Hollywood film is often forced and clichéd, directors must compensate with something else to hold the audience's attention, resorting to transformation effects and cacophonous derring-do: THE FIFTH ELEMENT. In the same vein, because story is often thin or absent in the art film, again, directors must compensate. In this case, with one of two possibilities: information or sensory stimulation. Either dialogue-heavy scenes of political argument, philosophical musing, and characters' self-conscious descriptions of their emotions; or lush production design and photography or musical scores to pleasure the audience's senses: THE ENGLISH PATIENT.

The sad truth of the political wars of contemporary cinema is that the excesses of both "art film" and "Hollywood film" are the mirror images of each other: The telling is forced to become a dazzling surface of spectacle and sound to distract the audience from the vacancy and falsity of the story . . . and in both boredom follows as night the day.

Behind the political squabbling over finance, distribution, and awards lies a deep cultural divide, reflected in the opposing worldviews of Archplot versus Miniplot and Antiplot. From story to story the writer may move anywhere within the triangle, but most of us feel more at home in one place or another. You must make your own "political" choices and decide where you reside. As you do, let me offer these points for you to weigh:

The Writer Must Earn His Living Writing

Writing while holding down a forty-hour-a-week job is possible. Thousands have done it. But in time, exhaustion sets in, concentration wanders, creativity crumbles, and you're tempted to quit. Before you do, you must find a way to earn your living from your writing. A talented writer's survival in the real world of film and

television, theatre, and publishing begins with his recognition of this fact: As story design moves away from the Archplot and down the triangle toward the far reaches of Miniplot, Antiplot, and Nonplot, *the audience shrinks.*

This atrophy has nothing to do with quality or a lack of it. All three corners of the story triangle gleam with masterworks that the world treasures, pieces of perfection for our imperfect world. Rather, the audience shrinks for this reason: Most human beings believe that life brings closed experiences of absolute, irreversible change; that their greatest sources of conflict are external to themselves; that they are the single and active protagonists of their own existence; that their existence operates through continuous time within a consistent, causally interconnected reality; and that inside this reality events happen for explainable and meaningful reasons. Since our first ancestor stared into a fire of his own making and thought the thought, "I am," this is how human beings have seen the world and themselves in it. Classical design is a mirror of the human mind.

Classical design is a model of memory and anticipation. When we think back to the past, do we piece events together antistructured? Minimalistically? No. We collect and shape memories around an Archplot to bring the past back vividly. When we daydream about the future, what we dread or pray will happen, is our vision minimalistic? Antistructured? No, we mold our fantasies and hopes into an Archplot. Classical design displays the temporal, spatial, and causal patterns of human perception, outside which the mind rebels.

Classical design is not a Western view of life. For thousands of years, from the Levant to Java to Japan, the storytellers of Asia have framed their works within the Archplot, spinning yarns of high adventure and great passion. As the rise of Asian film has shown, Eastern screenwriters draw on the same principles of classical design used in the West, enriching their tellings with a unique wit and irony. The Archplot is neither ancient nor modern, Western nor Eastern; it is human.

When the audience senses that a story is drifting too close to fic-

tional realities it finds tedious or meaningless, it feels alienated and turns away. This is true of intelligent, sensitive people of all incomes and backgrounds. The vast majority of human beings cannot endorse the inconsistent realities of Antiplot, the internalized passivity of Miniplot, and the static circularity of Nonplot as metaphors for life as they live it. As story reaches the bottom of the triangle the audience has shrunk to those loyal, cinephile intellectuals who like to have their realities twisted once in a while. This is an enthusiastic, challenging audience . . . but a very small audience.

If the audience shrinks, the budget must shrink. This is the law. In 1961 Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD and throughout the seventies and eighties he wrote brilliant Antiplot puzzle pieces—films more about the art of writing than about the act of living. I once asked him how, despite the anticommercial bent of his films, he did it. He said he'd never spent more than $750,000 to make a film and never would. His audience was faithful but meager. At an ultra-low budget his investors doubled their money and kept him in the director's chair. But at $2 million they would lose their shirts and he his seat. Robbe-Grillet was both visionary and pragmatic.

If, like Robbe-Grillet, you wish to write Miniplot or Antiplot, and can find a non-Hollywood producer to work at low budget, and are happy with relatively little money for yourself, good. Do it. But when you write for Hollywood, a low-budget script is no asset. Seasoned professionals who read your minimalist or antistructured piece may applaud your handling of image, but decline to be involved because experience has taught them that if the story is inconsequential, so is the audience.

Even modest Hollywood budgets run into the tens of millions of dollars, and each film must find an audience large enough to repay its cost at a profit greater than the same money would have earned in a secured investment. Why should investors place millions at enormous jeopardy when they can put it into real estate and at least have a building when they're done, not something that's shown in a couple of film festivals, shoved into a refrigerated vault, and forgotten? If a Hollywood studio is going to take this wild ride with

you, you must write a film that has at least a chance of recouping its huge risk. In other words, a film that leans toward the Archplot.

The Writer Must Master Classical Form

By instinct or study, fine writers recognize that minimalism and antistructure are not independent forms but reactions to the Classical. Miniplot and Antiplot were born out of the Archplot—one shrinks it, the other contradicts it. The avant-garde exists to oppose the popular and commercial, until it too becomes popular and commercial, then it turns to attack itself. If Nonplot "art films" went hot and were raking in money, the avant-garde would revolt, denounce Hollywood for selling out to portraiture, and seize the Classical for its own.

These cycles between formality/freedom, symmetry/asymmetry are as old as Attic theatre. The history of art is a history of revivals: Establishment icons are shattered by an avant-garde that in time becomes the new establishment to be attacked by a new avant-garde that uses its grandfather's forms of weapons. Rock 'n' roll, which was named after black slang for sex, began as an avant-garde movement against the white-bread sounds of the postwar era. Now it's the definition of musical aristocracy and even used as church music.

The serious use of Antiplot devices not only has gone out of fashion but has become a joke. A vein of dark satire has always run through antistructure works, from UN CHIEN ANDALOU to WEEKEND, but now direct address to camera, inconsistent realities, and alternative endings are the staples of film farce. Antiplot gags that began with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby's THE ROAD TO MOROCCO have been worked into the likes of BLAZING SADDLES, the PYTHON films, and WAYNE'S WORLD. Story techniques that once struck us as dangerous and revolutionary now seem toothless but charming.

Respecting these cycles, great storytellers have always known that, regardless of background or education, everyone, consciously or instinctively, enters the story ritual with Classical anticipation. Therefore, to make Miniplot and Antiplot work the writer must

play with or against this expectancy. Only by carefully and creatively shattering or bending the Classical form can the artist lead the audience to perceive the inner life hidden in a Miniplot or to accept the chilling absurdity of an Antiplot. But how can a writer creatively reduce or reverse that which he does not understand?

Writers who found success in the deep corners of the story triangle knew that the starting point of understanding was at the top and began their careers in the Classical. Bergman wrote and directed love stories and social and historical dramas for twenty years before he dared venture into the minimalism of THE SILENCE or the antistructure of PERSONA. Fellini made I VITIONI and LA STRADA before he risked the Miniplot of AMARCORD or the Antiplot of $8^{1}/_{2}$. Godard made BREATHLESS before WEEKEND. Robert Altman perfected his story talents in the TV series *Bonanza* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents.* First, the masters mastered the Archplot.

I sympathize with the youthful desire to make a first screenplay read like PERSONA. But the dream of joining the avant-garde must wait while, like the artists before you, you too gain mastery of Classical form. Don't kid yourself into thinking that you understand Archplot because you've seen the movies. You'll know you understand it *when you can do it.* The writer works at his skills until knowledge shifts from the left side of the brain to the right, until intellectual awareness becomes living craft.

The Writer Must Believe in What He Writes

Stanislavski asked his actors: Are you in love with the art in yourself or yourself in the art? You too must examine your motives for wanting to write the way you write. Why do your screenplays find their way to one corner of the triangle or the other? What is your vision?

Each tale you create says to the audience: "I believe life is like *this.*" Every moment must be filled with your passionate conviction or we smell a phony. If you write minimalism, do you believe in the meanings of this form? Has experience convinced you that life

brings little or no change? If your ambition is anticlassicism, are you convinced of the random meaninglessness of life? If your answer is a passionate yes, then write your Miniplot or Antiplot and do everything possible to see it made.

For the vast majority, however, the honest answer to these questions is no. Yet antistructure and, in particular, minimalism still attract young writers like a Pied Piper. Why? I suspect that for many it isn't the intrinsic meanings of such forms that draw their interest. Rather, it's what these forms represent extrinsically. In other words, politics. It isn't what Antiplot and Miniplot are, it's what they're *not*: They're not Hollywood.

The young are taught that Hollywood and art are antithetical. The novice, therefore, wanting to be recognized as an artist, falls into the trap of writing a screenplay not for what it *is*, but for what it's *not*. He avoids closure, active characters, chronology, and causality to avoid the taint of commercialism. As a result, pretentiousness poisons his work.

A story is the embodiment of our ideas and passions in Edmund Husserl's phrase, "an objective correlative" for the feelings and insights we wish to instill in the audience. When you work with one eye on your script and the other on Hollywood, making eccentric choices to avoid the taint of commercialism, you produce the literary equivalent of a temper tantrum. Like a child living in the shadow of a powerful father, you break Hollywood's "rules" because it makes you feel free. But angry contradiction of the patriarch is not creativity; it's delinquency calling for attention. Difference for the sake of difference is as empty an achievement as slavishly following the commercial imperative. Write only what you believe.

3

STRUCTURE AND SETTING

THE WAR ON CLICHÉ

This may be the most demanding time in history to be a writer. Compare the story-saturated audience of today to that of centuries past. How many times a year did educated Victorians go to the theatre? In a era of huge families and no automatic dishwashers, how much time did they have for fiction? In a typical week our great-great-grandparents may have read or seen five or six hours of story—what many of us now consume per day. By the time modern filmgoers sit down to your work, they've absorbed tens of thousands of hours of TV, movies, prose, and theatre. What will you create that they haven't seen before? Where will you find a truly original story? How will you win the war on cliché?

Cliché is at the root of audience dissatisfaction, and like a plague spread through ignorance, it now infects all story media. Too often we close novels or exit theatres bored by an ending that was obvious from the beginning, disgruntled because we've seen these clichéd scenes and characters too many times before. The cause of this worldwide epidemic is simple and clear; the source of all clichés can be traced to one thing and one thing alone: *The writer does not know the world of his story.*

Such writers select a setting and launch a screenplay assuming a knowledge of their fictional world that they don't have. As they reach into their minds for material, they come up empty. So where do they run? To films and TV, novels and plays with similar settings. From

the works of other writers they crib scenes we've seen before, paraphrase dialogue we've heard before, disguise characters we've met before, and pass them off as their own. They reheat literary leftovers and serve up plates of boredom because, regardless of their talents, they lack an in-depth understanding of their story's setting and all it contains. Knowledge of and insight into the world of your story is fundamental to the achievement of originality and excellence.

SETTING

A story's SETTING is four-dimensional—*Period, Duration, Location, Level of Conflict.*

The first dimension of time is Period. Is the story set in the contemporary world? In history? A hypothetical future? Or is it that rare fantasy, such as ANIMAL FARM or WATERSHIP DOWN, in which location in time is unknowable and irrelevant?

PERIOD is a story's place in time.

Duration is the second dimension of time. How much time does the story span within the lives of your characters? Decades? Years? Months? Days? Is it that rare work in which storytime equals screentime, such as MY DINNER WITH ANDRE, a two-hour movie about a two-hour dinner?

Or rarer still, LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD, a film that liquefies time into timelessness? It's conceivable, through cross-cutting, overlap, repetition, and/or slow motion, for screentime to surpass storytime. Although no feature-length film has attempted this, a few sequences have done it brilliantly—most famous of all, the "Odessa Steps" sequence of THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN. The actual assault by the Tsar's army on the Odessa protesters took no more than two or three minutes, the time needed for jack-booted feet to march down the steps from top to bottom. Onscreen the terror expands to five times this length.

DURATION is a story's length through time.

Location is the story's physical dimension. What is the story's specific geography? In what town? On what streets? What buildings on those streets? What rooms inside those buildings? Up what mountain? Across what desert? A voyage to what planet?

LOCATION is a story's place in space.

Level of Conflict is the human dimension. A setting includes not only itsphysical and temporal domain, but social as well. This dimension becomes vertical in this sense: At what Level of Conflict do you pitch your telling? No matter how externalized in institutions or internalized in individuals, the political, economic, ideological, biological, and psychological forces of society shape events as much as period, landscape, or costume. Therefore, the cast of characters, containing its various levels of conflict, is part of a story's setting.

Does your story focus on the inner, even unconscious conflicts within your characters? Or coming up a level, on personal conflicts? Or higher and wider, on battles with institutions in society? Wider still, on struggles against forces of the environment? From the subconscious to the stars, through all the multilayered experiences of life, your story may be set at any one or any combination of these levels.

LEVEL OF CONFLICT is the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles.

The Relationship Between Structure and Setting

A story's setting sharply defines and confines its possibilities.

Although your setting is a fiction, not everything that comes to mind may be allowed to happen in it. Within any world, no matter how imaginary, only certain events are possible or probable.

If your drama is set among the gated estates of West L.A., we won't see homeowners protesting social injustice by rioting in their tree-lined streets, although they might throw a thousand-dollar-a-plate fund-raiser. If your setting is the housing projects of East

L.A.'s ghetto, these citizens won't dine at thousand-dollar-a-plate galas, but they might hit the streets to demand change.

A STORY must obey its own internal laws of probability. The event choices of the writer, therefore, are limited to the possibilities and probabilities within the world he creates.

Each fictional world creates a unique cosmology and makes its own "rules" for how and why things happen within it. No matter how realistic or bizarre the setting, once its causal principles are established, they cannot change. In fact, of all genres *Fantasy* is the most rigid and structurally conventional. We give the fantasy writer one great leap away from reality, then demand tight-knit probabilities and no coincidence—the strict Archplot of THE WIZARD OF OZ, for example. On the other hand, a gritty realism often allows leaps in logic. In THE USUAL SUSPECTS, for example, screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie arrests his wild improbabilities inside the "law" of free association.

Stories do not materialize from a void but grow out of materials already in history and human experience. From its first glimpse of the first image, the audience inspects your fictional universe, sorting the possible from the impossible, the likely from the unlikely. Consciously and unconsciously, it wants to know your "laws," to learn how and why things happen in your specific world. You create these possibilities and limitations through your personal choice of setting and the way you work within it. Having invented these strictures, you're bound to a contract you must keep. For once the audience grasps the laws of your reality, it feels violated if you break them and rejects your work as illogical and unconvincing.

Seen this way, the setting may feel like a straitjacket to the imagination. When working in development, I'm often struck by how writers try to wriggle out of its restraints by refusing to be specific. "What's your setting?" I'll ask. "America," the writer cheerfully answers. "Sounds a bit vast. Got any particular neighborhood in mind?" "Bob, it won't matter. This is your quintessential American

story. It's about divorce. What could be more American? We can set it in Louisiana, New York, or Idaho. Won't matter." But it matters absolutely. Breakup in the Bayou bears little resemblance to a multi-million-dollar Park Avenue litigation, and neither looks like infidelity on a potato farm. There is no such thing as a portable story. An honest story is at home in one, and only one, place and time.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CREATIVE LIMITATION

Limitation is vital. The first step toward a well-told story is to create a small, *knowable* world. Artists by nature crave freedom, so the principle that the structure/setting relationship restricts creative choices may stir the rebel in you. With a closer look, however, you'll see that this relationship couldn't be more positive. The constraint that setting imposes on story design doesn't inhibit creativity; it inspires it.

