

INTRODUCTION

—by *Frank Daniel*

*H*ave you ever been able to understand the theory of relativity? If so, then congratulations. I am one of the mortals who constantly encounters mysterious puzzles and keeps asking, How can one calculate the speed and trajectory that a missile must follow through boundless space to find its way to our little moon? I have a problem balancing my checkbook. Another puzzle is: How come, when you push a little button, some electrons start streaming in lines on your TV in such an orderly manner that you can see something that is happening at this very minute god knows where?

I admit that these (and many other things) are for me still veiled in the mystique of a miracle, although I realize grudgingly that there are people who not only understand it all, but keep adding further miracles every day. Gene splicing, black holes, there's even a bus schedule for New York City!

I know that behind all these things there are people. And for them these miracles are the nuts to crack; they think of them day and night, struggle with them, sleep on them, and finally find solutions, using a heap of accumulated knowledge and a fair amount of their own inventiveness.

I can imagine what an electronics engineer has to master before he is able to add some little improvement to the construction of a TV set. And it is possible to realize that there once was a moment when he decided to enter this field and started learning all that he had to know. He was lucky to select a sphere in which the scope of necessary expertise is generally clear, so that to reach his goal was only a question of his motivation and persistence.

But there are people in this world who—for reasons that only they can tell—set for themselves an entirely different aim. They become obsessed with a desire to sit down and start writing or printing words in order to recount “discoveries.” A man affected by this obsession sees these as equal to the discoveries mentioned above, or at least on a level with a New York

City bus schedule, discoveries that members of an audience would be able to follow in their life journeys. They want to write stories.

Nowadays, many of the people thus afflicted are driven to write stories for the screen. They usually possess the derring-do of a Columbus, but very often keep rediscovering America. And as we now all know, Columbus didn't even do that.

"It is a strange thing," Turgenev once said with a sigh. "A composer studies harmony and theory of musical forms; a painter doesn't paint a picture without knowing something about colors and design; architecture requires basic schooling. Only when somebody makes a decision to start writing, he believes that he doesn't need to learn anything and that anybody who has learned to put words on paper can be a writer."

There is so much for any writer to know and learn continuously that one book couldn't cover even the basics. There isn't an area of life, a branch of human knowledge, that couldn't become the object of the writer's interest. But there is one skill that needs to be acquired foremost: the ability to express and shape one's visions. For a screenwriter this skill is a complex one. It means an ability to express and build scenes, sequences, and the whole story in the most effective way that the screen demands.

When people want to know what screenwriting is all about, I have a stock answer: It's simple—it's telling exciting stories about exciting people in an exciting form. That's all there is to it. The only problem is knowing how to make stories and people exciting and how to master all the intricacies of the form—because screenwriting is filmmaking on paper.

There is a nice apocryphal story about an enterprising young man who was made president of a brand-new Hollywood film company. He wanted to convince his investors that the only foolproof and unique way to succeed was to concentrate the company's efforts on stories. He hired a research company to answer the question, What does the public go to see in the movie theater—the story, the stars, the production values, or the special effects, sex, and violence? The research specialists got the message and a few weeks later, and only a little over their already hefty budget, produced a report all wonderfully laid out and nicely bound, full of graphics and tables, with statistics that proved beyond any doubt that it was the story the viewer came seeking in the darkness of the movie house. (As we all know, statistics can prove anything, sometimes even the truth.)

When the company folded, the unsuccessful president wondered what went wrong. And because he never asked the right people, he never found out that viewers go to movies not just to see stories, but to see *stories well*

told. The screenwriter's job is called *story-telling*, not *story-making*. Every story can be botched, as we have all seen.

In the area of cinema, "well told" means not only a well-narrated, skillfully structured and plotted tale. The story has to be displayed in rich scenes that use well-conceived (and well-performed) character parts and that inspire the designer, the cinematographer, the composer, the editor, and all the collaborators who add their talents to the final form in which the screenwriter's imagery and words appear in front of the audience.

There are many books on screenwriting. Naturally, as everyone knows, none of them will give someone the things that he has to bring: talent and a zest to tell stories. No book and no school can give you the things that are needed unconditionally: a fresh and never-ending supply of vivid facts of life, observations, impressions, memories of events, and knowledge of people—their life stories, attitudes, whims, quirks, strange tastes, superstitions, ideals, beliefs, dreams—in short, the stuff from which a writer has to, and feels compelled to, write stories.

The poor individual who is under the spell of this desire to write for the screen needs a lot of things besides talent. Fortunately, these are things he or she can learn. He can develop and strengthen his insight and his capacity to conceive and express characters and to create parts that will whet the appetite of actors and actresses; he can train his eye to keep discovering graphic and impressive locations; and—most important of all—he can learn from masters of the past, and sometimes even of the present, how to lay out scenes so that they arouse, keep, and intensify audience interest, empathy, involvement, and full participation. We have seen these things happening in our teaching programs.

What the would-be screenwriter needs most is an unbiased, nondogmatic introduction to dramatic structural principles and an understanding of the different narrative techniques and storytelling devices that cinema has learned to use. David Howard has wisely outlined this area for himself and has covered it in a concise, readable, knowledgeable, and intelligible manner. He has also been very generous with his pointers, advice, and admonitions about screenwriting and storytelling.

The worst thing a book on screenwriting can do is to instill in the mind of the beginning writer a set of rules, regulations, formulas, prescriptions, and recipes. Actually, it is even worse when these rules, regulations, prescriptions, and recipes are appropriated by those who don't have any intention of writing, but who are in charge of the development of "properties" (a very special and quite revealing Hollywood term).

In the hands of executives, agents, script readers, and script doctors,

these precepts can become cudgels used against those who have the audacity to write something in which a required or expected plot point or turning point doesn't occur on page such-and-such, or where the protagonist, antagonist, or even the whole third act doesn't behave according to the canonized commandments. (This failure to follow "the rules" becomes a sacrilege when the script works anyway.)

In classes and workshops in this country and abroad, at the Sundance Institute and in my work with Hollywood professionals, I have encountered all sorts of skepticism, suspicions, and superstitions. European filmmakers only recently began to admit—reluctantly and with constant apprehension, I must say—that the total abandonment of the screenwriting *métier* in the past thirty years of unrestricted rule by the director-as-auteur theory has led to an unhappy result. National filmmakers have lost their own audiences, although sporadically some of their films have been able to impress selected festival juries in other countries and have had limited exposure in art theaters.

This loss of audience is why there is such an enormous renewed interest in the theory and practice of writing scripts, and it is why even the term *dramaturgy* has been resurrected. The various national cinemas want to regain their viewers.

It has been said that dilettantes mistrust theoretical knowledge and are afraid that if they understood why and how certain principles work, they would lose their creative freedom if not their creativity.

On the other hand, hacks believe in recipes and stick to them anxiously and injudiciously. They don't know, however, why and how the recipes occasionally work, but they are afraid that without them they would be lost totally.

Professionals, true masters, search for principles. Principles are based on the nature of stories in general and upon the specificity of the medium itself.

David Howard doesn't preach any dogma, but he knows from his own experience, as well as from the lessons his students have learned, that to understand the principles helps, that ignorance is not the best advisor, and that applying the principles actually liberates and broadens creativity and enlarges the available choices. Amanda Silver, who was David's student and wrote *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* as her thesis script in the Graduate Screenwriting Program, would surely confirm the value of these lessons to her schoolmates.

I once had a student who came to me as a devoted believer in the "method of the premise." According to this precept, a story should prove

a premise, a statement, a "truth," a message; the writer should formulate his premise lucidly and rationally before he starts writing. This is supposed to make the writing easier and more organized, but it has unwanted consequences.

This student of mine brought with her a script that she had written according to the dictates of this creed. The result was to be expected: a clean and clear example of a formula story, totally predictable, necessarily boring and two-dimensional, with characters who served the purpose of proving the thesis-premise and did everything to show that it was "true."

