

At this point, it makes sense to look back over the seven questions listed earlier in this chapter, as well as the answers we gave to them. By now, you should be ready to try answering these questions for your own project.

Write as clearly and simply as you can, unless you are planning to do a detailed story outline in place of a first draft script, as discussed earlier. In that case, you can overwrite and revise, as we did with the outline for *The Flight of Icarus*. Either way, the question-and-answer process may take you as much time to complete as the actual writing of your story outline—but it will be time well spent. When you've completed the answers, some sort of feedback would be helpful before continuing on—from a class session or your teacher or informed friends. It is especially important that the dramatic action of your main character is clear and makes sense to your audience as well as to you.

EIGHTH ASSIGNMENT: WRITING THE STORY OUTLINE

Now take up pencil and paper, or lay hands on a typewriter or word processor, and write down the steps of your outline, the spine of your story. Revise at least twice before handing it in or showing it to anyone, giving yourself enough time between each revision to develop some sort of detachment about the writing.

As for criticism, listen and take note, but use only what works for you.

NOTES

1. Rust Hills, *writing in general and the short story in particular* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 4.
2. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. Francis Fergusson, trans. and introduction by S.H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 62.
3. Ibid., 72.
4. Ibid., 87
5. In John Brady, *The Craft of the Screenwriter* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 115, 116.
6. David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Viking, 1993), 14.

WRITING AN ORIGINAL SHORT SCREENPLAY

Narrative is the art closest to the ordinary daily operation of the human mind. People find the meaning of their lives in the idea of sequence, in conflict, in metaphor and in moral. People think and make judgments from the confidence of narrative; anyone, at any age, is able to tell the story of his or her life with authority.

—E.L. DOCTOROW

At this point, if you have faithfully done the exercises and assignments laid out in previous chapters, you will have learned, among other things, how to write and revise both character description and location description in format, how to use off-screen sound to create mood and to evoke off-screen events, how to gather material for an adaptation, and how to do a story outline for a short screenplay to be written from that material.

What follows is a brief discussion of ways in which character in a screenplay can be revealed in speech and ways in which speech is used to further dramatic action. In good dramatic writing, monologue or dialogue is as much a form of behavior, however disguised, as any physical action.

DIALOGUE AS DRAMATIC ACTION: TEXT, SUBTEXT, AND CONTEXT

In art, as in life, gesture and speech have to be seen or heard in context in order to be fully understood. Someone may say, "Come in, and close the door after you" in a manner that implies a request for privacy, suggests wonderful things to follow, or threatens your physical well-being. In order to grasp the subtext of a particular line or gesture in any script (the *text*)—that is, in order to grasp its underlying or implicit meaning—we need to place it

in proper *context*, to examine that line or gesture in relation to the events or circumstances that surround it.

Again, in art as in life, people often don't mean what they say or say what they mean. For a variety of reasons, some of which appear to make sense and some of which do not, we frequently choose to express ourselves obliquely rather than directly, using tone of voice and physical emphasis to convey our real meaning. For instance, in the example just given, you might respond to the line of dialogue by coming in and closing the door after you, not simply, but with a bang, or very slowly, or with exaggerated care, each choice denoting a different subtext.

Among the pleasures afforded us in viewing a first-rate narrative film or video are a kind of automatic deciphering of possible subtext along with an appreciation (the more conscious, the more pleasurable) of the tension that exists between text and subtext.

EXERCISE 7: DIALOGUE AS ACTION

Write down the following dialogue, in format or not, as you choose. As soon as you have the lines on paper, begin writing further lines, or even physical actions of the characteristics, as fast as you can without worrying about exposition or concerning yourself as to whether or not any of it makes sense. Write for ten minutes, and stop.

A:

What are we going to do about this?

B:

I dunno.

A:

Well, we've got to do something.

A pause.

B:

Why?

Immediately afterwards, ask your characters the questions from Exercise 2 (see page 21) and write down the answers.

The answers will establish the context for your scene. When you have answered them, put everything away for the usual twenty-four-hour period.