All fine stories take place within a limited, knowable world. No matter how grand a fictional world may seem, with a close look you'll discover that it's remarkably small. CRIME AND PUNISHMENT is microscopic. WAR AND PEACE, although played against a landscape of Russia in turmoil, is the focused tale of a handful of characters and their interrelated families. DR. STRANGELOVE is set in the office of General Jack D. Ripper, a Flying Fortress heading for Russia, and the War Room of the Pentagon. It climaxes in planetary nuclear annihilation, but the telling is limited to three sets and eight principal characters.

The world of a story must be small enough that the mind of a single artist can surround the fictional universe it creates and come to know it in the same depth and detail that God knows the one He created. As my mother used to say, "Not a sparrow falls that God does not know." Not a sparrow should fall in the world of a writer that he wouldn't know. By the time you finish your last draft, you must possess a commanding knowledge of your setting in such depth and detail that no one could raise a question about your world—from the eating habits of your characters to the weather in September—that you couldn't answer instantly.

A "small" world, however, does not mean a trivial world. Art consists of separating one tiny piece from the rest of the universe and holding it up in such a way that it appears to be the most important, fascinating thing of this moment. "Small," in this case, means knowable.

"Commanding knowledge" does not mean an extended awareness into every crevice of existence. It means knowledge of all that's germane. This may seem an impossible ideal, but the best writers attain it every day. What relevant question about the time, place, and characters of CRIES AND WHISPERS would elude Ingmar Bergman? Or David Mamet of GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS? Or John Cleese of A FISH CALLED WANDA? It's not that fine artists give deliberate, conscious thought to each and every aspect of life implied by their stories, but at some level they absorb it all. Great writers *know*. Therefore, work within what's knowable. A vast, populous world stretches the mind so thinly that knowledge must be superficial. A limited world and restricted cast offer the possibility of knowledge in depth and breadth.

The irony of setting versus story is this: The larger the world, the more diluted the knowledge of the writer, therefore the fewer his creative choices and the more clichéd the story. The smaller the world, the more complete the knowledge of the writer, therefore the greater his creative choices. Result: a fully original story and victory in the war on cliché.

RESEARCH

The key to winning this war is research, taking the time and effort to acquire knowledge. I suggest these specific methods: research of memory, research of imagination, research of fact. Generally, a story needs all three.

Memory

Lean back from your desk and ask, "What do I know from personal experience that touches on my characters' lives?"

You're writing, let's say, about a middle-aged executive who faces a career-making/career-destroying presentation. His personal and

professional life hangs in the balance. He's afraid. How does fear feel? Slowly, memory takes you back to the day your mother, for reasons you'll never understand, locked you in a closet, left the house, and didn't come back until the next day. Bring back those long, fright-filled hours when the dark smothered you. Could your character feel the same? If so, vividly describe your day and night in the closet. You may think you know, but you don't know you know until you can write it down. Research is not daydreaming. Explore your past, relive it, then write it down. In your head it's only memory, but written down it becomes working knowledge. Now with the bile of fear in your belly, write an honest, one-of-a-kind scene.

Imagination

Lean back and ask, "What would it be like to live my character's life hour by hour, day by day?"

In vivid detail sketch how your characters shop, make love, pray—scenes that may or may not find their way into your story, but draw you into your imagined world until it feels like déjà vu. While memory gives us whole chunks of life, imagination takes fragments, slivers of dream, and chips of experience that seem unrelated, then seeks their hidden connections and merges them into a whole. Having found these links and envisioned the scenes, write them down. A working imagination is research.

Fact

Have you ever had writer's block? Scary, isn't it? Days drag by and nothing gets written. Cleaning the garage looks like fun. You rearrange your desk over and over and over until you think you're losing your mind. I know a cure, but it isn't a trip to your psychiatrist. It's a trip to the library.

You're blocked because you have nothing to say. Your talent didn't abandon you. If you had something to say, you couldn't stop yourself from writing. You can't kill your talent, but you can starve it into a coma through ignorance. For no matter how talented, the

ignorant cannot write. Talent must be stimulated by facts and ideas. Do research. Feed your talent. Research not only wins the war on cliché, it's the key to victory over fear and its cousin, depression.

Suppose, for example, you're writing in the genre of *Domestic Drama.* You were raised in a family, perhaps you've raised a family, you've seen families, you can imagine families. But if you were go to the library and read respected works on the dynamics of family life, two very important things would happen:

1. Everything life has taught you would be powerfully confirmed. On page after page you'll recognize your own family. This discovery, that your personal experience is universal, is critical. It means you'll have an audience. You'll write in a singular way, but audiences everywhere will understand because the patterns of family are ubiquitous. What you've experienced in your domestic life is analogous to all others—the rivalries and alliances, loyalties and betrayals, pains and joys. As you express emotions you feel are yours and yours alone, each member of the audience will recognize them as his and his alone.
2. No matter how many families you live in, how many you observe, or how vivid your imagination, your knowledge of the nature of family is limited to the finite circle of your experience. But as you take notes in the library, your solid, factual research will expand that circle globally. You'll be struck by sudden and powerful insights and reach a depth of understanding you couldn't have gained any other way.

Research from memory, imagination, and fact is often followed by a phenomenon that authors love to describe in mystical terms: Characters suddenly spring to life and of their own free will make choices and take actions that create Turning Points that twist, build, and turn again until the writer can hardly type fast enough to keep up with the outpourings.

This "virgin birth" is a charming self-deception writers love to indulge in, but the sudden impression that the story is writing

itself simply marks the moment when a writer's knowledge of the subject has reached the saturation point. The writer becomes the god of his little universe and is amazed by what seems to be spontaneous creation, but is in fact the reward for hard work.

Be warned, however. While research provides material, it's no substitute for creativity. Biographical, psychological, physical, political, and historical research of the setting and cast is essential but pointless if it doesn't lead to the creation of events. A story is not an accumulation of information strung into a narrative, but a design of events to carry us to a meaningful climax.

What's more, research must not become procrastination. Too many insecure talents spend years in study and never actually write anything. Research is meat to feed the beasts of imagination and invention, never an end in itself. Nor is there a necessary sequence to research. We do not first fill notebooks full of social, biographical, and historical studies, and once all this work is done, begin to compose a story. Creativity is rarely so rational. Origination and exploration go on alternatively.

Imagine writing a *Psycho-Thriller.* You begin perhaps with a "What if . . ." What would happen if a psychiatrist violated her professional ethics and began an affair with her patient? Intrigued, you wonder, Who is this doctor? Patient? Perhaps he's a soldier, shell-shocked, catatonic. Why does she fall for him? You analyze and explore until growing knowledge leads to wild speculation: Suppose she falls when her treatment seems to work a miracle: Under hypnosis his wide-eyed paralysis melts away to reveal a beautiful, almost angelic personality.

That turn seems too sweet to be true, so you go on a hunt in the other direction, and deep in your studies you come across the concept of *successful schizophrenia*: Some psychotics possess such extreme intelligence and willpower they can easily hide their madness from everyone around them, even their psychiatrists. Could your patient be one of these? Could your doctor be in love with a madman she thinks she's cured?

As new ideas seed your story, story and characters grow; as your story grows, questions are raised and it hungers for more

research. Creation and investigation go back and forth, making demands on each other, pushing and pulling this way or that until the story shakes itself out, complete and alive.

CREATIVE CHOICES

Fine writing is never one to one, never a matter of devising the exact number of events necessary to fill a story, then penciling in dialogue. Creativity is five to one, perhaps ten or twenty to one. The craft demands the invention of far more material than you can possibly use, then the astute selection from this quantity of quality events, moments of originality that are true to character and true to world. When actors compliment each other, for example, they often say, "I like your choices." They know that if a colleague has arrived at a beautiful moment, it's because in rehearsal the actor tried it twenty different ways, then chose the one perfect moment. The same is true for us.

CREATIVITY means creative choices of inclusion and exclusion.

Imagine writing a romantic comedy set on the East Side of Manhattan. Your thoughts meander back and forth between the separate lives of your characters, searching for that perfect moment when the lovers meet. Then sudden inspiration: "A singles bar! That's it! They meet at P. J. Clarke's!" And why not? Given the affluent New Yorkers of your imagining, meeting in a singles bar is certainly possible. Why not? Because it's a dreadful cliché. It was a fresh idea when Dustin Hoffman met Mia Farrow in JOHN AND MARY, but since then, yuppie lovers have bumped into each other in a singles bar in film after film, soap operas, and sitcoms.

But if you know the craft, you know how to cure clichés: Sketch a list of five, ten, fifteen different "East Side lovers meet" scenes. Why? Because experienced writers never trust so-called inspiration. More often than not, inspiration is the first idea picked off the top of your head, and sitting on the top of your head is every film you've ever seen, every novel you've ever read, offering clichés to

pluck. This is why we fall in love with an idea on Monday, sleep on it, then reread it with disgust on Tuesday as we realize we've seen this cliché in a dozen other works. True inspiration comes from a deeper source, so let loose your imagination and experiment:

1. *Singles Bar.* Cliché, but a choice. Don't throw it away yet.
2. *Park Avenue.* A tire blows out on his BMW. He stands at the curb, helpless in his three-piece suit. She comes along on her motorcycle and takes pity on him. She gets out the spare, and as she doctors the car, he plays nurse, handing her jack handle, lug nuts, wheel cover . . . until suddenly eyes meet and sparks fly.
3. *Toilet.* She's so drunk at the office Christmas party that she stumbles into the men's room to throw up. He finds her collapsed on the floor. Quickly, before others enter, he locks the stall door and helps her through her illness. When the coast is clear he sneaks her out, saving her embarrassment.

On and on the list grows. You needn't write out these scenes in full. You're on a search for ideas, so simply sketch the bold strokes of what happens. If you know your characters and world in depth, a dozen or more such scenes won't be a difficult task. Once you've exhausted your best ideas, survey your list, asking these questions: Which scene is truest to my characters? Truest to their world? *And has never been on the screen quite this way before?* This is the one you write into the screenplay.

Suppose, however, as you question the meeting-cute scenes on your list, deep in your gut you realize that, while all have their virtues, your first impression was right. Cliché or not, these lovers would meet in a singles bar; nothing could be more expressive of their natures and milieu. Now what do you do? Follow your instincts and start a new list: a dozen different ways to meet in a singles bar. Research this world, hang out, observe the crowd, get involved, until you know the singles bar scene like no writer before you.

Scanning your new list you ask the same questions: Which variation is truest to character and world? Which has never been

onscreen before? When your script becomes a film and the camera dollies toward a singles bar, the audience's first reaction may be, "Oh man, not another singles bar scene." But then you take them through the door, show them what really goes on in those meat racks. If you've done your task well, jaws will drop and heads will nod: "That's right! It's not 'What's your astrological sign? Read any good books lately?' That's the embarrassment, danger. That's the truth."

If your finished screenplay contains every scene you've ever written, if you've never thrown an idea away, if your rewriting is little more than tinkering with dialogue, your work will almost certainly fail. No matter our talent, we all know in the midnight of our souls that 90 percent of what we do is less than our best. If, however, research inspires a pace of ten to one, even twenty to one, and if you then make brilliant choices to find that 10 percent of excellence and burn the rest, every scene will fascinate and the world will sit in awe of your genius.

No one has to see your failures unless you add vanity to folly and exhibit them. Genius consists not only of the power to create expressive beats and scenes, but of the taste, judgment, and will to weed out and destroy banalities, conceits, false notes, and lies.

4

STRUCTURE AND GENRE

THE FILM GENRES

Through tens of thousands of years of tales told at fireside, four millennia of the written word, twenty-five hundred years of theatre, a century of film, and eight decades of broadcasting, countless generations of storytellers have spun story into an astonishing diversity of patterns. To make sense of this outpouring, various systems have been devised to sort stories according to shared elements, classifying them by *genre*. No two systems, however, have ever agreed on which story elements to use in the sorting, and, therefore, no two agree on the number and kind of genres.

Aristotle gave us the first genres by dividing dramas according to the value-charge of their ending versus their story design. A story, he noted, could end on either a positive or a negative charge. Then each of these two types could be either a Simple design (ending flat with no turning point or surprise) or a Complex design (climaxing around a major reversal in the protagonist's life). The result is his four basic genres: Simple Tragic, Simple Fortunate, Complex Tragic, Complex Fortunate.

Over the centuries, however, the lucidity of Aristotle was lost as genre systems became more and more blurred and bloated. Goethe listed seven types by subject matter—love, revenge, and so on. Schiller argued that there must be more but couldn't name them. Polti inventoried no less than three dozen different emotions from which he deduced "Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations," but his categories

such as "An Involuntary Crime Committed for Love" or "Self-Sacrifice for an Ideal" are vague beyond use. The semiologist Metz reduced all film edits to eight possibilities he called "syntagmas," then tried to schematize all of cinema inside "La Gran Syntagma," but his effort to turn art into science crumbled like the Tower of Babel.

The neo-Aristotelian critic Norman Friedman, on the other hand, developed a system that once again delineates genres by structure and values. We're indebted to Friedman for distinctions such as the *Education Plot, Redemption Plot,* and *Disillusionment Plot*—subtle forms in which story arcs at the level of inner conflict to bring about deep changes within the mind or moral nature of the protagonist.

While scholars dispute definitions and systems, the audience is already a genre expert. It enters each film armed with a complex set of anticipations learned through a lifetime of moviegoing. The genre sophistication of filmgoers presents the writer with this critical challenge: He must not only fulfill audience anticipations, or risk their confusion and disappointment, but he must lead their expectations to fresh, unexpected moments, or risk boring them. This two-handed trick is impossible without a knowledge of genre that surpasses the audience's.

Below is the genre and subgenre system used by screenwriters—a system that's evolved from practice, not theory, and that turns on differences of subject, setting, role, event, and values.

1. **LOVE STORY.** Its subgenre, **Buddy Salvation,** substitutes friendship for romantic love: MEAN STREETS, PASSION FISH, ROMY AND MICHELE'S HIGH SCHOOL REUNION.
2. **HORROR FILM.** This genre divides into three subgenres: the **Uncanny,** in which the source of horror is astounding but subject to "rational" explanation, such as beings from outer space, science-made monsters, or a maniac; the **Supernatural,** in which the source of horror is an "irrational" phenomenon from the spirit realm; and the **Super-Uncanny,** in which the audience is kept guessing between the other two possibilities—THE TENANT, HOUR OF THE WOLF, THE SHINING.

3. **MODERN EPIC** (the individual versus the state): SPARTACUS, MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON, VIVA ZAPATA!, 1984, THE PEOPLE VS. LARRY FLINT.
4. **WESTERN.** The evolution of this genre and its subgenres is brilliantly traced in Will Wright's *Six Guns and Society.*
5. **WAR GENRE.** Although war is often the setting for another genre, such as the **Love Story,** the **WAR GENRE** is specifically about combat. **Pro-war** versus **Antiwar** are its primary subgenres. Contemporary films generally oppose war, but for decades the majority covertly glorified it, even in its most grisly form.
6. **MATURATION PLOT** or the coming-of-age story: STAND BY ME, SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, RISKY BUSINESS, BIG, BAMBI, MURIEL'S WEDDING.
7. **REDEMPTION PLOT.** Here the film arcs on a moral change within the protagonist from bad to good: THE HUSTLER, LORD JIM, DRUGSTORE COWBOY, SCHINDLER'S LIST, LA PROMESSE.
8. **PUNITIVE PLOT.** In these the good guy turns bad and is punished: GREED, THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE, MEPHISTO, WALL STREET, FALLING DOWN.
9. **TESTING PLOT.** Stories of willpower versus temptation to surrender: THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA, COOL HAND LUKE, FITZCARRALDO, FORREST GUMP.
10. **EDUCATION PLOT.** This genre arcs on a deep change within the protagonist's view of life, people, or self from the negative (naive, distrustful, fatalistic, self-hating) to the positive (wise, trusting, optimistic, self-possessed): HAROLD AND MAUDE, TENDER MERCIES, WINTER LIGHT, IL POSTINO, GROSS POINTE BLANK, MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING, SHALL WE DANCE.
11. **DISILLUSIONMENT PLOT.** A deep change of worldview from the positive to the negative: MRS. PARKER AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE, L'ECLISSE, LE FEU FOLLET, THE GREAT GATSBY, MACBETH.