She was devastated when she was told why all this had happened. And she grew even more frightened when she was told that she would have to learn to give her characters full freedom so that they would be able to do what *they* wanted and needed instead of being forced by her to perform what the premise required. She had to learn that characters are never our puppets. They have to live their own lives.

"But then . . ." she said, her eyes resembling two black holes, "then it won't be my story!" It took her a long time to understand that *only* then would she be writing truly her story, that it wouldn't be controlled by her rational brain, but would involve the whole of herself, with all her emotional, subconscious, spontaneous, and intuitional insights. It takes courage and it isn't easy. Writing this way is a bit frightening for some people, but it is the only way to write stories that are effective and "organically grown instead of artificially inseminated," to use the contemporary vocabulary. This is the only road to stories that aren't just chewing gum for human minds, but ones that bring some real nutrition to the viewer's imagination and intellect.

The book you are going to study makes this adventure of exploration quite appealing and—apparently owing to David Howard's gentle nature—it doesn't make it look very threatening. My hope is that it will encourage aspiring screenwriters to exert more of their own efforts to learn directly from those who know, or knew, the principles and "secrets" of our art and craft.

With the availability of films on tape and laser disc (as well as scripts to read), there are no obstacles to the enjoyment of these exploratory voyages of discovery.

My other hope is that the reader will take in all the rational and reasonable body of knowledge this book offers, that he or she will digest it and use it in the manner recommended by Lope de Vega, that "wonder of nature," the most prolific playwright of all time, who wrote more than fifteen

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hundred plays. In his comprehensive study of dramatic theory and practice, *Writing Plays in Our Time* (published in 1609 and written in verse), he stated openly and bravely, after having introduced all the “rules”: “When I have to write a play, I lock up the rules with six keys.”

ABOUT SCREENWRITING

*Writing is creating something
out of nothing.*

—ROBERT TOWNE

*The writer's responsibility, the filmmaker's
responsibility, is to deliver as best he can, the
intention he has.*

—BILL WITTLIFF

THE SCREENWRITER'S TASK

I just happen to be one of those irrational persons who think that a film cannot be any good if it isn't well written.

—ERNEST LEHMAN

It's easy to patronize screenwriting, but it's not easy to do. That's proven all the time by all the bad screenplays you see.

—TOM RICKMAN

A movie, I think, is really only four or five moments between two people; the rest of it exists to give those moments their impact and resonance. The script exists for that. Everything does.

—ROBERT TOWNE

The screenplay is certainly one of the most difficult and misunderstood forms of writing in all literature. The film that results from a screenwriter's labors is much more immediate and visceral than prose fiction, yet the process of transforming the writer's words, ideas, and desires into that final product is less direct and involves many more intermediaries between writer and audience than do other forms of literature. As a result, the screenwriter finds his or her path strewn with pitfalls and problems that don't arise in the creation of an essay, a novel, or a poem.

The screenwriter must communicate with a director, actors, costumers, a cinematographer, sound designers, production designers, editors, and a whole host of other filmmaking professionals. At the same time, the screenwriter must be especially aware of audience psychology and the conventions of screen storytelling. And, finally, the screenwriter needs to be attuned to the wants, passions, and limitations of all the characters in the story. These sometimes conflicting demands on the screenwriter are so great that they make the creation of a first-rate screenplay quite rare indeed.

However, the screenwriter has a wealth of dramatic history from which to learn. Screenwriting is the direct outgrowth of playwriting, adapting many of the same tools and conventions of the theater to a newer technology, a new way of delivering the story to the audience. If we examine successful plays (that is, plays that have held the interest of large audiences over a period of time) and compare them with successful films, we find that they seem to share certain features. The technique employed to hold audience interest is strikingly similar in a comedy by Plautus and one by Neil Simon, a Greek tragedy and *The Godfather*, a Shakespearean play and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In other words, there is a technique of focusing audience interest that can be observed, and it can be learned. (Mastery of the technique will not automatically assure the creation of a viable play or screenplay, but the lack of a deliberate or instinctive technique will almost certainly ensure failure.)

The screenwriter's task is far more than the setting down of dialogue. Indeed, this part of the task may turn out to be the smallest problem. The concept every screenwriter must address is the fundamental vision of a sequence of events, which includes not only the dialogue spoken by the actors, but also their physical activity, their surroundings, the entire context in which the story takes place, the lighting, the music and sounds, the costumes, the whole pace and rhythm of the storytelling. Yet still the screenwriter's job is not done, for, in addition to all these considerations, the script must provide enough clarity that it enables the director, the cinematographer, the sound designer, and all the other film professionals to create a film that resembles the original intentions of the screenwriter.

Although others will eventually interpret the writer's words and story, the original vision of a film is first the exclusive domain of the screenwriter. The writer is the very first to "see" the film, though it is solely in the mind and on the page. The screenwriter must have conscious intentions for what the audience will see and hear and, most important, experience when the script is cast and produced. Without this clarity in the mind of the screenwriter, there is little hope that the script, or a film made from it, will have any of the impact intended by the author.

We can be sure that the author of every great screenplay imagined the activity of the actors as well as their dialogue, envisioning where, as well as when, they would be making their entrances and exits, what the effect of settings, costume, and music would be, the subtle changes of rhythm and pace that would be most effective. This is not to suggest that the screenwriter has to be a sound engineer, cinematographer, set designer, or electrician any more than a director or leading actor; but a screenwriter

must know how the various arts of cinema can be utilized to give the impression of reality on film to what was originally born in his head. This vision is contained in the screenplay, a sort of blueprint for an extremely complex art form, an art form recorded in two dimensions that depicts three dimensions, an art form that has the additional dimension of time, which also enters into the arts of music, poetry, and dance.

The screenwriter can hardly anticipate a total fulfillment of this vision, any more than a playwright can. Shakespeare was well acquainted with actors' failings, as is apparent in Hamlet's advice to the players, and his awareness of the limited resources of his playhouse led him to call it an "unworthy scaffold." Still, his plays have endured, and all the elements of dramatic storytelling he employed are just as effective today as they were when his works were first performed. Shakespeare's dialogue, magnificent as it is, was only one element among many in his approach to his story.

Circumstances are much the same with the screenwriter who must relinquish a tenderly nursed and fussed-over vision, his or her "baby," for others to interpret, stage, create, and display to the final audience. With all the steps between a completed screenplay and the first showing of a finished film made from that work, it's amazing that any of the screenwriter's original vision makes it to the screen intact. Yet it does, precisely because the accomplished screenwriter has envisioned the entirety of the production, has communicated with all the collaborators in the process, and, most important of all, has remained attuned to what should be communicated to the audience and when it should be revealed for maximum impact and effectiveness.

What follows are discussions of dramatic construction and the tools of storytelling. Many of them are as ancient as the theater; a few are as new as the technology of filmmaking. In the end, screenwriting comes down to making meticulous plans for a physical representation of a story on real or realistic locations (for the story), and in four dimensions—it is the dimension of time that makes pace and rhythm possible as part of the pattern of telling a story for maximum impact.

STAGE VERSUS SCREEN

A play is manifestly different from a screenplay. You've got a stage, a proscenium; you've got an audience sitting there that knows it's in a theater. They are willing to accept all kinds of conventions that go with the theater. It's a different discipline, almost a different genre. Film is much more permissive—and in that sense, a much more difficult—medium.

—PADDY CHAYEFESKY

There isn't that much difference in the creative process of writing the two forms of drama, except that one of them is to be put on the screen.

—ERNEST LEHMAN

Although the dramaturgy of screenwriting (which is the craft and practice of writing dramatic narrative material for film and television) owes a great deal to the history and development of the theater, the two art forms differ. The problem of describing the ways in which film and theater diverge is a lot like trying to define the difference between a dog and a cat; both are mammals that walk on all fours, have tails, fur, ears that stick up, and snouts. Yet even the quickest glance can determine the difference between them. Once well acquainted with both dramatic forms, most people can usually tell the difference between a work that is cinematic and one that is theatrical.