The novelist and scriptwriter Raymond Chandler wrote in an article on writers in Hollywood that "the challenge of screenwriting is to say much in little and then take half of that little out and still preserve an effect of leisure

and natural movement. Such a technique requires experiment and elimination."¹

If this is true for screenwriting in general, it is particularly so for the short screenplay and for dialogue in the short screenplay.

To illustrate the process of "saying much in little," here is the opening scene of a short script by one of the coauthors of this book, first in first-draft and then rewrite form. The script is called *Annie's Flight*,² and its protagonist is a seven-year-old girl whose parents are about to get a divorce.

Through much of the title sequence before the scene, we have heard muffled sounds of a man and woman quarreling.

FADE IN:

INT. DININGROOM DAY

A pleasant room in an old house: bright reproductions of paintings, hanging plants, a large round table with a lace tablecloth. KIRSTIN and DAVID, a couple in their late thirties, sit facing one another at the table.

KIRSTIN

So . . . when do we tell her?

DAVID

You decide.

KIRSTIN

I don't know . . . I don't know . . .

DAVID

But soon, it should be soon.

KIRSTIN

Well, you say, then.

A slight pause.

DAVID

I've got meetings all week . . .

Silence.

Listen, Kirstin—I honestly think it would be better if you told her.

KIRSTIN

We agreed to tell her together.

CAMERA MOVES DOWN PAST THE TABLE to a place where the cloth is rucked up eighteen inches or so. In this space, we see a little girl peering out. This is

ANNIE. As we watch, she disappears into the darkness underneath the table.

Again, KIRSTIN AND DAVID.

DAVID

Then it has to wait.

A pause.

KIRSTIN

You don't really give a damn about her, do you.

DAVID

That's not true! (pause) You know that's not true. (pause) We'll tell her on the weekend.

KIRSTIN

Fine.

DAVID pushes his chair back and gets up from the table.

KIRSTIN (con't)

It's not her fault, after all.

HOLD ON KIRSTIN, watching him go. After a moment, she gets up herself, and goes out.

CUT TO ANNIE, UNDER THE TABLE.

When the time came to revise, the writer was aware of two significant factors before starting: (1) this was too lengthy an opening for a film of seven or eight minutes in length and (2) the tension between the parents could be increased if certain lines were used as subtext rather than text (implied rather than spoken).

Here, then, is the revision, and her rationale for the changes:

THE IDENTICAL SCENE REVISED

(Description of room and characters remains the same.)

KIRSTIN

So, when do we tell her?

DAVID

You decide.

KIRSTIN

I don't know... I don't know...

DAVID

But soon, it ought to be soon.

KIRSTIN

Well, you say.

DAVID

The thing is, I've got meetings all week.
pause

KIRSTIN

Cancel them.

DAVID

O, come on, Kirstin...

KIRSTIN

We agreed to tell her together.
pause

DAVID

Friday morning, then.

KIRSTIN

Friday morning's fine, David.

He gets up and abruptly goes out of the room as KIRSTIN sits gazing after him. After a moment, she gives a sigh and crosses past the CAMERA to go off as well. The CAMERA MOVES DOWN THE TABLECLOTH to a place where it is rucked up about eighteen inches or so. In that space, we see a little girl of seven peering out from under the table. This is ANNIE. She looks after her mother a moment, then pulls back into the darkness.

THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE CHANGES

The father's inner action is to get the mother to tell the child about the divorce without his being present, while the mother's is to ensure their telling her together. His line "I honestly think it would be better if you told her" is too supplicatory and is in any case implied by "I've got meetings all week." And her response "Cancel them" is far stronger than accusing him

of not giving a damn about his daughter—the implication is that if he cared about her at all, he would do what was necessary to take part in telling her. Other lines have been dropped for similar reasons—to make the conflict between them stronger and more indicative of what is wrong with the marriage.

The writer's goal throughout the revision was to emphasize the struggle between the couple by compressing their language, increasing the tension by bringing their anger "under," as the expression goes. She also wanted to imply that this kind of conflict is not at all unusual for them—just its subject on this occasion. (And all of this would set up the conditions for Annie's flight.)