Some genres are mega-genres, so large and complex that they're filled with numerous subgenre variations:

12. **COMEDY.** Subgenres range from **Parody** to **Satire** to **Sitcom** to **Romantic** to **Screwball** to **Farce** to **Black Comedy,** all differing by the focus of comic attack (bureaucratic folly, upper-class manners, teenage courtship, etc.) and the degree of ridicule (gentle, caustic, lethal).
13. **CRIME.** Subgenres vary chiefly by the answer to this question: From whose point of view do we regard the crime? **Murder Mystery** (master detective's POV); **Caper** (master criminal's POV); **Detective** (cop's POV); **Gangster** (crook's POV); **Thriller** or **Revenge Tale** (victim's POV); **Courtroom** (lawyer's POV); **Newspaper** (reporter's POV); **Espionage** (spy's POV); **Prison Drama** (inmate's POV); **Film Noir** (POV of a protagonist who may be part criminal, part detective, part victim of a femme fatale).
14. **SOCIAL DRAMA.** This genre identifies problems in society—poverty, the education system, communicable diseases, the disadvantaged, antisocial rebellion, and the like—then constructs a story demonstrating a cure. It has a number of sharply focused subgenres: **Domestic Drama** (problems within the family), the **Woman's Film** (dilemmas such as career versus family, lover versus children), **Political Drama** (corruption in politics), **Eco-Drama** (battles to save the environment), **Medical Drama** (struggles with physical illness), and **Psycho-Drama** (struggles with mental illness).
15. **ACTION/ADVENTURE.** This often borrows aspects from other genres such as **War** or **Political Drama** to use as motivation for explosive action and derring-do. If **ACTION/ADVENTURE** incorporates ideas such as destiny, hubris, or the spiritual, it becomes the subgenre **High Adventure:** THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING. If Mother Nature is the source of antagonism, it's a **Disaster/Survival Film:** ALIVE, THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE.

Taking a still wider view, supra-genres are created out of settings, performance styles, or filmmaking techniques that contain a host of autonomous genres. They are like mansions of many rooms where one of the basic genres, subgenres, or any combination might find a home:

16. **HISTORICAL DRAMA.** History is an inexhaustible source of story material and embraces every type of story imaginable. The treasure chest of history, however, is sealed with this warning: What is past must be present. A screenwriter isn't a poet hoping to be discovered after he's dead. He must find an audience today. Therefore, the best use of history, and the only legitimate excuse to set a film in the past and thereby add untold millions to the budget, is anachronism—to use the past as a clear glass through which you show us the present.

    Many contemporary antagonisms are so distressing or loaded with controversy that it's difficult to dramatize them in a present-day setting without alienating the audience. Such dilemmas are often best viewed at a safe distance in time. **HISTORICAL DRAMA** polishes the past into a mirror of the present, making clear and bearable the painful problems of racism in GLORY, religious strife in MICHAEL COLLINS, or violence of all kinds, especially against women, in UNFORGIVEN.

    Christopher Hampton's DANGEROUS LIAISONS: Setting a down ending, love/hate story in the France of lace cuffs and piquant repartee seemed like protocol for commercial disaster. But the film found a huge audience by turning a scalding light on a mode of modern hostility too politically sensitive to be addressed directly: courtship as combat. Hampton stepped back two centuries to an age in which sexual politics exploded into a war for sexual supremacy, where the ascendant emotion was not love but fear and suspicion of the opposite sex. Despite the antiquated setting, within minutes the audience felt intimately at home with its corrupted aristocrats—they are us.

17. **BIOGRAPHY.** This cousin to **Historical Drama** focuses on a person rather than an era. **BIOGRAPHY,** however, must never become a simple chronicle. That someone lived, died, and did interesting things in between is of scholarly interest and no more. The biographer must interpret facts as if they were fiction, find the meaning of the subject's life, and then cast him as the protagonist of his life's genre: YOUNG MR. LINCOLN defends the innocent in a **Courtroom Drama;** GANDHI becomes the hero of a **Modern Epic;** ISADORA succumbs to a **Disillusionment Plot;** NIXON suffers in a **Punitive Plot.**

    These caveats apply equally to the subgenre **Autobiography.** This idiom is popular with filmmakers who feel that they should write a film about a subject they know. And rightly so. But autobiographical films often lack the very virtue they promise: self-knowledge. For while it's true that the unexamined life is not worth living, it's also the case that the unlived life isn't worth examining. BIG WEDNESDAY, for example.
18. **DOCU-DRAMA.** A second cousin to **Historical Drama, DOCU-DRAMA** centers on recent rather than past events. Once invigorated by cinema verité—BATTLE OF ALGIERS—it's become a popular TV genre, sometimes powerful, but often with little documentary value.
19. **MOCKUMENTARY.** This genre pretends to be rooted in actuality or memory, behaves like documentary or autobiography, but is utter fiction. It subverts fact-based filmmaking to satirize hypocritical institutions: the backstage world of rock 'n' roll in THIS IS SPINAL TAP; the Catholic Church in ROMA; middle-class mores in ZELIG; TV journalism in MAN BITES DOG; politics in BOB ROBERTS; crass American values in TO DIE FOR.
20. **MUSICAL.** Descended from opera, this genre presents a "reality" in which characters sing and dance their stories. It's often a **Love Story,** but it can be **Film Noir:** the stage adaptation of SUNSET BOULEVARD; **Social Drama:**

WEST SIDE STORY; **Punitive Plot:** ALL THAT JAZZ; **Biography:** EVITA. Indeed, any genre can work in musical form and all can be satirized in **Musical Comedy.**

21. **SCIENCE FICTION.** In hypothetical futures that are typically technological dystopias of tyranny and chaos, the **SCIENCE FICTION** writer often marries the man-against-state **Modern Epic** with **Action/Adventure:** the STAR WARS trilogy and TOTAL RECALL. But, like history, the future is a setting in which any genre may play. In SOLARIS, for example, Andrei Tarkovsky used sci-fi to act out the inner conflicts of a **Disillusionment Plot.**
22. **SPORTS GENRE.** Sport is a crucible for character change. This genre is a natural home for the **Maturation Plot:** NORTH DALLAS FORTY; the **Redemption Plot:** SOMEBODY UP THERE LIKES ME; the **Education Plot:** BULL DURHAM; the **Punitive Plot:** RAGING BULL; the **Testing Plot:** CHARIOTS OF FIRE; the **Disillusionment Plot:** THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER; **Buddy Salvation:** WHITE MEN CAN'T JUMP; **Social Drama:** A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN.
23. **FANTASY.** Here the writer plays with time, space, and the physical, bending and mixing the laws of nature and the supernatural. The extra-realities of **FANTASY** attract the **Action** genres but also welcome others such as the **Love Story:** SOMEWHERE IN TIME; **Political Drama/Allegory:** ANIMAL FARM; **Social Drama:** IF . . . ; **Maturation Plot:** ALICE IN WONDERLAND.
24. **ANIMATION.** Here the law of universal metamorphism rules: Anything can become something else. Like **Fantasy** and **Science Fiction, ANIMATION** leans toward the **Action** genres of cartoon **Farce:** BUGS BUNNY; or **High Adventure:** THE SWORD IN THE STONE, THE YELLOW SUBMARINE; and because the youth audience is its natural market, many **Maturation Plots:** THE LION KING, THE LITTLE MERMAID; but as the animators of Eastern Europe and Japan have shown, there are no restraints.

Lastly, for those who believe that genres and their conventions are concerns of "commercial" writers only, and that serious art is nongeneric, let me add one last name to the list:

25. **ART FILM.** The avant-garde notion of writing outside the genres is naive. No one writes in a vacuum. After thousands of years of storytelling no story is so different that it has no similarity to anything else ever written. The **ART FILM** has become a traditional genre, divisible into two subgenres, **Minimalism** and **Antistructure,** each with its own complex of formal conventions of structure and cosmology. Like **Historical Drama,** the **ART FILM** is a supra-genre that embraces other basic genres: **Love Story, Political Drama,** and the like.

Although this slate is reasonably comprehensive, no list can ever be definitive or exhaustive because the lines between genres often overlap as they influence and merge with one another. Genres are not static or rigid, but evolving and flexible, yet firm and stable enough to be identified and worked with, much as a composer plays with the malleable movements of musical genres.

Each writer's homework is first to identify his genre, then research its governing practices. And there's no escaping these tasks. We're all genre writers.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND GENRE

Each genre imposes conventions on story design: conventional value-charges at climax such as the down-ending of the *Disillusionment Plot*; conventional settings such as the *Western*; conventional events such as boy-meets-girl in the *Love Story*; conventional roles such as the criminal in a *Crime Story*. The audience knows these conventions and expects to see them fulfilled. Consequently, the choice of genre sharply determines and limits what's possible within a story, as its design must envision the audience's knowledge and anticipations.

GENRE CONVENTIONS are specific settings, roles, events, and values that define individual genres and their subgenres.

Each genre has unique conventions, but in some these are relatively uncomplicated and pliable. The primary convention of the *Disillusionment Plot* is a protagonist who opens the story filled with optimism, who holds high ideals or beliefs, whose view of life is positive. Its second convention is a pattern of repeatedly negative story turns that may at first raise his hopes, but ultimately poison his dreams and values, leaving him deeply cynical and disillusioned. The protagonist of THE CONVERSATION, for example, begins with an orderly, secure hold on life and ends in a paranoid nightmare. This simple set of conventions offers uncountable possibilities, for life knows a thousand paths to hopelessness. Among the many memorable films in this genre are THE MISFITS, LA DOLCE VITA, and LENNY.

Other genres are relatively inflexible and filled with a complex of rigid conventions. In the *Crime Genre* there must be a crime; it must happen early in the telling. There must be a detective character, professional or amateur, who discovers clues and suspects. In the *Thriller* the criminal must "make it personal." Although the story may start with a cop who works for a paycheck, to deepen the drama, at some point, the criminal goes over the line. Clichés grow like fungus around this convention: The criminal menaces the family of the cop or turns the cop himself into a suspect; or, cliché of clichés with roots back to THE MALTESE FALCON, he kills the detective's partner. Ultimately, the cop must identify, apprehend, and punish the criminal.

Comedy contains myriad subgenres as well, each with its own conventions, but one overriding convention unites this mega-genre and distinguishes it from drama: *Nobody gets hurt.* In *Comedy*, the audience must feel that no matter how characters bounce off walls, no matter how they scream and writhe under the whips of life, it doesn't really hurt. Buildings may fall on Laurel and Hardy, but they get up out of the rubble, dust themselves off, mutter, "Now, what a fine mess . . ." and on they go.

In A FISH CALLED WANDA Ken (Michael Palin), a character with an obsessive love of animals, tries to kill an old lady but accidentally kills her pet terriers instead. The last dog dies under a massive construction block with his little paw left sticking out. Charles Crichton, the director, shot two versions of this moment: one showing only the paw, but for the second he sent to a butcher's shop for a bag of entrails and added a trail of gore draining away from the squashed terrier. When this gory image flashed in front of preview audiences, the theatre fell dead quiet. The blood and guts said: "It hurt." For general release Crichton switched to the sanitized shot and got his laugh. By genre convention, the comedy writer walks the line between putting characters through the torments of hell while safely reassuring the audience that the flames don't really burn.

Across that line waits the subgenre of *Black Comedy*. Here the writer bends comic convention and allows his audience to feel sharp, but not unbearable, pain: THE LOVED ONE, THE WAR OF THE ROSES, PRIZZI'S HONOR—films in which laughter often chokes us.

Art Films are conventionalized by a number of external practices such as the absence of stars (or stars' salaries), production outside the Hollywood system, generally in a language other than English—all of which become sales points as the marketing team encourages critics to champion the film as an underdog. Its primary internal conventions are, first, a celebration of the cerebral. The *Art Film* favors the intellect by smothering strong emotion under a blanket of mood, while through enigma, symbolism, or unresolved tensions it invites interpretation and analysis in the postfilm ritual of cafe criticism. Secondly and essentially, the story design of an *Art Film* depends on one grand convention: unconventionality. *Minimalist* and/or *Antistructure* unconventionality is the *Art Film*'s distinguishing convention.

Success in the *Art Film* genre usually results in instant, though often temporary, recognition as an artist. On the other hand, the durable Alfred Hitchcock worked solely within the Archplot and genre convention, always aimed for a mass audience, and habitually found it. Yet today he stands atop the pantheon of filmmakers, worshipped worldwide as one of the century's major artists, a film

poet whose works resonate with sublime images of sexuality, religiosity, and subtleties of point of view. Hitchcock knew that *there is no necessary contradiction between art and popular success, nor a necessary connection between art and Art Film.*

MASTERY OF GENRE

Each of us owes an enormous debt to the great story traditions. You must not only respect but master your genre and its conventions. Never assume that because you've seen films in your genre you know it. This is like assuming you could compose a symphony because you have heard all nine of Beethoven's. You must study the form. Books of genre criticism may help, but few are current and none is complete. Read everything, nonetheless, for we need all possible help from wherever we can get it. The most valuable insights, however, come from self-discovery; nothing ignites the imagination like the unearthing of buried treasure.

Genre study is best done in this fashion: First, list all those works you feel are like yours, both successes and failures. (The study of failures is illuminating . . . and humbling.) Next, rent the films on video and purchase the screenplays if possible. Then study the films stop and go, turning pages with the screen, breaking each film down into elements of setting, role, event, and value. Lastly, stack, so to speak, these analyses one atop the other and look down through them all asking: What do the stories in my genre always do? What are its conventions of time, place, character, and action? Until you discover answers, the audience will always be ahead of you.

To anticipate the anticipations of the audience you must master your genre and its conventions.

If a film has been properly promoted, the audience arrives filled with expectancy. In the jargon of marketing pros, it's been "positioned." "Positioning the audience" means this: We don't want people coming to our work cold and vague, not knowing what to expect, forcing us to spend the first twenty minutes of screen-

time clueing them toward the necessary story attitude. We want them to settle into their seats, warm and focused with an appetite we intend to satisfy.

Positioning of the audience is nothing new. Shakespeare didn't call his play *Hamlet*; he called it *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. He gave comedies titles such as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, so that each afternoon at the Globe Theatre his Elizabethan audience was psychologically set to cry or laugh.

Skillful marketing creates genre expectation. From the title to the poster through print and TV ads, promotion seeks to fix the type of story in the mind of the audience. Having told our filmgoers to expect a favorite form, we must deliver as promised. If we botch genre by omitting or misusing conventions, the audience knows instantly and badmouths our work.

For example, the marketing of the unfortunately titled MIKE'S MURDER (USA/1984) positioned the audience to a *Murder Mystery*. The film, however, is in another genre, and for over an hour the audience sat wondering, "Who the hell dies in this movie?" The screenplay is a fresh take on the *Maturation Plot* as it arcs Debra Winger's bank teller from dependency and immaturity to self-possession and maturity. But the sour word-of-mouth of a mispositioned and confused audience cut the "legs" out from under an otherwise good film.

CREATIVE LIMITATIONS

Robert Frost said that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down, for it's the self-imposed, indeed artificial demands of poetic conventions that stir the imagination. Let's say a poet arbitrarily imposes this limit: He decides to write in six-line stanzas, rhyming every other line. After rhyming the fourth line with the second line he reaches the end of a stanza. Backed into this corner, his struggle to rhyme the sixth line with the fourth and second may inspire him to imagine a word that has no relationship to his poem whatsoever—it just happens to rhyme—but this random word then springs loose a phrase that in turn brings an image to mind,

an image that in turn resonates back through the first five lines, triggering a whole new sense and feeling, twisting and driving the poem to a richer meaning and emotion. Thanks to the poet's Creative Limitation of this rhyme scheme, the poem achieves an intensity it would have lacked had the poet allowed himself the freedom to choose any word he wished.