The most obvious difference is on the page, the format of how the words of the author are laid out. While this is the least important of the differences, it does illustrate the most important distinction. In a play, the bulk of what is on the page is the characters' dialogue; in a screenplay the balance shifts toward scene description, the actions of the characters, and the visuals the audience sees. At the risk of oversimplifying two complex entities to make a point, it can be said that a play depends upon the words

of the characters to carry the weight of the storytelling, while a screenplay (and the film made from it) depends on the actions of the characters. That said, it must be emphasized that the actions of the characters in plays are still more crucial to the audience's experience of the work than the dialogue. But consider the strengths and the shortcomings of both live theater and film.

In the theater, the audience watches real, living, breathing human beings interact. In a film there is only the recorded image of the people, the actors. Clearly the former has a much greater possibility for a connection between performer and audience than the latter. An accomplished actor on stage can create an electrifying empathy with the audience that is impossible in film. In other words, the actor on stage can make his or her emotions palpable to the audience in a way the actors on screen cannot. Theater's strength is cinema's weakness.

Yet there is a price for this immediacy, this intimacy between performer and audience. In a play, the storyteller has much less latitude in urging the audience to watch any specific action or reaction, or to register any small bit of information. There are ways of focusing audience attention in the theater, but none is so powerful as the frame of film, which does not allow the audience a choice in looking elsewhere. And in a play, it is much more difficult to change locations and move about through time. Both of course are possible, but can't be done with anything approaching the facility of film, which can jump across town, across the country, or around the world, and get back before any sets have been changed in a play. For major periods of stage time, most plays are locked in one location, in one specific time. Once the screenwriter and the filmmaker have liberated the camera, it can go anywhere; the film story can skip time or go backward and forward in time and come back again in less screen time than the play has spent in one location and time.

So the theater has the advantage of immediacy, of rapport between actors and audience, but the limitations of more cumbersome changes in time and place. Film has incredible latitude in time and place, but suffers from a lack of contact between the actors and the audience. This is not to say that screen acting is a lesser art form than stage acting, just a different one, one with the added obstacle of distance between performer and audience. A great deal of this distance can be made up by the camera, which can bring the audience much closer to a film actor than a seated audience can get to a stage actor. Because the camera magnifies every little gesture and expression, what is a perfectly realistic reaction on stage becomes "too big" on screen. Yet even with the camera's ability to take the audience "inside"

a character by participating in the performance, it still cannot bridge the gap between live performance and recorded performance.

The accomplished screenwriter will write for the strengths of film and around its limitations, and the accomplished playwright will do the same in writing for the stage. In the end, this translates into differences in how plays and screenplays distribute the load of telling the story and involving the audience. The playwright can allow the actor long speeches and plenty of time to “strut his stuff,” to involve the audience in the performance, while the screenwriter should give the actors more actions that help reveal character, wants, desires, and the whole range of emotion the performance needs to evoke. At the same time, the screenwriter should also write for the strengths of cinema, using its ability to force the audience to see only what the storyteller chooses and its ability to change time and place with ease. While nearly anything that is possible on stage is possible on screen, and even though both film and theater have all the same attributes (but in different proportions), they are, to their core, different animals, just as certainly as cats and dogs share a great many similarities but are not in the least interchangeable.

ADAPTATION

Very often you find that first-rate books don't make first-rate movies. It's often a mistake to try to preserve the literary quality of it.

—WALTER BERNSTEIN

Movies do some things wonderfully well that novels don't do. There's a marvelous narrative thing that movies have; they do size and scope. They are entirely different forms. The only similarity is that very often they both use dialogue. Otherwise the way that one handles a scene in a movie and the way one handles a scene in a book have nothing to do with each other.

—WILLIAM GOLDMAN

Stories for film can be adapted from a variety of sources. Plays, novels, short stories, real-life experiences, even poetry and songs have been adapted to the screen. At first glance, this looks like an easier task than developing a whole new story from scratch. Yet adapting a story from another source usually requires greater skill and understanding of the film medium than does creating a new story. Very few stories created for another medium, or stories that have actually been lived through, lend themselves easily and immediately to the needs of a screenplay. We've all heard the term “dramatic license,” which comes from the need to alter, simplify, compress, or eliminate material to make the drama work. And we have all had the experience of seeing a film about a real-life event we remember and thinking, “But it wasn't like that.”

These discrepancies don't necessarily stem from incompetence on the part of the screenwriter; it could be that license was the only way to solve the dramatic problems. Real people's lives rarely fall into a three-act structure. Novels usually have too much material or are not terribly visual or are decidedly too internal. Plays have been written for the limitations of

the stage and must be made more cinematic by the addition of the camera as narrator, expanding beyond the few sets of the play and by dramatizing actions only alluded to in the play. Short stories often don't have a complete first act and sometimes have too little material or, again, are too internal or not very visual. Poems and songs are typically too schematic, too sketchy to be much more than a starting point for a screenwriter.

The moment a writer begins adapting a story from another source, the question comes up: How faithful to that source *must* one and *can* one be? Sometimes the most faithful adaptations make the worst films, because the material wasn't designed for a film story and, as written, doesn't work on screen, however powerful the story is in its original form. Drama in general and certainly in the cinema demands compression, intensification. There is an old saying, "Fiction is gossip, drama is scandal." The two are the same thing except that scandal is more intense and spreads like wildfire, while gossip can meander about and go on much longer. Events that take place in a novel or in real life over months, or even years, will often play much better in a film if they all happen in the same day. But when one is confronted with a story in print or the actual facts of exactly how something happened, there is a natural inclination to go with the facts or the printed page—at the price of the drama. Someone writing an adaptation must constantly weigh these two sides against each other: fidelity to the original source, and the demands of drama for intensity and compression. These are inherently difficult issues.

To the novice screenwriter, then, adaptation from another source is more likely to be a stumbling block than a crutch. Yet adaptation can be a refreshing challenge to an accomplished screenwriter, who will know what to look for, when sections of material can be kept, and when, why, and how others must be altered to make the drama work on screen. The experienced adaptor looks below the surface of the events for the drama that lies underneath, finds ways of bringing disparate elements together to fit thematically and dramatically with the rest of the story, and, at the same time, tries to remain true to the spirit of the original story.

Another major difficulty to overcome in adaptation is translating the voice of the narrator. There is no exact film equivalent of the narrator of a book, whether it's written in the first or third person, and yet in some of the best fiction, the direct one-on-one communication between the author and the reader is the most interesting aspect of the work. The book author can make digressions into philosophy, psychology, personal and regional history, wordplay, and the wizardry of language that can't be brought to the screen in the same way. These aspects of the voice of the author can foil

even the most accomplished screenwriter attempting an adaptation, for the very reason they can beguile the reader: the author is provoking the reader's imagination in a way that a film cannot. What is shown on screen is "real" to the audience; the actors *are* their characters, the places and events seem as real as the filmmakers can make them. A reader conjures up images of the people, places, and events in his mind, and delights in the asides and musings of the author. This imaginative conjuring and the leisurely wandering of the reader through the mind of the storyteller are not possible in film, which necessarily has to make visible manifestations in place of the imaginings of the reader.

The beginning screenwriter would be better advised to gain some command over the tools of the craft while pursuing a story that can readily be changed, developed, and emphasized for greatest dramatic impact. Once a screenwriter develops a degree of finesse with the tools discussed at length in this work, an adaptation becomes a worthwhile effort.

THE AUTEUR OF A FILM

Everybody gets together and everybody makes a picture.

—WILLIAM GOLDMAN

I say this as a writer: there is no more important person on a set than a director. But even then a movie is always collaborative. I believe the auteur theory is merely one way it is easier for historians to assign credit or blame to individuals. It's a simplistic way of interpreting facts, and it often has very little to do with what actually happened.

—ROBERT TOWNE

Film is essentially a collaboration.

—BILL WITTLIFF

Who is the real author of a film? Film theorists and film viewers love to wrestle with this question. The popular conception, originated by François Truffaut writing as a film critic in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and first promoted in this country by Andrew Sarris, holds that the director and the director alone is the author of the film, the *auteur*. In the history of film, there have been a number of filmmakers who seem like true *auteurs*—filmmakers whose work shows a consistency of expression and seems to demonstrate primarily the artistry and convictions of one person. Most of these *auteurs* have been directors: D. W. Griffith, Billy Wilder, Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, François Truffaut, and Woody Allen, among others. But it should be noted that Bergman, Wilder, Truffaut, and Allen also have written or co-written most of their scripts, and that Hitchcock worked in very close collaboration with his screenwriters, though he did not take writing credit for his contributions.

Writer-directors or directors who collaborate in considerable depth with their writers only account for a portion of the films created every year. Who

is the author of all these other films? The entire team of filmmakers is the *auteur*—the writer and director, but also the producer, the cinematographer, the production designer, and the actors. The director is obviously an important player on the team, but without a script, without actors, without camera, sound, sets, costumes—the whole production—the director is helpless. Close inspection shows the contributions of collaborating writers, the same cinematographer and composer and designer in film after film—even in the films of the great writer-directors listed above. Where does the work of all the others end and the work of the director begin? While the director is undeniably the leader of the team once the game begins, there is no game without the writer, and the director cannot hope to accomplish much without the other team members.

In other words, the question of authorship becomes a moot point. The interdependencies of the family of filmmakers who produce, shoot, and edit a film are much too strong for any one contributor to be the sole author of the work. At the same time, some films have a clear-cut stamp of personality; often this is contributed by the director, but sometimes by the writer, by the cinematographer, or, more often than a lot of auteur theorists care to admit, by the star whose brand is all over the film, no matter who wrote or directed. From the films of Mae West to the *Thin Man* series to James Bond films to Clint Eastwood westerns, many films take their most distinctive quality from the stars in front of the camera. But for most films, the *auteur* is the team, not any single individual. And the variety, depth, and vividness of any given film is stronger for the efforts of this small group, each adding his or her individual expertise to the enterprise.

THE SCREENWRITER'S RELATIONSHIPS

Basically there are seven people who are essential to a film, and if the film's going to be really any good, all seven have to be at their best. In no particular order, they are the director, the producer, the players, the cinematographer, the production designer, the editor and certainly the writer. Sometimes the composer is essential, absolutely essential.

—WILLIAM GOLDMAN

If everybody does what they do well, then there's a sense in which all the skills tend to merge. You call the writer the writer, the actor the actor, the director the director. But they are really working together in a way that melds their respective jobs.

—ROBERT TOWNE

There is a terrible tendency among film viewers, some critics, and more than a few people in the film industry to think of filmmakers and screenwriters as two separate groups, as if screenwriting were not filmmaking. This fallacy is also perpetuated by a large number of people writing screenplays, who believe they don't need to know anything about filmmaking in order to write a good script. Playwrights, novelists, journalists, actors, waiters, and housewives have all become accomplished screenwriters, but that doesn't mean those occupations have provided training for their screenwriting. Whether a writer went to film school or got hired to write because of some outside work (like novel writing or acting), he or she had to learn what filmmaking was all about. A writer who fails to grasp how films are made, what the needs, limits, and strengths of the film medium are, who the other professionals are, and how to communicate with them, cannot become accomplished at the craft of screenwriting.

One doesn't have to know how to play the oboe to write a symphony, but a classical composer had better know the strengths and limitations of the oboe—as well as of the bassoon, the cello, the violin, and all the other instruments that make up the orchestra. An architect need not know how to build a form for a cement foundation or how to frame a pitched roof, but necessary knowledge for an architect includes knowing what is structurally possible and impossible, plus what the requirements, uses, and pitfalls of various construction techniques are. The same is true of the accomplished screenwriter, who must communicate with producer, director, actors, designers, composer, cinematographer, production manager, sound recordist, editor, mixer, and many more. To become effective at screenwriting, a writer must know not only how to tell a story well, but how to communicate it to a whole host of professionals, each of whom does part of the job of creating the finished film.

Because filmmaking is a group activity, relationships are crucial to effective work. The screenwriter's three most important relationships are with the producer, the director, and the actors. The many other film arts and crafts use the script as a reference and starting point for their work, but these three relationships require a greater degree of understanding by the writer.

The producer of a film asks a great number of questions: Who would want to see this film? How similar is it to other films in current or recent release? Who would want to play the lead and other critical roles? How much would it cost to make this picture? There are many more questions, but these few give an idea of what is going on in the back of a producer's mind when reading a script. It is a bad idea for a screenwriter to propose answers to any of these questions, such as suggesting specific actors or actresses, but it is a very good idea to keep in mind that a producer will be subjecting your work to this kind of questioning. You cannot and should not attempt to second-guess what will be a hit next year (or, more realistically, two years from the writing stage). Instead, write a story that compels you, that you would like to see as a film, and trust that your sensibility will find an audience.

The relationship between the writer and director is so strong that a great many people attempt to do both jobs—and some succeed. These are the only two people involved in a film production who look at the film in nearly the same way; that is, the writer and director look at the totality of the story, how it is told to the audience, how they hope the audience will experience it and react to it. While the producer looks at the whole picture and is concerned with the story and storytelling from early on through

release and distribution, the producer's vision must be occupied partly by the practical considerations of getting the film made—budget, scheduling, locations, and all the rest. But the writer and director are potentially each other's greatest allies because these two jobs involve the whole weave and texture of the story, its fabric. If they are both making the same picture—if they both see the same film in their mind's eyes—it can be a wonderfully enriching collaboration. This is why the writer and the director should work together in preproduction, fine-tuning the script until they both are seeing the same story in the same way.

The writer's relationship with the actors is much closer than many people suspect—not necessarily in working closely together, but in similar approaches to the material and work essentials. A great deal of the process of screenwriting begins with character exploration: discovering/inventing who the characters are, what they want, what they hope for, what they fear, what makes them tick. This same process is done by the actors as well, delving into the inner workings of the characters well beyond what will be manifested on screen. The two approaches diverge because a screenwriter must go through this process for every important character, whereas the actor has to do it for only one character. In the end this means that the actor can achieve a lot more depth, can take the character closer to heart than the screenwriter, whose attention and energies are necessarily divided. Because of this, eventually the character “belongs” to the actor even more than it does to the writer; the actor has an even greater depth of understanding of the character. Feedback from actors who have taken their characters to heart can be invaluable to the writer in fine-tuning and polishing the screenplay prior to production. Unfortunately this luxury is not always possible, but it should nonetheless be a goal, because it can help the finished film immensely.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE

One of the great difficulties in film and screenwriting analysis is the confusion of its vocabulary. When a doctor uses the word *appendicitis*, or a lawyer *subpoena*, or an architect *fenestration*, others in the same profession know exactly what is being talked about. When a teacher or screenwriter or producer uses the following words (all of them taken from chapter headings in books on playwriting and screenwriting)—*continuity*, *progression*, *premise*, *theme*, *forestalling*, *finger-posts*, *preparation*, *anticlimax*, *complication*, *scene*, *catastrophe*, *resolution*, *representation*, *crisis*, *antagonist*, *impressionism*, *adjustment*, *peripety*, *irony*, *attack*, *focus*, *suspense*, *action*,

recognition, *balance*, *movement*, *orchestration*, *unity of opposites*, *static*, *jumping*, *transition*, *incident*—meanings can become confused, for most of the terms have no precise definitions in the context of the subject matter. They are used to mean different things by different writers. Reading half a dozen books on screenwriting in succession is apt to leave one quite bewildered, unless one ignores the terminology and thinks in terms of concepts.