The principle of Creative Limitation calls for freedom within a circle of obstacles. Talent is like a muscle: without something to push against, it atrophies. So we deliberately put rocks in our path, barriers that inspire. We discipline ourselves as to what to do, while we're boundless as to how to do it. One of our first steps, therefore, is to identify the genre or combination of genres that govern our work, for the stony ground that grows the most fruitful ideas is genre convention.

Genre conventions are the rhyme scheme of a storyteller's "poem." They do not inhibit creativity, they inspire it. The challenge is to keep convention but avoid cliché. That boy meets girl in a *Love Story* is not a cliché but a necessary element of form—a convention. The cliché is that they meet as *Love Story* lovers have always met: Two dynamic individualists are forced to share an adventure and seem to hate each other on sight; or two shy souls, each carrying the torch for someone who won't give them the time of day, find themselves shunted to the edge of a party with no one else to talk to, and so on.

Genre convention is a *Creative Limitation* that forces the writer's imagination to rise to the occasion. Rather than deny convention and flatten the story, the fine writer calls on conventions like old friends, knowing that in the struggle to fulfill them in a unique way, he may find inspiration for the scene that will lift his story above the ordinary. With mastery of genre we can guide audiences through rich, creative variations on convention to reshape and exceed expectations by giving the audience not only what it had hoped for but, if we're very good, more than it could have imagined.

Consider *Action/Adventure.* Often dismissed as mindless fare, it is in fact the single most difficult genre in which to write today . . . simply because it's been done to death. What is an *Action* writer

to do that the audience hasn't seen a thousand times before? For example, chief among its many conventions is this scene: *The hero is at the mercy of the villain.* The hero, from a position of helplessness, must turn the tables on the villain. This scene is imperative. It tests and expresses in absolute terms the protagonist's ingenuity, strength of will, and cool under pressure. Without it both the protagonist and his story are diminished; the audience leaves dissatisfied. Clichés grow on this convention like mold on bread, but when its solution is fresh, the telling is much enhanced.

In RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, Indiana Jones comes face to face with an Egyptian giant wielding a massive scimitar. A look of terror, then a shrug and a quick bullet as Jones remembers he is carrying a gun. The behind-the-screen legend is that Harrison Ford suggested this much-loved solution because he was too sick with dysentery to take on the acrobatic fight Lawrence Kasdan had scripted.

DIE HARD climaxes around this graceful execution of the convention: John McClane (Bruce Willis), stripped to the waist, weaponless, his hands in the air, is face to face with the sadistic and well-armed Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman). Slowly, however, as the camera tracks around McClane we discover that he's duct-taped a gun to his naked back. He distracts Gruber with a joke, snatches the gun from his back, and kills him.

Of all the hero-at-the-mercy-of-the-villain clichés, "Look out! There's somebody behind you!" is the most archaic. But in MIDNIGHT RUN screenwriter George Gallo gave it new life and delight by riffing lunatic variations in scene after scene.

MIXING GENRES

Genres are frequently combined to resonate with meaning, to enrich character, and to create varieties of mood and emotion. A *Love Story* subplot, for example, finds its way inside almost any *Crime Story.* THE FISHER KING wove five threads—*Redemption Plot, Psycho-Drama, Love Story, Social Drama, Comedy*—into an excellent film. The *Musical Horror Film* was a delicious invention. Given over two dozen principal genres, possibilities for inventive

cross-breeding are endless. In this way the writer in command of genre may create a type of film the world has never seen.

REINVENTING GENRES

Equally, mastery of genre keeps the screenwriter contemporary. For the genre conventions are not carved in stone; they evolve, grow, adapt, modify, and break apace with the changes in society. Society changes slowly, but it does change, and as society enters each new phase, the genres transform with it. For genres are simply windows on reality, various ways for the writer to look at life. When the reality outside the window undergoes change, the genres alter with it. If not, if a genre becomes inflexible and cannot bend with the changing world, it petrifies. Below are three examples of genre evolution.

The Western

The *Western* began as morality plays set in the "Old West," a mythical golden age for allegories of good versus evil. But in the cynical atmosphere of the 1970s the genre became dated and stale. When Mel Brooks's BLAZING SADDLES exposed the *Western's* fascist heart, the genre went into virtual hibernation for twenty years before making a comeback by altering its conventions. In the 1980s the *Western* modulated into quasi-*Social Drama*, a corrective to racism and violence: DANCES WITH WOLVES, UNFORGIVEN, POSSE.

The Psycho-Drama

Clinical insanity was first dramatized in the UFA silent THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (Germany/1919). As psychoanalysis grew in reputation, *Psycho-Drama* developed as a kind of a Freudian detective story. In its first stage, a psychiatrist played "detective" to investigate a hidden "crime," a deeply repressed trauma his patient has suffered in the past. Once the psychiatrist exposed this "crime," the victim was either restored to sanity or took a major step toward it: SYBIL, THE SNAKE PIT, THE THREE FACES OF EVE, I

NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN, THE MARK, DAVID AND LISA, EQUUS.

However, as the serial killer began to haunt society's nightmares, genre evolution took *Psycho-Drama* to its second stage, merging it with the *Detective Genre* into the subgenre known as the *Psycho-Thriller.* In these cops became lay psychiatrists to hunt down psychopaths, and apprehension hinged on the detective's psychoanalysis of the madman: THE FIRST DEADLY SIN, MANHUNTER, COP, and, recently, SEVEN.

In the 1980s the *Psycho-Thriller* evolved a third time. In films such as TIGHTROPE, LETHAL WEAPON, ANGEL HEART, and THE MORNING AFTER, the detective himself became the psycho, suffering from a wide variety of modern maladies—sexual obsession, suicidal impulse, traumatic amnesia, alcoholism. In these films the key to justice became the cop's psychoanalysis of himself. Once the detective came to terms with his inner demons, apprehending the criminal was almost an afterthought.

This evolution was a telling statement about our changing society. Gone was the day when we could comfort ourselves with the notion that all the crazy people were locked up, while we sane people were safely outside the asylum walls. Few of us are so naive today. We know that, given a certain conjunction of events, we too could part company with reality. These *Psycho-Thrillers* spoke to this threat, to our realization that our toughest task in life is self-analysis as we try to fathom our humanity and bring peace to the wars within.

By 1990 the genre reached its fourth stage by relocating the psychopath once again, now placing him in your spouse, psychiatrist, surgeon, child, nanny, roommate, neighborhood cop. These films tap communal paranoia, as we discover that the people most intimate in our lives, people we must trust, those we hope will protect us, are maniacs: THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE, SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY, FORCED ENTRY, WHISPERS IN THE DARK, SINGLE WHITE FEMALE, and THE GOOD SON. Most telling of all perhaps is DEAD RINGERS, a film about the ultimate fear: the fear of the person closest to you—yourself.

What horror will crawl up from your unconscious to steal your sanity?

The Love Story

The most important question we ask when writing a *Love Story* is: "What's to stop them?" For where's the story in a *Love Story?* Two people meet, fall in love, marry, raise a family, support each other till death do them part . . . what could be more boring than that? So, for over two thousand years, since the Greek dramatist Menander, writers answered the question with "the parents of the girl." Her parents find the young man unsuitable and become the convention known as Blocking Characters or "the force opposed to love." Shakespeare expanded it to both sets of parents in *Romeo and Juliet.* From 2300 B.C. this essential convention went unchanged . . . until the twentieth century launched the romantic revolution.

The twentieth century has been an Age of Romance like no other. The idea of romantic love (with sex as its implicit partner) dominates popular music, advertising, and Western culture in general. Over the decades, the automobile, telephone, and a thousand other liberating factors have given young lovers greater and greater freedom from parental control. Meanwhile, parents, thanks to the rampant rise in adultery, divorce, and remarriage, have extended romance from a youthful fling to a lifelong pursuit. It's always been the case that young people don't listen to their parents, but today, if a movie Mom and Dad were to object, and the teenage lovers were actually to obey them, the audience would blister the screen with jeers. So, as the-parents-of-the-girl convention faded along with arranged marriages, resourceful writers unearthed a new and amazing array of forces that oppose love.

In THE GRADUATE the Blocking Characters were the conventional parents of the girl but for a very unconventional reason. In WITNESS the force that opposes love is her culture—she's Amish, virtually from another world. In MRS. SOFFEL, Mel Gibson plays an imprisoned murderer condemned to hang and Diane Keaton is the wife of the prison's warden. What is to stop them? All mem-

bers of "right-thinking" society. In WHEN HARRY MET SALLY, the lovers suffer from the absurd belief that friendship and love are incompatible. In LONE STAR, the blocking force is racism; in THE CRYING GAME, sexual identity; in GHOST, death.

The enthusiasm for romance that opened this century has turned at its close to deep malaise that brings with it a dark, skeptical attitude toward love. In response, we've seen the rise and surprising popularity of down-endings: DANGEROUS LIAISONS, THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY, THE REMAINS OF THE DAY, HUSBANDS AND WIVES. In LEAVING LAS VEGAS, Ben's a suicidal alcoholic, Sera's a masochistic prostitute, and their love is "star-crossed." These films speak to a growing sense of the hopelessness, if not impossibility, of a lasting love.

To achieve an up-ending some recent films have retooled the genre into the *Longing Story*. Boy-meets-girl has always been an irreducible convention that occurs early in the telling, to be followed by the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of love. But SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE and RED end on boy-meets-girl. The audience waits to see how the lovers' "fate" will be shaped in the hands of chance. By cleverly delaying the lovers' meeting to climax, these films avoid the prickly issues of modern love by replacing the difficulty of love with the difficulty of meeting. These aren't love stories but stories of longing, as talk about and desire for love fills the scenes, leaving genuine acts of love and their often troubling consequences to happen in an offscreen future. It may be that the twentieth century gave birth to, then buried, the Age of Romance.

The lesson is this: Social attitudes change. The cultural antenna of the writer must be alert to these movements or risk writing an antique. For example: In FALLING IN LOVE the force that opposes love is that the lovers are each married to someone else. The only tears in the audience came from yawning too hard. One could almost hear their thoughts screaming, "What's your problem? You're married to stiffs. Dump them. Does the word 'divorce' mean anything to you people?"

Through the 1950s, however, a love affair across marriages was seen as a painful betrayal. Many poignant films—STRANGERS

WHEN WE MEET, BRIEF ENCOUNTER—drew their energy from society's antagonism to adultery. But by the 1980s attitudes had shifted, giving rise to the feeling that romance is so precious and life so short, if two married people want to have an affair, let them. Right or wrong, that was the temperament of the time, so that a film with antiquated 1950s values brutally bored the 1980s audience. The audience wants to know how it feels to be alive on the knife edge of the now. What does it mean to be a human being today?

Innovative writers are not only contemporary, they are visionary. They have their ear to the wall of history, and as things change, they can sense the way society is leaning toward the future. They then produce works that break convention and take the genres into their next generation.

This, for example, is one of the many beauties of CHINATOWN. In the climax of all previous *Murder Mysteries* the detective apprehends and punishes the criminal, but CHINATOWN's wealthy and politically powerful killer gets away with it, breaking an honored convention. This film could not have been made, however, until the 1970s when the civil rights movement, Watergate, and the Vietnam War woke America up to the depth of its corruption and the nation realized that indeed the rich were getting away with murder . . . and much more. CHINATOWN rewrote the genre, opening the door to down-ending crime stories such as BODY HEAT, CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS, Q & A, BASIC INSTINCT, THE LAST SEDUCTION, and SEVEN.

The finest writers are not only visionary, they create classics. Each genre involves crucial human values: love/hate, peace/war, justice/injustice, achievement/failure, good/evil, and the like. Each of these values is an ageless theme that has inspired great writing since the dawn of story. From year to year these values must be reworked to keep them alive and meaningful for the contemporary audience. Yet the greatest stories are always contemporary. They are classics. A classic is reexperienced with pleasure because it can be reinterpreted through the decades, because in it truth and humanity are so abundant that each new generation finds itself

mirrored in the story. CHINATOWN is such a work. With an absolute command of genre Towne and Polanski took their talents to a height few have reached before or since.

THE GIFT OF ENDURANCE

Mastery of genre is essential for yet one more reason: Screenwriting is not for sprinters, but for long-distance runners. No matter what you've heard about scripts dashed off over a weekend at poolside, from first inspiration to last polished draft, a quality screenplay consumes six months, nine months, a year, or more. Writing a film demands the same creative labor in terms of world, character, and story as a four-hundred-page novel. The only substantive difference is the number of words used in the telling. A screenplay's painstaking economy of language demands sweat and time, while the freedom to fill pages with prose often makes the task easier, even faster. All writing is discipline, but screenwriting is a drill sergeant. Ask yourself, therefore, what will keep your desire burning over those many months?

Generally, great writers are not eclectic. Each tightly focuses his oeuvre on one idea, a single subject that ignites his passion, a subject he pursues with beautiful variation through a lifetime of work. Hemingway, for example, was fascinated with the question of how to face death. After he witnessed the suicide of his father, it became the central theme, not only of his writing, but of his life. He chased death in war, in sport, on safari, until finally, putting a shotgun in his mouth, he found it. Charles Dickens, whose father was imprisoned for debt, wrote of the lonely child searching for the lost father over and over in *David Copperfield, Oliver Twist,* and *Great Expectations.* Molière turned a critical eye on the idiocy and depravity of seventeenth-century France and made a career writing plays whose titles read like a checklist of human vices: *The Miser, The Misanthrope, The Hypochondriac.* Each of these authors found his subject and it sustained him over the long journey of the writer.

What is yours? Do you, like Hemingway and Dickens, work directly from the life you've lived? Or, like Molière, do you write

about your ideas of society and human nature? Whatever your source of inspiration, beware of this: Long before you finish, the love of self will rot and die, the love of ideas sicken and perish. You'll become so tired and bored with writing about yourself or your ideas, you may not finish the race.

So, in addition, ask: What's my favorite genre? Then write in the genre you love. For although the passion for an idea or experience may wither, the love of the movies is forever. Genre should be a constant source of reinspiration. Every time you reread your script, it should excite you, for this is your kind of story, the kind of film you'd stand in line in the rain to see. Do not write something because intellectual friends think it's socially important. Do not write something you think will inspire critical praise in *Film Quarterly*. Be honest in your choice of genre, for of all the reasons for wanting to write, the only one that nurtures us through time is love of the work itself.

5

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER

Plot or character? Which is more important? This debate is as old as the art. Aristotle weighed each side and concluded that story is primary, character secondary. His view held sway until, with the evolution of the novel, the pendulum of opinion swung the other way. By the nineteenth century many held that structure is merely an appliance designed to display personality, that what the reader wants is fascinating, complex characters. Today both sides continue the debate without a verdict. The reason for the hung jury is simple: The argument is specious.

We cannot ask which is more important, structure or character, because structure *is* character; character *is* structure. They're the same thing, and therefore one cannot be more important than the other. Yet the argument goes on because of a widely held confusion over two crucial aspects of the fictional role—the difference between *Character* and *Characterization.*

CHARACTER VERSUS CHARACTERIZATION

Characterization is the sum of all observable qualities of a human being, everything knowable through careful scrutiny: age and IQ; sex and sexuality; style of speech and gesture; choices of home, car, and dress; education and occupation; personality and nervosity; values and attitudes—all aspects of humanity we could know by taking notes on someone day in and day out. The totality of these traits

makes each person unique because each of us is a one-of-a-kind combination of genetic givens and accumulated experience. This singular assemblage of traits is *characterization* . . . but it is not *character.*

TRUE CHARACTER is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure—the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature.

Beneath the surface of characterization, regardless of appearances, who is this person? At the heart of his humanity, what will we find? Is he loving or cruel? Generous or selfish? Strong or weak? Truthful or a liar? Courageous or cowardly? The *only* way to know the truth is to witness him make choices under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of his desire. As he chooses, he is.

Pressure is essential. Choices made when nothing is at risk mean little. If a character chooses to tell the truth in a situation where telling a lie would gain him nothing, the choice is trivial, the moment expresses nothing. But if the same character insists on telling the truth when a lie would save his life, then we sense that honesty is at the core of his nature.

Consider this scene: Two cars motor down a highway. One is a rusted-out station wagon with buckets, mops, and brooms in the back. Driving it is an illegal alien—a quiet, shy woman working as a domestic for under-the-table cash, sole support of her family. Alongside her is a glistening new Porsche driven by a brilliant and wealthy neurosurgeon. Two people who have utterly different backgrounds, beliefs, personalities, languages—in every way imaginable their *characterizations* are the opposite of each other.

Suddenly, in front of them, a school bus full of children flips out of control, smashes against an underpass, bursting into flames, trapping the children inside. Now, under this terrible pressure, we'll find out who these two people really are.

Who chooses to stop? Who chooses to drive by? Each has rationalizations for driving by. The domestic worries that if she gets

caught up in this, the police might question her, find out she's an illegal, throw her back across the border, and her family will starve. The surgeon fears that if he's injured and his hands burned, hands that perform miraculous microsurgeries, the lives of thousands of future patients will be lost. But let's say they both hit the brakes and stop.

This choice gives us a clue to character, but who's stopping to help, and who's become too hysterical to drive any farther? Let's say they both choose to help. This tells us more. But who chooses to help by calling for an ambulance and waiting? Who chooses to help by dashing into the burning bus? Let's say they both rush for the bus—a choice that reveals character in even greater depth.

Now doctor and housekeeper smash windows, crawl inside the blazing bus, grab screaming children, and push them to safety. But their choices aren't over. Soon the flames surge into a blistering inferno, skin peels from their faces. They can't take another breath without searing their lungs. In the midst of this horror each realizes there's only a second left to rescue one of the many children still inside. How does the doctor react? In a sudden reflex does he reach for a white child or the black child closer to him? Which way do the housekeeper's instincts take her? Does she save the little boy? Or the little girl cowering at her feet? How does she make "Sophie's choice"?

We may discover that deep within these utterly different characterizations is an identical humanity—both willing to give their lives in a heartbeat for strangers. Or it may turn out that the person we thought would act heroically is a coward. Or the one we thought would act cowardly is a hero. Or at rock bottom, we may discover that selfless heroism is not the limit of true character in either of them. For the unseen power of their acculturation may force each to a spontaneous choice that exposes unconscious prejudices of gender or ethnicity . . . even while they are performing acts of saintlike courage. Whichever way the scene's written, choice under pressure will strip away the mask of characterization, we'll peer into their inner natures and with a flash of insight grasp their true characters.

CHARACTER REVELATION

The revelation of true character in contrast or contradiction to characterization is fundamental to all fine storytelling. Life teaches this grand principle: What *seems* is not what *is*. People are not what they appear to be. A hidden nature waits concealed behind a facade of traits. No matter what they say, no matter how they comport themselves, the only way we ever come to know characters in depth is through their choices under pressure.

If we're introduced to a character whose demeanor is "loving husband," and by the end of the tale he's still what he first appeared to be, a loving husband with no secrets, no unfulfilled dreams, no hidden passions, we'll be very disappointed. When characterization and true character match, when inner life and outer appearance are, like a block of cement, of one substance, the role becomes a list of repetitious, predictable behaviors. It's not as if such a character isn't credible. Shallow, nondimensional people exist . . . but they are boring.

For example: What went wrong with Rambo? In FIRST BLOOD he was a compelling character—a Vietnam burnout, a loner hiking through the mountains, seeking solitude (characterization). Then a sheriff, for no reason other than wickedly high levels of testosterone, provoked him, and out came Rambo, a ruthless and unstoppable killer (true character). But once Rambo came out, he wouldn't go back in. For the sequels, he strapped bandoleers of bullets across his oiled, pumped muscles, coiffed his locks with a red bandanna until super-hero characterization and true character merged into a figure with less dimension than a Saturday morning cartoon.

Compare that flat pattern to James Bond. Three seems to be the limit on Rambos, but there have been nearly twenty Bond films. Bond goes on and on because the world delights in the repeated revelation of a deep character that contradicts characterization. Bond enjoys playing the lounge lizard: Dressed in a tuxedo, he graces posh parties, a cocktail glass dangling from his fingertips as he chats up beautiful women. But then story pressure builds and Bond's choices

reveal that underneath his lounge lizard exterior is a thinking man's Rambo. This exposé of witty super-hero in contradiction to playboy characterization has become a seemingly endless pleasure.

Taking the principle further: The revelation of deep character in contrast or contradiction to characterization is fundamental in major characters. Minor roles may or may not need hidden dimensions, but principals must be written in depth—they cannot be at heart what they seem to be at face.

CHARACTER ARC

Taking the principle further yet: The finest writing not only reveals true character, but arcs or changes that inner nature, for better or worse, over the course of the telling.

In THE VERDICT, protagonist Frank Galvin first appears as a Boston attorney, dressed in a three-piece suit and looking like Paul Newman . . . unfairly handsome. David Mamet's screenplay then peels back this characterization to reveal a corrupt, bankrupt, self-destructive, irretrievable drunk who hasn't won a case for years. Divorce and disgrace have broken his spirit. We see him searching obituaries for people who have died in automobile or industrial accidents, then going to the funerals of these unfortunates to pass out his business card to grieving relatives, hoping to drum up some insurance litigation. This sequence culminates in a rage of drunken self-loathing as he trashes his office, rips the diplomas off the walls, and smashes them before collapsing in a heap. But then comes the case.

He's offered a medical malpractice suit to defend a woman lost in a coma. With a quick settlement, he'd make seventy thousand dollars. But as he looks at his client in her helpless state, he senses that what this case offers is not a fat, easy fee, but his last chance for salvation. He chooses to take on the Catholic Church and the political establishment, fighting not only for his client but for his own soul. With victory comes resurrection. The legal battle changes him into a sober, ethical, and excellent attorney—the kind of man he once was before he lost his will to live.

This is the play between character and structure seen throughout the history of fiction. First, the story lays out the protagonist's characterization: Home from the university for the funeral of his father, Hamlet is melancholy and confused, wishing he were dead: "Oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt . . . "

Second, we're soon led into the heart of the character. His true nature is revealed as he chooses to take one action over another: The ghost of Hamlet's father claims he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who has now become king. Hamlet's choices expose a highly intelligent and cautious nature battling to restrain his rash, passionate immaturity. He decides to seek revenge, but not until he can prove the King's guilt: "I will speak daggers . . . but use none."

Third, this deep nature is at odds with the outer countenance of the character, contrasting with it, if not contradicting it. We sense that he is not what he appears to be. He's not merely sad, sensitive, and cautious. Other qualities wait hidden beneath his persona. Hamlet: "I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw."

Fourth, having exposed the character's inner nature, the story puts greater and greater pressure on him to make more and more difficult choices: Hamlet hunts for his father's killer and finds him on his knees in prayer. He could easily kill the King, but Hamlet realizes that if Claudius dies in prayer, his soul might go to heaven. So Hamlet forces himself to wait and kill Claudius when the King's soul is "as damned and black as Hell whereto it goes."

Fifth, by the climax of the story, these choices have profoundly changed the humanity of the character: Hamlet's wars, known and unknown, come to an end. He reaches a peaceful maturity as his lively intelligence ripens into wisdom: "The rest is silence."

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER FUNCTIONS

The function of STRUCTURE is to provide progressively building pressures that force characters into more and more difficult dilemmas where they must make more and more difficult risk-taking choices and actions, grad-

ually revealing their true natures, even down to the unconscious self.

The function of CHARACTER is to bring to the story the qualities of characterization necessary to convincingly act out choices. Put simply, a character must be credible: young enough or old enough, strong or weak, worldly or naive, educated or ignorant, generous or selfish, witty or dull, in the right proportions. Each must bring to the story the combination of qualities that allows an audience to believe that the character could and would do what he does.

Structure and character are interlocked. The event structure of a story is created out of the choices that characters make under pressure and the actions they choose to take, while characters are the creatures who are revealed and changed by how they choose to act under pressure. If you change one, you change the other. If you change event design, you have also changed character; if you change deep character, you must reinvent the structure to express the character's changed nature.

Suppose a story contains a pivotal event in which the protagonist, at serious risk, chooses to tell the truth. But the writer feels the first draft doesn't work. While studying this scene in the rewrite, he decides that his character would lie and changes his story design by reversing that action. From one draft to the next the protagonist's characterization remains intact—he dresses the same, works the same job, laughs at the same jokes. But in the first draft he's an honest man. In the second, a liar. With the inversion of an event the writer creates a wholly new character.

Suppose, on the other hand, the process takes this path: The writer has a sudden insight into his protagonist's nature, inspiring him to sketch out a radically new psychological profile, transforming an honest man into a liar. To express a wholly changed nature the writer will have to do far more than rework the character's traits. A dark sense of humor might add texture but would

never be enough. If story stays the same, character stays the same. If the writer reinvents character, he must reinvent story. A changed character must make new choices, take different actions, and live another story—his story. Whether our instincts work through character or structure, they ultimately meet at the same place.

For this reason the phrase "character-driven story" is redundant. All stories are "character-driven." Event design and character design mirror each other. Character cannot be expressed in depth except through the design of story.

The key is *appropriateness.*

The relative complexity of character must be adjusted to genre. *Action/Adventure* and *Farce* demand simplicity of character because complexity would distract us from the derring-do or pratfalls indispensable to those genres. Stories of personal and inner conflict, such as *Education* and *Redemption Plots,* demand complexity of character because simplicity would rob us of the insight into human nature requisite to those genres. This is common sense. So what does "character-driven" really mean? For too many writers it means "characterization driven," tissue-thin portraiture in which the mask may be well drawn but deep character is left underdeveloped and unexpressed.

CLIMAX AND CHARACTER

The interlock of structure and character seems neatly symmetrical until we come to the problem of endings. A revered Hollywood axiom warns: "Movies are about their last twenty minutes." In other words, for a film to have a chance in the world, the last act and its climax must be the most satisfying experience of all. For no matter what the first ninety minutes have achieved, if the final movement fails, the film will die over its opening weekend.

Compare two films: For the first eighty minutes of BLIND DATE Kim Basinger and Bruce Willis careened through this farce, exploding laugh after laugh. But with the Act Two climax all laughter ceased, Act Three fell flat, and what should have been a hit went south. KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN, on the other hand,

opened with a tedious thirty or forty minutes, but gradually the film drew us into deep involvement and built pace until the Story Cimax moved us as few dramas do. Audiences who were bored at eight o'clock were elated at ten o'clock. Word-of-mouth gave the film legs; the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences voted William Hurt an Oscar.

Story is metaphor for life and life is lived in time. Film, therefore, is temporal art, not plastic art. Our cousins are not the spacial media of painting, sculpture, architecture, or still photography, but the temporal forms of music, dance, poetry, and song. And the first commandment of all temporal art is: Thou shalt save the best for last. The final movement of a ballet, the coda of a symphony, the couplet of a sonnet, the last act and its Story Climax—these culminating moments must be the most gratifying, meaningful experiences of all.

A finished screenplay represents, obviously, 100 percent of its author's creative labor. The vast majority of this work, 75 percent or more of our struggles, goes into designing the interlock of deep character to the invention and arrangement of events. The writing of dialogue and description consumes what's left. And of the overwhelming effort that goes into designing story, 75 percent of that is focused on creating the climax of the last act. The story's ultimate event is the writer's ultimate task.

Gene Fowler once said that writing is easy, just a matter of staring at the blank page until your forehead bleeds. And if anything will draw blood from your forehead, it's creating the climax of the last act—the pinnacle and concentration of all meaning and emotion, the fulfillment for which all else is preparation, the decisive center of audience satisfaction. If this scene fails, the story fails. Until you have created it, you don't have a story. If you fail to make the poetic leap to a brilliant culminating climax, all previous scenes, characters, dialogue, and description become an elaborate typing exercise.

Suppose you were to wake up one morning with the inspiration to write this Story Climax: "Hero and villain pursue each other on foot for three days and three nights across the Mojave Desert. On

the brink of dehydration, exhaustion, and delirium, a hundred miles from the nearest water, they fight it out and one kills the other." It's thrilling . . . until you look back at your protagonist and remember that he's a seventy-five-year-old retired accountant, hobbled on crutches and allergic to dust. He'd turn your tragic climax into a joke. What's worse, your agent tells you Walter Matthau wants to play him as soon as you get the ending sorted out. What do you do?

Find the page where the protagonist is introduced, on it locate the phrase of description that reads "Jake (75)", then delete 7, insert 3. In other words, rework characterization. Deep character remains unchanged because whether Jake is thirty-five or seventy-five, he still has the will and tenacity to go to the limit in the Mojave. But you must make him credible.

In 1924 Erich von Stroheim made GREED. Its climax plays out over three days and three nights, hero and villain, across the Mojave Desert. Von Stroheim shot this sequence in the Mojave in high summer with temperatures rising to over 130 degrees Fahrenheit. He almost killed his cast and crew, but he got what he wanted: a white-on-white landscape of vast salt wastes extending to the horizon. Under the scorching sun, hero and villain, skin cracked and parched like the desert floor, grapple. In the struggle the villain grabs a rock and smashes in the skull of the hero. But as the hero dies, in his last moment of consciousness, he manages to reach up and handcuff himself to his killer. In the final image the villain collapses in the dust chained to the corpse he just killed.

GREED's brilliant ending is created out of ultimate choices that profoundly delineate its characters. Any aspect of characterization that undermines the credibility of such an action must be sacrificed. Plot, as Aristotle noted, is more important than characterization, but story structure and true character are one phenomenon seen from two points of view. The choices that characters make from behind their outer masks simultaneously shape their inner natures and propel the story. From Oedipus Rex to Falstaff, from Anna Karenina to Lord Jim, from Zorba the Greek to Thelma and Louise, this is the character/structure dynamic of consummate storytelling.

6

STRUCTURE AND MEANING

AESTHETIC EMOTION

Aristotle approached the question of story and meaning in this way: Why is it, he asked, when we see a dead body in the street we have one reaction, but when we read of death in Homer, or see it in the theatre, we have another? Because in life idea and emotion come separately. Mind and passions revolve in different spheres of our humanity, rarely coordinated, usually at odds.

In life, if you see a dead body in the street, you're struck by a rush of adrenaline: "My God, he's dead!" Perhaps you drive away in fear. Later, in the coolness of time, you may reflect on the meaning of this stranger's demise, on your own mortality, on life in the shadow of death. This contemplation may change you within so that the next time you are confronted with death, you have a new, perhaps more compassionate reaction. Or, reversing the pattern, you may, in youth, think deeply but not wisely about love, embracing an idealistic vision that trips you into a poignant but very painful romance. This may harden the heart, creating a cynic who in later years finds bitter what the young still think sweet.

Your intellectual life prepares you for emotional experiences that then urge you toward fresh perceptions that in turn remix the chemistry of new encounters. The two realms influence each other, but first one, then the other. In fact, in life, moments that blaze with a fusion of idea and emotion are so rare, when they happen

you think you're having a religious experience. But whereas life separates meaning from emotion, art unites them. Story is an instrument by which you create such epiphanies at will, the phenomenon known as *aesthetic emotion.*

The source of all art is the human psyche's primal, prelinguistic need for the resolution of stress and discord through beauty and harmony, for the use of creativity to revive a life deadened by routine, for a link to reality through our instinctive, sensory feel for the truth. Like music and dance, painting and sculpture, poetry and song, story is first, last, and always the experience of aesthetic emotion—the simultaneous encounter of thought and feeling.