Anyone venturing another book on the subject must also choose his own vocabulary, and indicate what every imprecise term means to him or her. The reader, to avoid confusion, had best ignore for the moment what others have meant by *premise* and *crisis* and *unity* and so on, and concentrate on the meaning in the context of the work in hand. Unfortunately, there seems to be no other way around this difficulty.

BASIC STORYTELLING

A story starts with a character.

—FRANK DANIEL

WHAT MAKES "A GOOD STORY WELL TOLD"

You just never know. But the audience always does. You can be so damned sure that your film is going to be a smash hit, it's that good in the projection room. And then suddenly the audience tells you what you never knew.

—ERNEST LEHMAN

The biggest sin in movies is being boring.

—FRANK DANIEL

The first thing is content. What does the filmmaker have to say that can mean something that I have not heard before?

—BILL WITTLIFF

There is always room for another really good story. But what is a really good story or, more precisely, "a good story well told"? "A sympathetic hero up against seemingly insurmountable odds who somehow manages to prevail" accounts for a lot of very good stories—from *Shane* to *North by Northwest* to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to *Star Wars*. But there is another whole category of equally successful and riveting films that do not have an inherently sympathetic central character, yet manage to engage an audience—from *The Sweet Smell of Success* to *Ama-deus* to *The Godfather*. In each of these, we still manage to care about a character who is far from admirable, far from enviable, yet with whom we still manage to share some small amount of empathy. We see the human heart suffering inside the character whose actions, desires, and possibly whose whole life we find distasteful. A great many good stories revolve around characters who are somewhere in between—not overtly sympathetic, because of some of their thoughts or actions, yet characters we still

find compelling. *Casablanca*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Searchers*, and *Body Heat* all fall into this category.

So our empathy—and its outgrowth, sympathy—need not be absolute with a character; but there must be some amount of empathy, however small. In addition, the character must be attempting to do something; attempting *not* to do something or attempting to stop something from happening are still doing something. Trying to save a life, win a race, avoid being drafted, keep from being touched, or paint a picture are all “wants” that could work for the right character. But there must be obstacles to keep the character from achieving easily whatever he or she wants. If it is easy to save the life, win the race, or paint the picture, then the audience says, “So what?” Audience disinterest is the result of a lack of difficulty to the circumstance.

The audience empathize with a character not because they are in pain or oppressed, but because of what they are doing about it.

—WALTER BERNSTEIN

In 1895, Georges Polti published *Les Trente-six Situations Dramatique* in France. In his work, he sought to identify the thirty-six basic dramatic situations that are possible to tell. Basic and helpful though this identification may be, Polti’s work still did not reveal the common thread that *all* stories share. It was Frank Daniel who first formulated a deceptively simple delineation of the basic dramatic circumstance: *Somebody wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it*. If the audience has some empathy with the “somebody,” and that character wants urgently to do something, and that something is very difficult to do or get, then we are well on the way to a good story. If the character barely cares whether he or she achieves the goal, or if the achievement is too easy or completely impossible, there is no drama. Thus a good story could be said to be about a character with whom the audience has some measure of empathy, who strongly wants something that is very difficult, yet possible, to achieve.

“A good story well told” includes one more crucial element: the way in which the audience experiences the story. What the audience knows, when they know it, what they know that one or more characters don’t know, what they hope for, what they fear, what they can anticipate, what surprises them—all of these are elements in the telling of a story. The management of these and other parts of an audience’s involvement in the story is the greatest achievement of the screenwriter. Without these elements, a good

story becomes just so many events in a sequence, not an experience the audience craves.

The beginning writer tends to feel that writing with the audience in mind is an evil to be avoided at all costs. But this mistakes writing with the audience in mind for pandering to the audience. Pandering should be avoided; just delivering up, without thought or genuine emotion, so much predigested emotional glop for an audience to consume is a waste of everyone’s time and energy. But it is no more sensible, or even possible, to write effective drama without the audience’s experience of it in mind than it would be to design clothes without the wearer in mind. Three arm holes, no legs, or a seven-inch waist would be the result; the same would happen in drama—a story no one would want to experience.

The difference between writing with the audience in mind and pandering comes down to who is in control. If the writer panders to the audience, what determines the action is the writer’s guess at what the audience wants *a priori* of the story at hand. The control is squarely in the hands of the audience. The writer who writes with the audience in mind, and succeeds in making it care about the characters, circumstances, and events of the story through skillful management of its perceptions of them, is in control; this writer offers an experience and essentially seduces the audience into joining in on it. The storyteller is in control.

The two principal concerns of this book are how to develop a good story and how to tell it well. The two are so intertwined that it would not be possible to deal with them separately. As Frank Daniel says in the introduction to this book, “It’s simple—it’s telling exciting stories about exciting people in an exciting form.” The essential elements of “a good story well told” are:

1. The story is about *somebody* with whom we have some empathy.
2. This somebody wants *something* very badly.
3. This something is *difficult*, but possible to do, get, or achieve.
4. The story is told for maximum *emotional impact* and *audience participation* in the proceedings.
5. The story must come to a *satisfactory ending* (which does not necessarily mean a happy ending).

“A good story well told” is simple, but it’s not easy.

THE DIVISION INTO THREE ACTS

In the first act, it's who are the people and what is the situation of this whole story. The second act is the progression of that situation to a high point of conflict and great problems. And the third act is how the conflicts and problems are resolved.

—ERNEST LEHMAN

Some writers work with a division into five acts, television movies often employ a seven act division, but in this work we deal with dividing the material of a story into three acts. In reality, the only difference in the number of acts results from how the writer organizes his thoughts about the story, not in how the audience experiences it. Used properly and effectively, the three-, five-, or seven-act division would put the same story events and revelations in more or less the same places and sequence.

A great many teachers and authors talk about “the three act structure” rather than about a division into three acts, but the former phrasing gives rise to the implication that the telling of a story is like the building of a bridge, that once the design is complete, it remains unchanged forever. In reality, a story *evolves*; its “structure” changes as the story unfolds; it is constantly in flux. Moreover, there is no fixed structure that works for the telling of a story; each new story is its own prototype, each must be created anew. There is no recipe, there is no blank form that must only have the blanks filled in for a story to take shape. Good storytelling requires a great deal more invention than that.

The reason we employ a three act paradigm is that it is the simplest to understand and it most closely adheres to the phases of an audience's experience of a story. The first act gets the audience involved with the characters and the story. The second act keeps it involved and heightens its emotional commitment to the story. The third act wraps up the story and

brings the audience's involvement to a satisfactory end. In other words, a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

There are no curtains in a film, no clear-cut changes of act, as there are in most plays. This enables a film story to be told as a continuum, on and on until the end, without stopping, without looking back. The ideal experience a film can give to an audience is that of a seamless dream, one continuously evolving and forward-moving story that engages the audience's mind and emotions, allowing it to “wake up” from the story only at the very end. Because of this attempt by the film storyteller to put the audience into a nearly dreamlike state—a state of being swept up in the story to the exclusion of all outside worries and thoughts—the screenwriter tries to mask the scene divisions, to smooth over the seams where the story is stitched and woven together.

So the division of a film into acts is not something that viewers are consciously aware of, though they feel the emotional shifts that come with pivotal changes in the story. The primary use of the three act division is to help the writer organize ideas about how to tell the story and to aid him in discovering the best places for major moments in the story to fall for maximum impact. Many of the essays in the “Screenwriting Tools” section deal in much more detail with the various components that help the writer achieve this goal of maximum impact.