When an idea wraps itself around an emotional charge, it becomes all the more powerful, all the more profound, all the more memorable. You might forget the day you saw a dead body in the street, but the death of Hamlet haunts you forever. Life on its own, without art to shape it, leaves you in confusion and chaos, but aesthetic emotion harmonizes what you know with what you feel to give you a heightened awareness and a sureness of your place in reality. In short, a story well told gives you the very thing you cannot get from life: meaningful emotional experience. In life, experiences become meaningful *with reflection in time.* In art, they are meaningful *now, at the instant they happen.*

In this sense, story is, at heart, nonintellectual. It does not express ideas in the dry, intellectual arguments of an essay. But this is not to say story is anti-intellectual. We pray that the writer has ideas of import and insight. Rather, the exchange between artist and audience expresses idea directly through the senses and perceptions, intuition and emotion. It requires no mediator, no critic to rationalize the transaction, to replace the ineffable and the sentient with explanation and abstraction. Scholarly acumen sharpens taste and judgment, but we must never mistake criticism for art. Intellectual analysis, however heady, will not nourish the soul.

A well-told story neither expresses the clockwork reasonings of a thesis nor vents raging inchoate emotions. It triumphs in the marriage of the rational with the irrational. For a work that's either essentially emotional or essentially intellectual cannot have the validity of

one that calls upon our subtler faculties of sympathy, empathy, premonition, discernment . . . our innate sensitivity to the truth.

PREMISE

Two ideas bracket the creative process: *Premise*, the idea that inspires the writer's desire to create a story, and *Controlling Idea*, the story's ultimate meaning expressed through the action and aesthetic emotion of the last act's climax. A Premise, however, unlike a Controlling Idea, is rarely a closed statement. More likely, it's an open-ended question: What would happen if . . . ? What would happen if a shark swam into a beach resort and devoured a vacationer? JAWS. What would happen if a wife walked out on her husband and child? KRAMER VS. KRAMER. Stanislavski called this the "Magic if . . . ," the daydreamy hypothetical that floats through the mind, opening the door to the imagination where everything and anything seems possible.

But "What would happen if . . ." is only one kind of Premise. Writers find inspiration wherever they turn—in a friend's lighthearted confession of a dark desire, the jibe of a legless beggar, a nightmare or daydream, a newspaper fact, a child's fantasy. Even the craft itself may inspire. Purely technical exercises, such as linking a smooth transition from one scene to the next or editing dialogue to avoid repetition, may trigger a burst of imagination. Anything may premise the writing, even, for example, a glance out a window.

In 1965 Ingmar Bergman contracted labyrinthitis, a viral infection of the inner ear that keeps its victims in a ceaselessly swirling vertigo, even while sleeping. For weeks Bergman was bedridden, his head in a brace, trying to keep vertigo at bay by staring at a spot his doctor had painted on the ceiling, but with each glance away the room spun like a whirligig. Concentrating on the spot, he began to imagine two faces intermingled. Days later, as he recovered, he glanced through a window and saw a nurse and a patient sitting comparing hands. Those images, the nurse/patient relationship and merging faces, were the genesis for Bergman's masterpiece PERSONA.

Flashes of inspiration or intuition that seem so random and spontaneous are in fact serendipitous. For what may inspire one

writer will be ignored by another. The Premise awakens what waits within, the visions or convictions nascent in the writer. The sum total of his experience has prepared him for this moment and he reacts to it as only he would. Now the work begins. Along the way he interprets, chooses, and makes judgments. If, to some people, a writer's final statement about life appears dogmatic and opinionated, so be it. Bland and pacifying writers are a bore. We want unfettered souls with the courage to take a point of view, artists whose insights startle and excite.

Finally, it's important to realize that whatever inspires the writing need not stay in the writing. A Premise is not precious. As long as it contributes to the growth of story, keep it, but should the telling take a left turn, abandon the original inspiration to follow the evolving story. The problem is not to start writing, but to keep writing and renewing inspiration. We rarely know where we're going; writing is discovery.

STRUCTURE AS RHETORIC

Make no mistake: While a story's inspiration may be a dream and its final effect aesthetic emotion, a work moves from an open premise to a fulfilling climax only when the writer is possessed by serious thought. For an artist must have not only ideas to express, but ideas *to prove*. Expressing an idea, in the sense of exposing it, is never enough. The audience must not just understand; it must believe. You want the world to leave your story convinced that yours is a truthful metaphor for life. And the means by which you bring the audience to your point of view resides in the very design you give your telling. As you create your story, you create your proof; idea and structure intertwine in a rhetorical relationship.

STORYTELLING is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action. A story's event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea . . . without explanation.

Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing—they dramatize. Audiences are rarely interested, and certainly never convinced, when forced to listen to the discussion of ideas. Dialogue, the natural talk of characters pursuing desire, is not a platform for the filmmaker's philosophy. Explanations of authorial ideas, whether in dialogue or narration, seriously diminish a film's quality. A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events; failure to express a view of life through the pure, honest consequences of human choice and action is a creative defeat no amount of clever language can salvage.

To illustrate, consider that prolific genre, *Crime*. What idea is expressed by virtually all detective fiction? "Crime doesn't pay." How do we come to understand that? Hopefully without one character musing to another, "There! What'd I tell ya? Crime doesn't pay. Nope, it looked like they'd get away with it, but the wheels of justice turned unrelentingly . . ." No, we see the idea acted out in front of us: A crime is committed; for a while the criminal goes free; eventually he's apprehended and punished. In the act of punishment—imprisoning him for life or shooting him dead on the street—an emotionally charged idea runs through the audience. And if we could put words to this idea, they wouldn't be as polite as "Crime does not pay." Rather: "They got the bastard!" An electrifying triumph of justice and social revenge.

The kind and quality of aesthetic emotion is relative. The *Psycho-Thriller* strives for very strong effects; other forms, like the *Disillusionment* plot or the *Love Story*, want the softer emotions of perhaps sadness or compassion. But regardless of genre, the principle is universal: the story's meaning, whether comic or tragic, must be dramatized in an emotionally expressive Story Climax without the aid of explanatory dialogue.

CONTROLLING IDEA

Theme has become a rather vague term in the writer's vocabulary. "Poverty," "war," and "love," for example, are not themes; they relate to setting or genre. A true theme is not a word but a sen-

tence—one clear, coherent sentence that expresses a story's irreducible meaning. I prefer the phrase *Controlling Idea*, for like theme, it names a story's root or central idea, but it also implies function: The Controlling Idea shapes the writer's strategic choices. It's yet another *Creative Discipline* to guide your aesthetic choices toward what is appropriate or inappropriate in your story, toward what is expressive of your Controlling Idea and may be kept versus what is irrelevant to it and must be cut.

The Controlling Idea of a completed story must be expressible in a single sentence. After the Premise is first imagined and the work is evolving, explore everything and anything that comes to mind. Ultimately, however, the film must be molded around one idea. This is not to say that a story can be reduced to a rubric. Far more is captured within the web of a story that can ever be stated in words—subtleties, subtexts, conceits, double meanings, richness of all kinds. A story becomes a kind of living philosophy that the audience members grasp as a whole, in a flash, without conscious thought—a perception married to their life experiences. But the irony is this:

The more beautifully you shape your work around one clear idea, the more meanings audiences will discover in your film as they take your idea and follow its implications into every aspect of their lives. Conversely, the more ideas you try to pack into a story, the more they implode upon themselves, until the film collapses into a rubble of tangential notions, saying nothing.

A CONTROLLING IDEA may be expressed in a single sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end.

The Controlling Idea has two components: Value plus Cause. It identifies the positive or negative charge of the story's critical value at the last act's climax, and it identifies the chief reason that this value has changed to its final state. The sentence composed from these two elements, Value plus Cause, expresses the core meaning of the story.

Value means the primary value in its positive or negative charge that comes into the world or life of your character as a result of the final action of the story. For example: An up-ending *Crime Story* (IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT) returns an unjust world (negative) to justice (positive), suggesting a phrase such as "Justice is restored . . ." In a down-ending *Political Thriller* (MISSING), the military dictatorship commands the story's world at climax, prompting a negative phrase such as "Tyranny prevails . . ." A positive-ending *Education Plot* (GROUNDHOG DAY) arcs the protagonist from a cynical, self-serving man to someone who's genuinely selfless and loving, leading to "Happiness fills our lives . . ." A negative-ending *Love Story* (DANGEROUS LIAISONS) turns passion into self-loathing, evoking "Hatred destroys . . . "

Cause refers to the primary reason that the life or world of the protagonist has turned to its positive or negative value. Working back from the ending to the beginning, we trace the chief cause deep within the character, society, or environment that has brought this value into existence. A complex story may contain many forces for change, but generally one cause dominates the others. Therefore, in a *Crime Story*, neither "Crime doesn't pay . . . " (justice triumphs . . .) nor "Crime pays . . . " (injustice triumphs . . .) could stand as a full Controlling Idea because each gives us only half a meaning—the ending value. A story of substance also expresses *why* its world or protagonist has ended on its specific value.

If, for example, you were writing for Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, your full Controlling Idea of Value plus Cause would be: "Justice triumphs because the protagonist is more violent than the criminals." Dirty Harry manages some minor detective work here and there, but his violence is the dominant cause for change. This insight then guides you to what's appropriate and inappropriate. It tells you it would be inappropriate to write a scene in which Dirty Harry comes upon the murder victim, discovers a ski cap left behind by the fleeing killer, takes out a magnifying glass, examines it, and concludes, "Hmm . . . this man's approximately thirty-five years of age; he has reddish hair; and he comes from the coal-

mining regions of Pennsylvania—notice the anthracitic dust." This is Sherlock Holmes, not Dirty Harry.

If, however, you were writing for Peter Falk's Columbo, your Controlling Idea would be: "Justice is restored because the protagonist is more clever than the criminal." The ski cap forensics might be appropriate for Columbo because the dominant cause for change in the *Columbo* series is Sherlock Holmesian deduction. It would be inappropriate, however, for Columbo to reach under his wrinkled raincoat, come up with a .44 Magnum, and start blowing people away.

To complete the previous examples: IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT—justice is restored because a perceptive black outsider sees the truth of white perversion. GROUNDHOG DAY—happiness fills our lives when we learn to love unconditionally. MISSING—tyranny prevails because it's supported by a corrupt CIA. DANGEROUS LIAISONS—hatred destroys us when we fear the opposite sex. The Controlling Idea is the purest form of a story's meaning, the how and why of change, the vision of life the audience members carry away into their lives.

Meaning and the Creative Process

How do you find your story's Controlling Idea? The creative process may begin anywhere. You might be prompted by a Premise, a "What would happen if . . . ," or a bit of character, or an image. You might start in the middle, the beginning, near the end. As your fictional world and characters grow, events interlink and the story builds. Then comes that crucial moment when you take the leap and create the Story Climax. This climax of the last act is a final action that excites and moves you, that feels complete and satisfying. The Controlling Idea is now at hand.

Looking at your ending, ask: As a result of this climatic action, what value, positively or negatively charged, is brought into the world of my protagonist? Next, tracing backward from this climax, digging to the bedrock, ask: What is the chief cause, force, or means by which this value is brought into his world? The sentence you compose from the answers to those two questions becomes your Controlling Idea.

In other words, the story tells you its meaning; you do not dictate meaning to the story. You do not draw action from idea, rather idea from action. For no matter your inspiration, ultimately the story embeds its Controlling Idea within the final climax, and when this event speaks its meaning, you will experience one of the most powerful moments in the writing life—*Self-Recognition:* The Story Climax mirrors your inner self, and if your story is from the very best sources within you, more often than not you'll be shocked by what you see reflected in it.

You may think you're a warm, loving human being until you find yourself writing tales of dark, cynical consequence. Or you may think you're a street-wise guy who's been around the block a few times until you find yourself writing warm, compassionate endings. You think you know who you are, but often you're amazed by what's skulking inside in need of expression. In other words, if a plot works out exactly as you first planned, you're not working loosely enough to give room to your imagination and instincts. Your story should surprise you again and again. Beautiful story design is a combination of the subject found, the imagination at work, and the mind loosely but wisely executing the craft.

Idea Versus Counter-Idea

Paddy Chayefsky once told me that when he finally discovered his story's meaning, he'd scratch it out on a scrap of paper and tape it to his typewriter, so that nothing going through the machine wouldn't in one way or another express his central theme. With a clear statement of Value plus Cause staring him in the eye, he could resist intriguing irrelevancies and concentrate on unifying the telling around the story's core meaning. By "one way or another," Chayefsky meant he'd forge the story dynamically, moving it back and forth across the opposing charges of its primary values. His improvisations would be so shaped that sequence after sequence alternately expressed the positive, then negative dimension of his Controlling Idea. In other words, he fashioned his stories by playing *Idea* against *Counter-Idea.*

PROGRESSIONS build by moving dynamically between the positive and negative charges of the values at stake in the story.

From the moment of inspiration you reach into your fictional world in search of a design. You have to build a bridge of story from the opening to the ending, a progression of events that spans from Premise to Controlling Idea. These events echo the contradictory voices of one theme. Sequence by sequence, often scene by scene, the positive Idea and its negative Counter-Idea argue, so to speak, back and forth, creating a dramatized dialectical debate. At climax one of these two voices wins and becomes the story's Controlling Idea.

To illustrate with the familiar cadences of the *Crime Story*: A typical opening sequence expresses the negative *Counter-Idea*, "Crime pays because the criminals are brilliant and/or ruthless" as it dramatizes a crime so enigmatic (VERTIGO) or committed by such diabolical criminals (DIE HARD) that the audience is stunned: "They're going to get away with it!" But as a veteran detective discovers a clue left by the fleeing killer (THE BIG SLEEP), the next sequence contradicts this fear with the positive *Idea*, "Crime doesn't pay because the protagonist is even more brilliant and/or ruthless." Then perhaps the cop is misled into suspecting the wrong person (FAREWELL, MY LOVELY): "Crime pays." But soon the protagonist uncovers the real identity of the villain (THE FUGITIVE): "Crime doesn't pay." Next the criminal captures, may even seem to kill, the protagonist (ROBOCOP): "Crime pays." But the cop virtually resurrects from the dead (SUDDEN IMPACT) and goes back on the hunt: "Crime doesn't pay."

The positive and negative assertions of the same idea contest back and forth through the film, building in intensity, until at *Crisis* they collide head-on in a last impasse. Out of this rises the Story Climax, in which one or the other idea succeeds. This may be the positive Idea: "Justice triumphs because the protagonist is tenaciously resourceful and courageous" (BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK, SPEED, THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS), or the negative Counter-Idea: "Injustice prevails because the antagonist is overwhelmingly ruthless and powerful" (SEVEN, Q & A, CHINATOWN). Which-

ever of the two is dramatized in the final climatic action becomes the Controlling Idea of Value plus Cause, the purest statement of the story's conclusive and decisive meaning.

This rhythm of Idea versus Counter-Idea is fundamental and essential to our art. It pulses at the heart of all fine stories, no matter how internalized the action. What's more, this simple dynamic can become very complex, subtle, and ironic.

In SEA OF LOVE detective Keller (Al Pacino) falls in love with his chief suspect (Ellen Barkin). As a result, each scene that points toward her guilt turns with irony: positive on the value of justice, negative on the value of love. In the maturation plot SHINE, David's (Noah Taylor) musical victories (positive) provoke his father's (Armin Mueller-Stahl) envy and brutal repression (negative), driving the pianist into a pathological immaturity (doubly negative), which makes his final success a triumph of maturity in both art and spirit (doubly positive).

DIDACTICISM

A note of caution: In creating the dimensions of your story's "argument," take great care to build the power of both sides. Compose the scenes and sequences that contradict your final statement with as much truth and energy as those that reinforce it. If your film ends on the Counter-Idea, such as "Crime pays because . . . ," then amplify the sequences that lead the audience to feel justice will win out. If your film ends on the Idea, such as "Justice triumphs because . . . ," then enhance the sequences expressing "Crime pays and pays big." In other words, do not slant your "argument."

If, in a morality tale, you were to write your antagonist as an ignorant fool who more or less destroys himself, are we persuaded that good will prevail? But if, like an ancient myth-maker, you were to create an antagonist of virtual omnipotence who reaches the brink of success, you would force yourself to create a protagonist who will rise to the occasion and become even more powerful, more brilliant. In this balanced telling your victory of good over evil now rings with validity.

The danger is this: When your Premise is an idea you feel you must prove to the world, and you design your story as an undeniable certification of that idea, you set yourself on the road to didacticism. In your zeal to persuade, you will stifle the voice of the other side. Misusing and abusing art to preach, your screenplay will become a thesis film, a thinly disguised sermon as you strive in a single stroke to convert the world. Didacticism results from the naive enthusiasm that fiction can be used like a scalpel to cut out the cancers of society.

More often than not, such stories take the form of *Social Drama*, a lead-handed genre with two defining conventions: Identify a social ill; dramatize its remedy. The writer, for example, may decide that war is the scourge of humanity, and pacifism is the cure. In his zeal to convince us all his good people are very, very good people, and all his bad people are very, very bad people. All the dialogue is "on the nose" laments about the futility and insanity of war, heartfelt declarations that the cause of war is the "establishment." From outline to last draft, he fills the screen with stomach-turning images, making certain that each and every scene says loud and clear: "War is a scourge, but it can be cured by pacifism . . . war is a scourge cured by pacifism . . . war is a scourge cured by pacifism . . ." until you want to pick up a gun.

But the pacifist pleas of antiwar films (OH! WHAT A LOVELY WAR, APOCALYPSE NOW, GALLIPOLI, HAMBURGER HILL) rarely sensitize us to war. We're unconvinced because in the rush to prove he has the answer, the writer is blind to a truth we know too well—men love war.

This does not mean that starting with an idea is certain to produce didactic work . . . but that's the risk. As a story develops, you must willingly entertain opposite, even repugnant ideas. The finest writers have dialectical, flexible minds that easily shift points of view. They see the positive, the negative, and all shades of irony, seeking the truth of these views honestly and convincingly. This omniscience forces them to become even more creative, more imaginative, and more insightful. Ultimately, they express what they deeply believe, but not until they have allowed themselves to weigh each living issue and experience all its possibilities.

Make no mistake, no one can achieve excellence as a writer without being something of a philosopher and holding strong convictions. The trick is not to be a slave to your ideas, but to immerse yourself in life. For the proof of your vision is not how well you can assert your Controlling Idea, but its victory over the enormously powerful forces that you array against it.

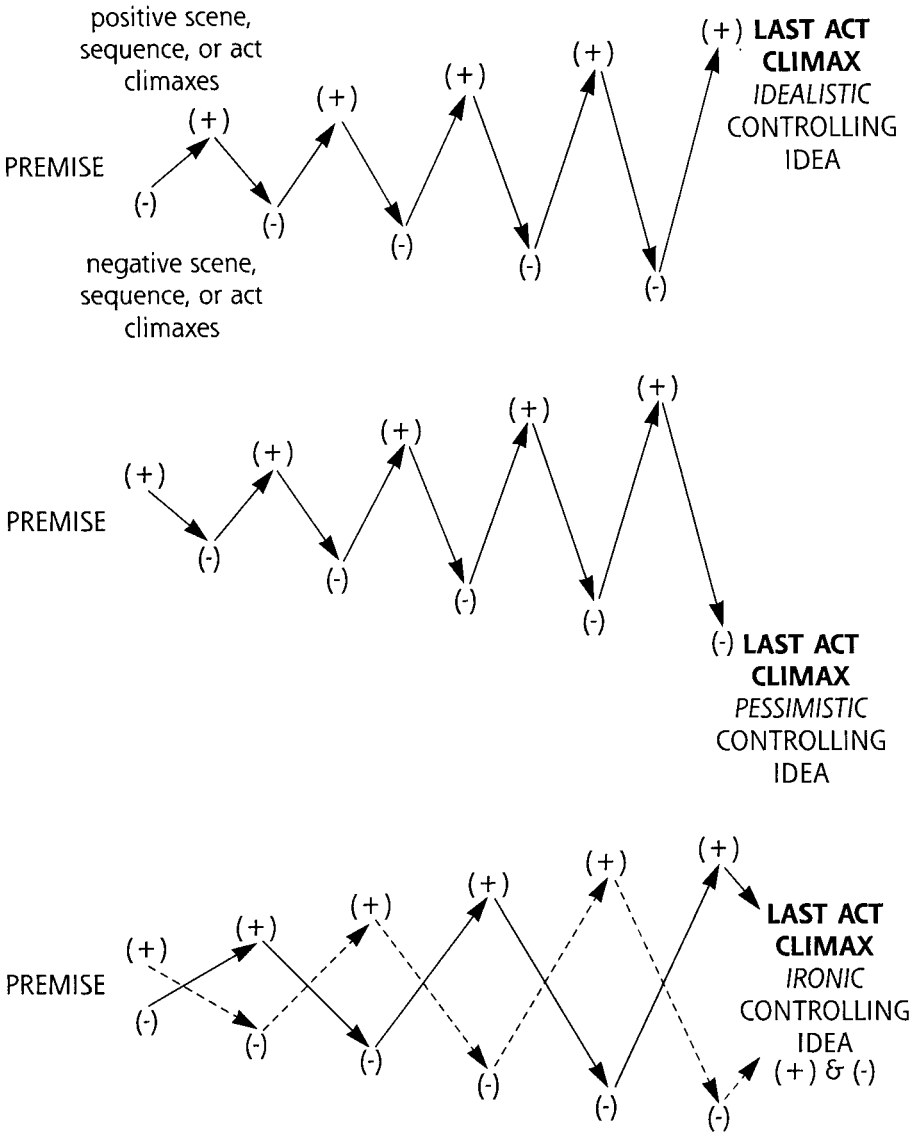
Consider the superb balance of three antiwar films directed by Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick and his screenwriters researched and explored the Counter-Idea to look deep within the human psyche itself. Their stories reveal war to be the logical extension of an intrinsic dimension of human nature that loves to fight and kill, chilling us with the realization that what humanity loves to do, it will do—as it has for aeons, through the now and into all foreseeable futures.

In Kubrick's PATHS OF GLORY the fate of France hangs on winning the war against the Germans at any cost. So when the French army retreats from battle, an outraged general devises an innovative motivational strategy: He orders his artillery to bombard his own troops. In DR. STRANGELOVE the United States and Russia both realize that in nuclear war, not losing is more important than winning, so each concocts a scheme for not losing so effective it incinerates all life on Earth. In FULL METAL JACKET, the Marine Corps faces a tough task: how to persuade human beings to ignore the genetic prohibition against killing their own kind. The simple solution is to brainwash recruits into believing that the enemy is not human; killing a man then becomes easy, even if he's your drill instructor. Kubrick knew that if he gave the humanity enough ammunition, it would shoot itself.

A great work is a living metaphor that says, "Life is like *this*." The classics, down through the ages, give us not solutions but lucidity, not answers but poetic candor; they make inescapably clear the problems all generations must solve to be human.

IDEALIST, PESSIMIST, IRONIST

Writers and the stories they tell can be usefully divided into three grand categories, according to the emotional charge of their Controlling Idea.



Idealistic Controlling Ideas

"Up-ending" stories expressing the optimism, hopes, and dreams of mankind, a positively charged vision of the human spirit; life as we wish it to be. Examples:

"Love fills our lives when we conquer intellectual illusions and follow our instincts": HANNAH AND HER SISTERS. In this

Multiplot story, a collection of New Yorkers are seeking love, but they're unable to find it because they keep thinking, analyzing, trying to decipher the meaning of things: sexual politics, careers, morality or immortality. One by one, however, they cast off their intellectual illusions and listen to their hearts. The moment they do, they all find love. This is one of the most optimistic films Woody Allen has ever made.

"Goodness triumphs when we outwit evil": THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK. The witches ingeniously turn the devil's own dirty tricks against him and find goodness and happiness in the form of three chubby-cheeked babies.

"The courage and genius of humanity will prevail over the hostility of Nature." *Survival Films*, a subgenre of *Action/Adventure*, are "up-ending" stories of life-and-death conflict with forces of the environment. At the brink of extinction, the protagonists, through dint of will and resourcefulness, battle the often cruel personality of Mother Nature and endure: THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE, JAWS, QUEST FOR FIRE, ARACHNOPHOBIA, FITZCARRALDO, FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX, ALIVE.

Pessimistic Controlling Ideas

"Down-ending" stories expressing our cynicism, our sense of loss and misfortune, a negatively charged vision of civilization's decline, of humanity's dark dimensions; life as we dread it to be but know it so often is. Examples:

"Passion turns to violence and destroys our lives when we use people as objects of pleasure": DANCE WITH A STRANGER. The lovers in this British work think their problem is a difference of class, but class has been overcome by countless couples. The deep conflict is that their affair is poisoned by desires to possess each other as objects for neurotic gratification, until one seizes the ultimate possession—the life of her lover.

"Evil triumphs because it's part of human nature": CHINATOWN. On a superficial level, CHINATOWN suggests that the rich get away with murder. They do indeed. But more profoundly

the film expresses the ubiquity of evil. In reality, because good and evil are equal parts of human nature, evil vanquishes good as often as good conquers evil. We're both angel and devil. If our natures leaned just slightly toward one or the other, all social dilemmas would have been solved centuries ago. But we're so divided, we never know from day to day which we'll be. One day we build the Cathedral of Notre Dame; the next, Auschwitz.

"The power of nature will have the final say over mankind's futile efforts." When the Counter-Idea of survival films becomes the Controlling Idea, we have that rare "down-ending" movie in which again human beings battle a manifestation of nature, but now nature prevails: SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC, THE ELEPHANT MAN, EARTHQUAKE, and THE BIRDS, in which nature lets us off with a warning. These films are rare because the pessimistic vision is a hard truth that some people wish to avoid.

Ironic Controlling Ideas

"Up/down-ending" stories expressing our sense of the complex, dual nature of existence, a simultaneously charged positive and negative vision; life at its most complete and realistic.

Here optimism/idealism and pessimism/cynicism merge. Rather than voicing one extreme or the other, the story says both. The *Idealistic* "Love triumphs when we sacrifice our needs for others," as in KRAMER VS. KRAMER, melds with the *Pessimistic* "Love destroys when self-interest rules," as in THE WAR OF THE ROSES, and results in an ironic Controlling Idea: "Love is both pleasure and pain, a poignant anguish, a tender cruelty we pursue because without it life has no meaning," as in ANNIE HALL, MANHATTAN, ADDICTED TO LOVE.

What follows are two examples of Controlling Ideas whose ironies have helped define the ethics and attitudes of contemporary American society. First, the positive irony:

The compulsive pursuit of contemporary values—success, fortune, fame, sex, power—will destroy you, but if you

see this truth in time and throw away your obsession, you can redeem yourself.

Until the 1970s an "up-ending" could be loosely defined as "The protagonist gets what he wants." At climax the protagonist's object of desire became a trophy of sorts, depending on the value at stake—the lover of one's dreams (love), the dead body of the villain (justice), a badge of achievement (fortune, victory), public recognition (power, fame)—and he won it.

In the 1970s, however, Hollywood evolved a highly ironic version of the success story, *Redemption Plots,* in which protagonists pursue values that were once esteemed—money, reknown, career, love, winning, success—but with a compulsiveness, a blindness that carries them to the brink of self-destruction. They stand to lose, if not their lives, their humanity. They manage, however, to glimpse the ruinous nature of their obsession, stop before they go over the edge, then throw away what they once cherished. This pattern gives rise to an ending rich in irony: At climax the protagonist sacrifices his dream (positive), a value that has become a soul-corrupting fixation (negative), to gain an honest, sane, balanced life (positive).

THE PAPER CHASE, THE DEER HUNTER, KRAMER VS. KRAMER, AN UNMARRIED WOMAN, 10, AND JUSTICE FOR ALL, TERMS OF ENDEARMENT, THE ELECTRIC HORSEMAN, GOING IN STYLE, QUIZ SHOW, BULLETS OVER BROADWAY, THE FISHER KING, GRAND CANYON, RAIN MAN, HANNAH AND HER SISTERS, AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN, TOOTSIE, REGARDING HENRY, ORDINARY PEOPLE, CLEAN AND SOBER, NORTH DALLAS FORTY, OUT OF AFRICA, BABY BOOM, THE DOCTOR, SCHINDLER'S LIST, and JERRY MAGUIRE all pivot around this irony, each expressing it in a unique and powerful way. As these titles indicate, this idea has been a magnet for Oscars.

In terms of technique, the execution of the climactic action in these films is fascinating. Historically, a positive ending is a scene in which the protagonist takes an action that gets him what he wants. Yet in all the works cited above, the protagonist either refuses to act on his obsession or throws away what he once

desired. He or she wins by "losing." Like solving the Zen riddle of the sound of one hand clapping, the writer's problem in each case was how to make a nonaction or negative action feel positive.

At the climax of NORTH DALLAS FORTY All-Star wide receiver Phillip Elliot (Nick Nolte) opens his arms and lets the football bounce off his chest, announcing in his gesture that he won't play this childish game anymore.

THE ELECTRIC HORSEMAN ends as the former rodeo star Sonny Steele (Robert Redford), now reduced to peddling breakfast cereal, releases his sponsor's prize stallion into the wild, symbolically freeing himself from his need for fame.

OUT OF AFRICA is the story of a woman living the 1980s ethic of "I am what I own." Karen's (Meryl Streep) first words are: "I had a farm in Africa." She drags her furniture from Denmark to Kenya to build a home and plantation. She so defines herself by her possessions that she calls the laborers "her people" until her lover points out that she doesn't actually own these people. When her husband infects her with syphilis, she doesn't divorce him because her identity is "wife," defined by her possession of a husband. In time, however, she comes to realize you are not what you own; you are your values, talents, what you can do. When her lover is killed, she grieves but is not lost because she is not he. With a shrug, she lets husband, home, everything go, surrendering all she had, but gaining herself.

TERMS OF ENDEARMENT tells of a very different obsession. Aurora (Shirley MacLaine) lives the Epicurean philosophy that happiness means never suffering, that the secret of life is to avoid all negative emotion. She refuses two renowned sources of misery, career and lovers. She's so afraid of the pain of growing old, she dresses twenty years too young for herself. Her home has the unlived-in look of a doll's house. The only life she leads is over the telephone vicariously through her daughter. But on her fifty-second birthday she begins to realize that the depth of joy you experience is in direct proportion to the pain you're willing to bear. In the last act she throws away the emptiness of a pain-free life to embrace children, lover, age, and all the pleasure and woe they bring.

Second, the negative irony:

If you cling to your obsession, your ruthless pursuit will achieve your desire, then destroy you.

WALL STREET; CASINO; THE WAR OF THE ROSES; STAR '80; NASHVILLE; NETWORK; THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY?—these films are the *Punitive Plot* counterpart to the *Redemption Plots* above. In them the "down-ending" Counter-Idea becomes the Controlling Idea as protagonists remain steadfastly driven by their need to achieve fame or success, and never think to abandon it. At Story Climax the protagonists achieve their desire (positive), only to be destroyed by it (negative). In NIXON the president's (Anthony Hopkins) blind, corrupt trust in his political power destroys him and with him the nation's faith in government. In THE ROSE Rose (Bette Midler) is destroyed by her passion for drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll. In ALL THAT JAZZ Joe Gideon (Roy Scheider) is brought down by his neurotic need for drugs, sex, and musical comedy.