The first act introduces the audience to the world of the story and its principal characters, and sets up the main conflict around which the story will be built. In most stories, there is a single central character whose life and predicament are focused on by the end of the first act—that is, the character's goal is established and some inkling of the obstacles is given. The second act elaborates in ever greater detail and intensity on those difficulties, the obstacles to the character achieving the goal. At the same time, this character changes and develops during the second act, or at least intense pressure is put on the character to change, and that change is manifested in the third act. Subplots in the story are developed largely in the second act. In the third act, the main story (the central character's story) and the subplots are all resolved in differing ways, but all with some sense of finality—the feeling that the conflict is over. (Even if we might see another storm brewing on the horizon, the conflicts of this story have been completed.)

It is a good idea to think of the three acts not as a mold or formula to be filled in with some kind of batter the writer has concocted, but rather as a set of landmarks an explorer/guide tries to keep sight of when traveling through new and dangerous territory. The travelers (the audience) who

follow the guide (the writer) are only aware of the land around them, the potential dangers that may lie ahead of them, the hoped-for benefits, the scary sounds in the night. But the guide must keep track of those landmarks, occasionally losing sight, but then spotting one again and becoming oriented. The wise guide won't point out all the landmarks to the travelers, but will allow them to enjoy the journey as a continuum and to think of the guide as a mystical being with uncanny powers of navigation.

THE WORLD OF THE STORY

I try not to force the characters into some setting or event to accomodate what I want, but rather let them be real enough to dictate to me what setting they want to be in.

—BILL WITTLIFF

There should be some kind of interaction between the people and their milieu.

—WALTER BERNSTEIN

The world of a story in any film is a unique creation, a variation—from very realistic to very fanciful—on the reality of our world, today or in another time period. With the exception of some sequels, two movies usually don't inhabit exactly the same world. Instead, most films take place in a specially designed universe with its own rules, limits, and things that are important. This is true even if at first glance two films appear to take place in exactly the same world. For instance, *The Champ* and *Rocky* are both about struggling prizefighters and the world of professional boxing. Both aspire to a sort of grittiness, but the former is more of a parable, an illustrated moral lesson, and the latter more of a fable, the creation of a legend.

One way to test the specificity of the worlds of individual films is by imagining a scene from one film within another. An extreme but illustrative comparison is between *Moonstruck* and *The Godfather*. Both stories are

about several generations of Italian immigrant families in New York City. Yet any single moment from one film would stand out as glaringly inappropriate in the other. Two much more similar films have the same discrepancy. *Chinatown* and *Double Indemnity* both take place in Los Angeles in about the same time period, with hard-boiled characters and dialogue, and both have something of a cynical side. Yet with all these similarities, Jake Gittes no more fits into *Double Indemnity* than Walter Neff fits into *Chinatown*; it's as if they came from a different universe, which of course they do.

Specificity in the world of a story derives from two sources: the nature of the central character (in most films) and the nature of the storyteller. Much of what is important and unimportant in a story's world comes from who the central character is, the qualities of this person and his or her predicament. At the same time, what the storyteller has in mind, what the story is really about (at its core; see the chapter on "Theme") also has considerable influence over the world of the story. What is emphasized and deemphasized, what goals, fears, aspirations, circumstances, realities, and fantasies make up the people who inhabit the story, all come from within the storyteller. These personal (and sometimes unintentional) prejudices and the conscious choices of the storyteller make subtle changes in the proportions, shadings, and views of the world of the story as it is presented to the audience. Another way to look at this is to accept that the world a writer imagines is, to its very core, part of that writer's style.

PROTAGONIST, ANTAGONIST, AND CONFLICT

I never work out the plot apart from the characters. For me to proceed, I have to find who the story is about, the main character . . . When I'm writing something in which there is a villain, I try very hard to give the villain the full benefit of his or her position, to make them formidable and interesting to make the devil persuasive and attractive.

—WALTER BERNSTEIN

Most film stories are told around a single central character, the protagonist (see “Protagonist and Objective”). Even in those stories that have many characters or another structural form (see “Unity”), each individual subplot in the overall story has its own protagonist. In the basic dramatic circumstance of “somebody wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it,” the “somebody” is the protagonist.

The *antagonist* of a story is the opposing force, the “difficulty” that actively resists the protagonist’s efforts to achieve the goal. These two opposing forces form the conflict or conflicts of the story.

Many stories have an antagonist who is another person, the “bad guy.” From *North by Northwest* to *Star Wars* to *Chinatown* to *Terminator*, very effective films have been made from stories in which the protagonist and antagonist are clearly and distinctly different people in active opposition to each other. In this sort of a story, the protagonist has what is called an external conflict, a conflict with someone else. But in a great many films the protagonist is his or her own antagonist as well; the central struggle is within the main character, two parts or desires or urges of the same person. Among the clearest cases of an internal conflict are *Hamlet* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but there are also many examples in film: *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Vertigo*, and *Raging*

Bull. In these and many more films, the principal struggle of the story is going on inside the central character.

Even though there is an internal conflict in which protagonist and antagonist are the same person, there is usually outside opposition as well. And in most well-made stories of an external conflict, there is still an element of internal conflict within the main character. Most of the time it is a balance of these two things, but the overriding conflict of the story is either internal or external. In *Casablanca*, Rick’s struggle is an internal conflict—to get involved or stay out of it—yet there is Colonel Strasser as a very real manifestation of the pressure on him to take a stand. In *The Sting*, the protagonist, Johnny Hooker, played by Robert Redford, wants to get revenge on the man who had his friend and mentor killed. That man is the antagonist and the conflict is an external one, yet there is still a struggle going on inside the Redford character: Is he up to the task of this revenge? Who can he trust? In *Jaws*, Sheriff Brody is the protagonist and the shark is the antagonist, making an external conflict, yet Brody has his own internal conflicts to overcome as well: his fear of water, his desire not to fight the shark, to get a bigger boat. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, the main conflict is within Clyde, with his own self-destructive impulses, yet there is the sheriff in hot pursuit of him and his gang as an external manifestation of his inner conflict.

An internal conflict in a story with an outside antagonist helps make the protagonist a more complex and interesting human being. An external source of conflict in a story where the main conflict is essentially internal helps make the two sides of the character visible, palpable; it gives them “lives of their own.” In fact, this is the nub of the central question of screenwriting, how to show the audience what is going on inside the central—or any—character.

EXTERNALIZING THE INTERNAL

Not what's on the page, but what's on the screen is what counts, even for writers.

—TOM RICKMAN

You have to play the moment, write the moment as fully as you can. If it's done truthfully and honestly and the dramatic situation is a good one, it'll work.

—WALTER BERNSTEIN

Because there are usually both internal and external conflicts—in whatever proportion—in most films, the screenwriter is constantly confronted with the problem of how to show what is going on inside a character at any given time. Stories would become pretty shallow and boring if we didn't get a window into the inner lives of the characters—their joys, torments, secret desires and aspirations, hidden fears. Clearly this is much easier when there is a character in active opposition to the efforts of another character. Unfortunately, this opposition does not always exist. The beginning screenwriter usually rushes to dialogue to fill the gap, but this is not a very satisfactory solution. What we end up with is a whole host of characters who talk openly and honestly about their feelings; the only drama in the theater is in the audience stampeding for the exits.

It is far better to give the audience a peek at the inner life of a character through his or her actions. One of those actions is speaking, but dialogue can only carry a share of the load. If a character says "I'm very angry with you," it's rather weak and might even be untrue. If the character grabs the other character by the collar and slams him up against the wall, usually we can figure out what is going on inside the first character without the support of dialogue. Finding actions that reveal complex inner emotions is one of the most difficult tasks a screenwriter faces, but it is the difference

between a story that works and one that talks about working. In *Annie Hall*, one of the happiest moments Alvy and Annie have is when they are trying to cook lobsters. After they have broken up, Alvy tries the same thing with another woman. This dramatizes what he misses, what he wishes to recapture. And when it goes poorly, it tells us a great deal about how he's doing. Dialogue, while present in both scenes, is really unnecessary for our understanding of the actions, the characters, and the outcome.

Even when dialogue is used, it doesn't always say exactly what it appears to say. If we see a character sneak up on another with a butcher knife hidden behind his back while he speaks of his undying love for the other person, which do we believe, the dialogue or the action? In fact it is the juxtaposition of dialogue and action, very often mismatched, that gives us our clearest picture of the inner world of a character. When a character lies to another character and we know the truth, we learn a second thing about the inner world of the lying character: the truth we already knew, plus how and to whom they lied. Often we are able to fathom why the character lied, which is like a snapshot of that character's motivations, a direct inroad to the internal life of the character.

This use of what appears to be going on between characters and what is really going on is called subtext. The clearest example of subtext occurs when a character lies about something while we know the truth, but subtext is much more complicated than just that. When Ilsa pulls a gun on Rick in *Casablanca*, trying to force him to give her the letters of transit, this act on the surface is one of hostility and aggression. Yet because we know her, because we know the circumstances and we see the way she makes her attempt, we are able to pick up what is going on under the surface: her love for Rick, her admiration/love for Victor, her desire to apologize for what happened in Paris.

By the careful revelation of tidbits of information to the audience, by showing us what various characters know that others do not, by urging us to see an action in a complex light and by making careful choices in how information is revealed on screen—both to the characters and to the audience—the skillful screenwriter can build a scene which is rich in subtext. This not only enriches the scene and reveals a great deal about the characters and how they play with their own knowledge, but it greatly increases the audience's enjoyment and participation in the story. The audience works to understand everything that is happening, and when it grasps the nature of the subtext, it feels like a real participant in the story and understands the inner lives of the characters much more completely.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE DRAMA

Put a baby just old enough to crawl alone at the top of a cliff and the circumstance is dramatic in itself, without our knowing anything about the baby and its habits, its wants, or its life. The moment is dramatic on its very surface. The use of violent weapons and martial arts, physical assaults, huge piles of cash, an alluring woman sashaying past a gaggle of young men loitering at a corner, the pomp and circumstance of a coronation—all of these are objectively dramatic. That is, their dramatic impact does not depend particularly on our knowing and caring about the characters involved.

But there are a great many moments in nearly all well-crafted films that are dramatic solely because we know something about the characters and care about what happens to them. If we know a man has hysterical claustrophobia, simply having him locked in a closet can create a riveting scene. If we add that he must lock himself into that closet as part of achieving something that he wants even more than avoiding his claustrophobia, the drama of the moment escalates exponentially. This situation is subjectively dramatic, because the drama depends on our knowledge of and participation in the story. The distinction between objective and subjective drama is another of Frank Daniel's contributions to dramatic theory.

Although some films attempt to rely only on objective drama or only on subjective drama, the majority of effective films have a mixture. Reliance on objective drama usually leaves the audience bored and uninterested within a short time. The guns have to get bigger and bigger, the explosions louder, the cliffs taller, and still, if the audience doesn't care about the individual characters in some measure, all the pyrotechnics can amount to wasted effort. On the other end of the spectrum, a film that relies on subjective drama can also lull the audience with a dearth of identifiable and anticipatable danger, a sense of uneventful safety. Often this can lead to a feeling that "too little happens."

For most stories, then, a combination of objective and subjective drama is most effective. One or the other usually dominates, but both are present, often at the same time. Sometimes the most memorable and visceral moments in a film are those that combine both forms. For instance, in *Wait Until Dark*, we know Suzy Hendrix is a self-reliant blind woman who accidentally has drug-dealing killers after her. The combination of our knowing of her disability and our caring about her well-being, and then of our being able to see the attempts made on her before she knows about them, keeps us firmly on the edge of our seats, fully participating in the story. *Amadeus*, which quite effectively uses primarily subjective drama, begins with a suicide scene that is objectively dramatic. And in its very moving end, where Salieri is literally working Mozart to death, the combination of factors—our knowledge of the characters, the allure of the gold to Mozart, and the desperate attempt of his wife to rescue him—makes this richly rewarding scene both subjectively and objectively dramatic.

TIME AND THE STORYTELLER

Try to make the time frame the minimum the story will permit.

—RING LARDNER, JR.

Don't have too much story for the time you have.

—TOM RICKMAN

There are three kinds of time in a film story: real time, screen time, and time frame. Real time is the time an action actually takes—the four minutes it takes a world-class runner to run a mile. Screen time is the time the depiction of an action takes up on screen—perhaps the first thirty seconds, another ten seconds in the middle of the race, and the last fifteen seconds of it, edited together with shots of a significant cheering fan in between, for a total of about a minute. The time frame is a deadline or an end to an action that the audience can anticipate; in the race it is the

finish line, the moment we all know the race is leading up to, when the action will be over.

Most scenes take place in real time; that is, the actions we see on screen take the same amount of time as those same actions would take us in our own home. Because we are witnessing the actions of people in (subjectively) realistic circumstances and participating in their actions, major variations from real time usually seem jarring. But a little bit of time can be cut out without marring the scene. This is called *ellipsis*, skipping over small or large amounts of time without shocking the audience out of its seamless dream. For instance it is possible to ellipse the time it actually takes to put on a pair of shoes and socks. In fact, if we don't make it shorter than it would really take, the audience usually gets impatient. At the same time, if the character is in danger of being caught or found out or some other dramatic turn, we might actually prolong the time beyond what it would realistically take to pull on the socks and slip on the shoes. This is called *elaboration*.

Examples of both ellipsis and elaboration can be seen in the final scene of *Chinatown*. When Evelyn is about to make her escape with her daughter, she hops in the car, the engine roars to life, and she speeds off. A small amount of real time has been ellipsed—her fumbling with car keys and starting the engine. After the police shoot and the car comes to a stop with the horn blaring, all the rest of the characters run toward it. When we cut to a shot next to the car, they are still running, but seem a long way off yet. Meanwhile, we're anxious to know what happened and to end the dreadful horn blaring. Real time has been elaborated upon for dramatic impact. Slow motion is sometimes used for the same reason, to prolong our experience of an important moment.

Screen time and real time are thus not necessarily the same thing. A lot of beginning screenwriters "get stuck in real time." That is, they have a character get up, cross a room, unlock the door, lock it behind him, go to his car, unlock it, climb in, put the key in the ignition. . . . Tedium has long since set in, unless all of these actions have new meanings or conflicts of their own. The four-minute mile described above as being depicted on screen in about a minute is an example of the difference, even within one scene. If the mile race is the highest or lowest moment in the whole story, if it is the moment the entire film has been building toward, then we may well choose to make it last four minutes or very nearly. If it is a race someone must win or lose as part of the continuing development of the story, four minutes is a long time to expect an audience to maintain its tension without new actions and information coming into the scene. This

is why it becomes necessary to snip out part of the real time while simultaneously making the audience believe it has seen the whole action.

Often an ellipsis of this kind is accomplished by using a parallel action, something happening elsewhere at the same time. For instance, the father of the miler is in the stands, but he has a heart condition. With the strain and excitement of the race, he collapses and the mother must ignore the race for a moment only to discover that he simply slipped off his seat. By the time they right themselves, the race is in the final stretch and all our attention is riveted back to the finish line. The audience won't notice the ellipsis; it has been distracted enough to accept that the four minutes were depicted in one and a half or two minutes. Another way of ellipsing time within a scene is to give the audience something else to look at, to draw its attention away from the action that is being shortened. If we want to boil a three-minute egg in a one-minute scene, it is necessary to draw the audience's attention away from the egg timer and the boiling water. The character boiling the egg either has a significant interaction with another character or does something—such as cutting a finger while chopping onions—that helps us bridge the real time and make the shortened screen time *seem* like real time.