On Irony

The effect of irony on an audience is that wonderful reaction, "Ah, life is just like that." We recognize that idealism and pessimism are at the extremes of experience, that life is rarely all sunshine and strawberries, nor is it all doom and drek; it is *both*. From the worst of experiences something positive can be gained; for the richest of experiences a great price must be paid. No matter how we try to plot a straight passage through life, we sail on the tides of irony. Reality is relentlessly ironic, and this is why stories that end in irony tend to last the longest through time, travel the widest in the world, and draw the greatest love and respect from audiences.

This is also why, of the three possible emotional charges at climax, irony is by far the most difficult to write. It demands the deepest wisdom and the highest craft for three reasons.

First, it's tough enough to come up with either a bright, idealistic ending or a sober, pessimistic climax that's satisfying and con-

vincing. But an ironic climax is a single action that makes both a positive and a negative statement. How to do two in one?

Second, how to say both *clearly*? Irony doesn't mean ambiguity. Ambiguity is a blur; one thing cannot be distinguished from another. But there's nothing ambiguous about irony; it's a clear, double declaration of what's gained and what's lost, side by side. Nor does irony mean coincidence. A true irony is honestly motivated. Stories that end by random chance, doubly charged or not, are meaningless, not ironic.

Third, if at climax the life situation of the protagonist is both positive and negative, how to express it so that the two charges remain separated in the audience's experience and don't cancel each other out, and you end up saying nothing?

MEANING AND SOCIETY

Once you discover your Controlling Idea, respect it. Never allow yourself the luxury of thinking, "It's just entertainment." What, after all, is "entertainment"? Entertainment is the ritual of sitting in the dark, staring at a screen, investing tremendous concentration and energy into what one hopes will be a satisfying, meaningful emotional experience. Any film that hooks, holds, and pays off the story ritual is entertainment. Whether it be THE WIZARD OF OZ (USA/1939) or THE 400 BLOWS (France/1959), LA DOLCE VITA (Italy/1960) or SNOW WHITE AND THE THREE STOOGES (USA/1961), no story is innocent. All coherent tales express an idea veiled inside an emotional spell.

In 388 B.C. Plato urged the city fathers of Athens to exile all poets and storytellers. They are a threat to society, he argued. Writers deal with ideas, but not in the open, rational manner of philosophers. Instead, they conceal their ideas inside the seductive emotions of art. Yet felt ideas, as Plato pointed out, are ideas nonetheless. Every effective story sends a charged idea out to us, in effect compelling the idea into us, so that we must believe. In fact, the persuasive power of a story is so great that we may believe its

meaning even if we find it morally repellent. Storytellers, Plato insisted, are dangerous people. He was right.

Consider DEATH WISH. Its Controlling Idea is "Justice triumphs when citizens take the law into their own hands and kill the people who need killing." Of all the vile ideas in human history, this is the vilest. Armed with it, the Nazis devastated Europe. Hitler believed he would turn Europe into a paradise once he killed the people who needed killing . . . and he had his list.

When DEATH WISH opened, newspaper reviewers across the country were morally outraged at the sight of Charles Bronson stalking Manhattan, gunning down people if they happened to look like muggers: "Hollywood thinks this passes for justice?" they ranted. "Whatever became of due process of law?" But in nearly every review I read, at some point the critic noted: ". . . and yet the audience seemed to enjoy it." A code for: ". . . and so did the critic." Critics never cite the pleasure of the audience unless they share it. In spite of their scandalized sensibilities, the film got to them too.

On the other hand, I wouldn't want to live in a country where DEATH WISH couldn't be made. I oppose all censorship. In pursuit of truth, we must willingly suffer the ugliest of lies. We must, as Justice Holmes argued, trust the marketplace of ideas. If everyone is given a voice, even the irrationally radical or cruelly reactionary, humanity will sort through all possibilities and make the right choice. No civilization, including Plato's, has ever been destroyed because its citizens learned too much truth.

Authoritative personalities, like Plato, fear the threat that comes not from idea, but from emotion. Those in power never want us to feel. Thought can be controlled and manipulated, but emotion is willful and unpredictable. Artists threaten authority by exposing lies and inspiring passion for change. This is why when tyrants seize power, their firing squads aim at the heart of the writer.

Lastly, given story's power to influence, we need to look at the issue of an artist's social responsibility. I believe we have no responsibility to cure social ills or renew faith in humanity, to uplift the spirits of society or even express our inner being. We have only one responsibility: *to tell the truth.* Therefore, study your Story

Climax and extract from it your Controlling Idea. But before you take another step, ask yourself this question: Is this the truth? Do I believe in the meaning of my story? If the answer is no, toss it and start again. If yes, do everything possible to get your work into the world. For although an artist may, in his private life, lie to others, even to himself, when he creates he tells the truth; and in a world of lies and liars, an honest work of art is always an act of social responsibility.

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

7

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 expe-

rience 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.

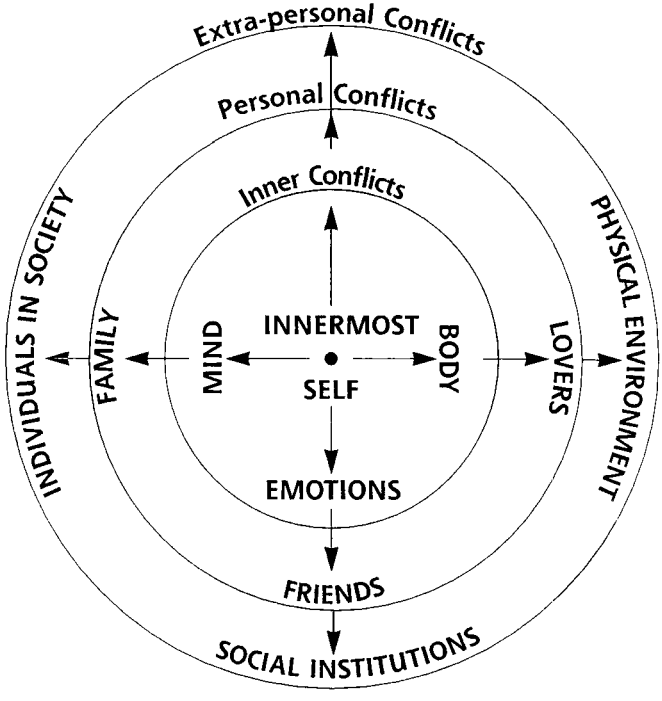
THE WORLD OF A CHARACTER

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



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.

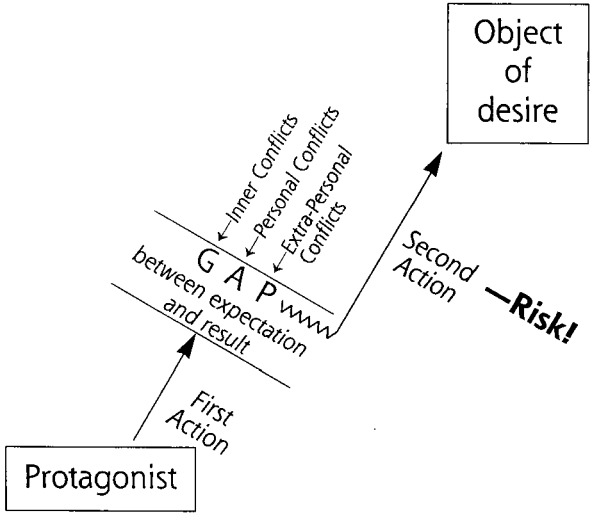
The third circle marks the level of extra-personal conflict—

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.



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.

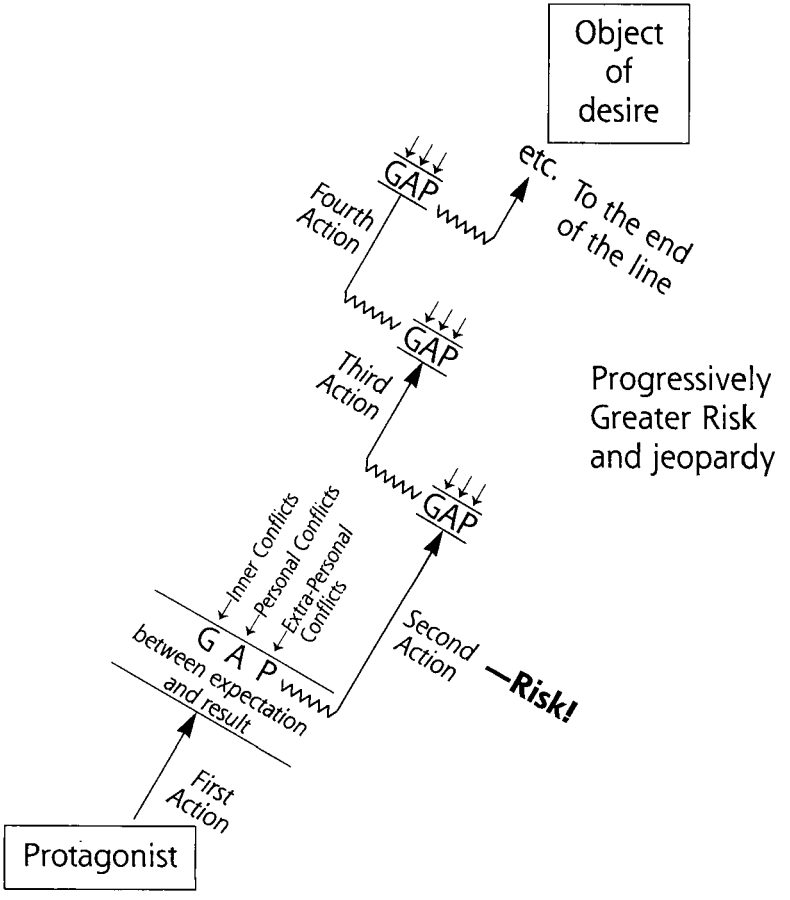
You're willing to risk people. Each morning you go to your desk and enter the imagined world of your characters. You dream and write until the sun's setting and your head's throbbing. So you turn off your word processor to be with the person you love. Except that, while you can turn off your machine, 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



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 instruc-

tive: 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.

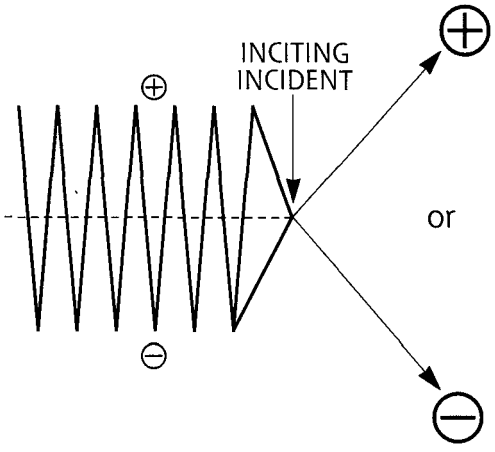
THE INCITING INCIDENT

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.

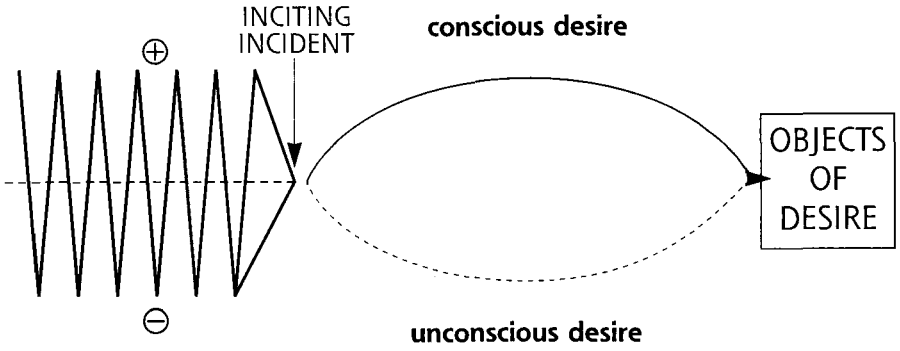
The protagonist must react to the Inciting Incident.

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.

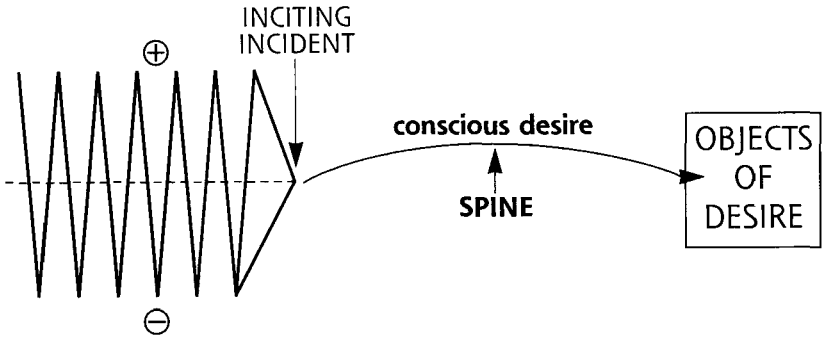
Mrs. Soffel seems to flit from choice to choice, but we sense that underneath her changes of mind is the powerful unconscious desire for a transcendent, absolute, romantic experience of such intensity that if nothing ever happened to her again it wouldn't matter . . . because for one sublime moment she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

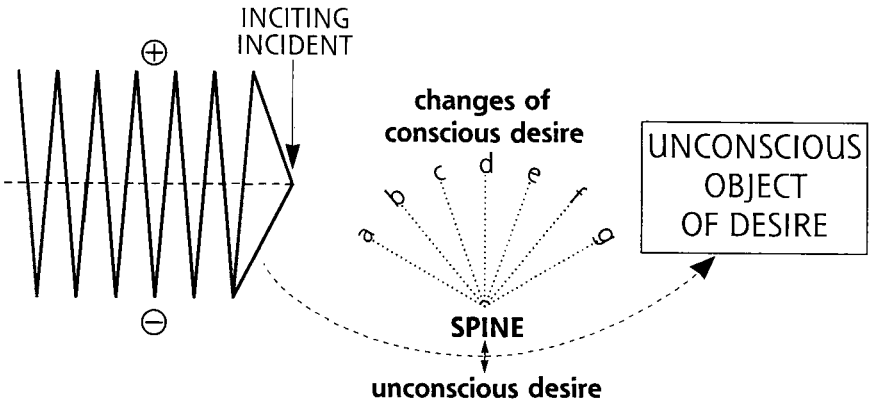


ultimately an aspect of the Spine, relating, causally or thematically, to this core of desire and action.

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.

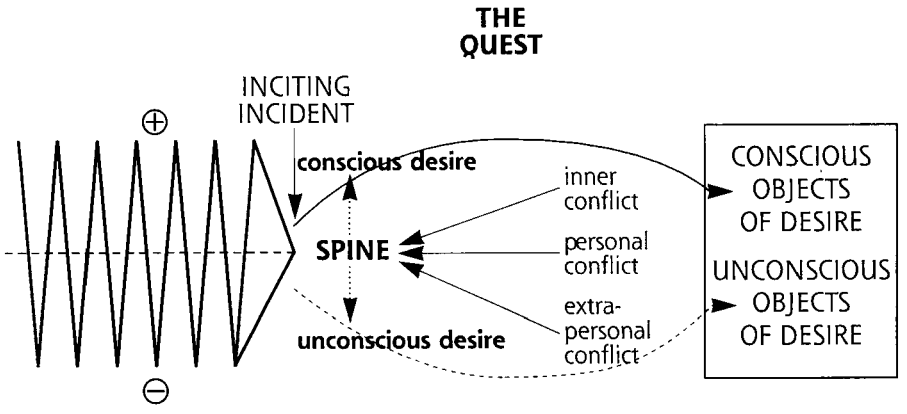


In THE CRYING GAME Fergus agonizes over politics while his unconscious need *to love and be loved* drives the telling. Jonathan searches for the "perfect woman" in CARNAL KNOWLEDGE, flitting from relationship to relationship, while his unconscious desire *to humiliate and destroy women* never varies. 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



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 impli-

cations 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.