Most major ellipses are done between scenes. A character can walk out of one scene heading for New York from Chicago and walk into the next scene in New York. Optical devices such as fade outs, fade ins, and dissolves are also used to ellipse time, as are montages, but it isn't always necessary or wise to rely on these devices. What is necessary, when one wants to cut directly from one scene to another with any significant jump in time, is to create a transition from one scene to the next. Exiting one scene in Chicago and entering the next in New York is possible, because we have seen the journey begin and end. It is also a good idea to give the audience a breather either at the end of one or at the beginning of the next scene. These ten seconds could be used to help ellipse a day, a week, or a year. In other words, when the character leaves the scene in Chicago, the scene stays with the remaining characters for a few seconds—one last line or reaction or sometimes a gag. Then we can cut to the character in the new place. Or it can be done the other way, giving a few seconds of scene in the new location before the traveling character arrives.

The important part is that the audience is helped to bridge this gap in time with something the writer inserts for that purpose: a verbal or audio transition, a transition based on visual similarities or transformations, making use of costumes, props, or music to carry an action over the ellipsis. For instance, a character says he's going to find so-and-so and punch his

lights out, then exits. We can cut right to a punch in the face and show the character satisfied with the completion of his action. Or a character could say he will never wear a tuxedo as long as he lives, and we cut to him being fitted for a tuxedo. Another way of helping the audience bridge the lost time is to start a process in motion, then show it being completed (as discussed above with the race and the parents). This can be done between scenes with great effectiveness. For instance, a character begins painting an apartment. We could dissolve to him completing the task or we could fade out and fade back in as he completes it. But perhaps it would be more cinematic if we cut to the neighbor lady sniffing away at the horrible smell, then cut back to the man completing his painting job.

Time frame is a device the storyteller uses to help the audience store up its emotional energy for the important moments by letting them know there is a deadline or some moment when a crucial action must be completed (see "Elements of the Future and Advertising," page 74). Sometimes the time frame is very obvious, as in the bomb with a timer on it as the hero tries to defuse it. Sometimes it is the title of the story: *48 Hours*, *Seven Days in May*, *High Noon*, *Three Days of the Condor*. We know that this story will have to be told within that time frame. Sometimes the time frame is set up during the course of the story: a deadline, a moment of truth, a battle, a race, or a contest. In *Star Wars* the rebels have to destroy the death star before it destroys their whole planet in *x* number of minutes. All of *Rocky* builds toward the moment of truth, the big fight. In *The African Queen*, the whole quest is to get down into the lake to sink the battleship *Louisa*; we know that when we have reached that spot, there will be a moment of truth very soon.

Some films have a time frame set from their title on; others are only established within the story, often at the end of the first act; and still others never have an overall time frame, no deadline. But often there will be use of a time frame within smaller portions of a story. For instance, one sequence in *The Sting* involves sneaking into the telegraph office to hold a fake meeting with the target of the sting. It is established that the boss is out to lunch for one hour, and that hour becomes the time frame of that sequence of the story. Use of a time frame—or, as some people call it, a ticking clock—can help intensify a scene or sequence by shortening it, making it more dramatic and focused.

THE POWER OF UNCERTAINTY

You don't want to explain to the audience, because that makes them observers. You want to reveal to them little by little and that makes them participants because then they experience the story in the same way the characters experience it.

—BILL WITTLIFF

For a filmmaker to achieve his or her goals with a narrative film, one essential ingredient is to keep the audience in their seats, paying attention to the story and caring about the outcome and characters. In other words, participation. Without the audience participating in the proceedings, they become mere witnesses, disinterested and unaffected. This can be the death of drama, because a story is not inherently dramatic; it is only dramatic insofar as it has an impact on the audience, as it moves them in some way. Drama (including both comedy and tragedy) requires an emotional response from its audience in order to exist.

Ironically, not all "emotional" stories affect the audience's emotions, and conversely, not all seemingly straightforward, action-packed stories are unemotional as far as the audience is concerned. *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Godfather*, and *North by Northwest* are all filled with action, yet each of them generates a strong visceral reaction in the audience. A film of a character crying hysterically won't have an emotional impact unless we know something about the character, the context, and the event or events that prompted the crying.

So what is the trick behind keeping the audience participating in the story and creating in itself the emotional response that drama depends upon? In a word, uncertainty. Uncertainty about the near future, uncertainty about the eventual turn of events. Another way of stating this idea is hope versus fear. If the filmmaker can get the audience to hope for one turn of events and fear another, where the audience truly does not know

which way the story will go, this state of uncertainty becomes a very powerful tool indeed. We often find ourselves riveted to a story that has a strong component of hope versus fear.

In *Casablanca*, will Rick stay uninvolved in the complex and dangerous world around him, even though his true love, Ilsa, is involved and implicated? In *The 400 Blows*, will Antoine be able to find a place where he fits in the world? In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, will Fred C. Dobbs succumb to greed, or will he stay true to his word? In *Rear Window*, will L. B. Jefferies prove what happened across the courtyard before the killer finds him? In *Annie Hall*, will Alvy be able to sustain a relationship with Annie?

Sometimes the identical situation can have the opposite hope versus fear under different circumstances. A young couple trying to have a baby would hope that this month the woman is pregnant and simultaneously fear that she was not. An underaged or insufficiently involved couple may fear that the woman is pregnant and hope that she is not. At the same time, the audience's uncertainty is not necessarily the same as the uncertainty of the characters. If the audience feels that the couple trying to have a baby are a bad match, that their break-up is imminent and the baby will suffer as a result, the audience might be hoping that she isn't pregnant and fearing that she is while the characters consciously feel the opposite way.

How is this sense of uncertainty, this hope versus fear, created in the audience? First and foremost, the audience must sympathize, to at least some small degree, with one or more pivotal characters (see "Protagonist and Objective," page 43, for a discussion of sympathy as it relates to the central character). The next most important element in creating hope versus fear is letting the audience know what *potentially might* happen, but not what *will* happen.

In *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin is a night watchman in a department store. He straps on a pair of roller skates and shows off his prowess to Paulette Goddard by wearing a blindfold while he skates. The area he is skating in is adjacent to a remodeling project where a huge hole is cut in the floor. He skates close to the hole, then away, closer still, then away, right toward it, then stops. All the while we are both laughing and tense, with a strong hope versus fear being felt. If we didn't know there was a hole in the floor, if we couldn't foresee what *might* happen, there would be no tension, no hope versus fear, hence no drama. But because we know he might careen over the side, and yet we don't know for sure if he will, we are in a state of uncertainty, and therefore we are participating.

The basis of this participation, then, is anticipation. Anticipation of what

may or may not happen is an informed situation, not one of ignorance. In other words, if we don't know the dangers or benefits that might come about in the near future of the story, we can't anticipate what may or may not happen. A common mistake of the beginning screenwriter is to think that the only way to keep the audience from guessing the ending is to keep it in the dark about what is going on by withholding information. But imagine if we didn't know about the hole in the floor Charlie Chaplin was skating near. Imagine if we didn't know who the real killer was in *Frenzy*. Imagine if we didn't know that mobsters were after the two men dressed up like women in *Some Like It Hot*. Where would the tension and drama come from?

The key to keeping the audience from guessing ahead is not to keep it in the dark about what might happen, but to make it believe that maybe its hope will come about, but that its fear is just as likely to happen. In other words, having two equally plausible outcomes to any given situation keeps the audience both participating and yet still unable to foresee the exact outcome of the scene or story.

This, then, is the furthest extension of audience participation in a story: The audience sympathizes to some degree with a character, it knows what may or may not happen and has taken a vested interest in one outcome or the other (by hoping and fearing), and it truly believes that either outcome is possible. Whether you are analyzing *Amadeus* or *Apocalypse Now*, *Rear Window* or *Gone with the Wind*, *The Third Man* or *Persona*, the key to making the individual scenes and the overall story work is that the filmmakers have successfully created this combination of feelings, knowledge, and belief in the audience. This combination must exist on the page for there to be any hope that it will be created in the audience for the eventual film. If creating this relationship with the audience is not taken into consideration in the writing stage, there is virtually no hope of overcoming that shortcoming in the production.