You should note that a pause before a response usually denotes some kind of struggle or debate on the part of the responding character. A pause *within* a speech indicates some kind of struggle or debate on the part of the character who is speaking.

In rethinking the structure of the scene, it seemed better to avoid breaking up their exchange because removing the interruption increased the tension between them while holding off on the discovery of Annie under the table until the very last moment made it more effective.

NINTH ASSIGNMENT: REVISING YOUR DIALOGUE

Read your answers to the seven questions from exercise 2 about your dialogue sequence and then the scene itself. Try to figure out what is going on between the characters, and what each of their inner (or dramatic) actions is, or seems to be. If this is unclear, come to a determination of what actions would make the scene work as you would like it to. (The initial four lines given were intended to suggest conflict.) If you want to extend the scene, do so now.

Think about any other changes you want to make, and rewrite the scene in screenplay format.

STEPPING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

Assignments and exercises in the first part of this book have been set up to encourage the kind of messages from the unconscious that produce specific and authentic story material rather than the lifeless copies of copies that make for hack work. To write an original short screenplay, you will be utilizing all the skills you've learned so far, so it makes good sense at this point to take a quiet half hour to look over your completed assignments in the order in which they were written. Note the kind of material that you choose to write about and the mood or tone in which you most often write: do you tend to go for the drama in things? the melodrama? the humor? Do you like to deal with your characters subtly? or with bold strokes? and so on.

This is information about the way you see the world and about your writing style that should be of great help as you move on to doing a short screenplay.

EXERCISE 8: WRITING A LETTER

First, letting your mind run free, try to call up two or three painful incidents from your past, incidents in which you were essentially the protagonist. Take a few moments to reflect on each of these, dismissing any memories that still seem "in process"—occasions that you can't recall without actual discomfort. Then choose a recollection to write about, even if you have to do so arbitrarily.

Second, imagine that you are about to write a letter describing and perhaps explaining the incident in detail. (Or in as much detail as you can recall. The act of writing about the past in an uncensored way usually stimulates memory to a surprising degree.) Choose a person to confide in—friend, relation, or imaginary confidant—who would hear you out with sympathy, and without judgment of any kind, the kind of ally who might even defend you to yourself.

Third, set your timer for fifteen minutes. If you finish writing sooner, go back over your letter to see if you have left anything out; if you are not yet finished with describing the incident when the timer goes off, continue on until you are done. Then fold the letter and put it away in a safe place for at least several days. *As this is raw material of a very special kind, it should not be shown to anyone else.*

TENTH ASSIGNMENT: GETTING STARTED (AGAIN)

In this assignment you will be following procedures outlined earlier, basically, for adapting material gathered on a folktale or myth into the dramatic structure of a script outline: making several photocopies of your letter, then marking off in different colors on one of these (a) the events, images, and remarks on characters or settings that seem essential, including descriptions of the main character's thoughts or feelings where important, (b) any other material that you are likely to use; and, finally, (c) whatever seems problematic but intriguing. Look this over and revise, if necessary, on your second copy.

Now ask yourself the questions that we asked of the Icarus/Daedalus myth to get two very different sets of answers—one in which Icarus was the protagonist, set in "mythical time" and one in which Daedalus was the protagonist, set in the time of the Civil War : Who is the protagonist? (Choose fictional names throughout.) Who or what is the antagonist? What is the protagonist's situation at the beginning of the script? (This should be written in as objective a manner as possible.) What event or occasion could serve as

catalyst? What is the protagonist's dramatic action? Do you have any images or ideas as to the climax? the ending?

Remember that this is an autobiographical fragment on its way to becoming fiction; change what you want, as long as the changes don't undermine the credibility of your story. (Sometimes changing the gender of a main character makes the scriptwriting easier.)

At this point, it would be a good idea to employ some or all of the exercises presented in earlier chapters. What you will be writing is *fiction* based on autobiography; the people in your letter are to be thought of as *characters*, the rooms and landscapes as *settings* and *locations*.

If, after doing the next several exercises, you find this to be in any way anxiety producing, you should accept the fact that the material has not yet been fully processed by your unconscious and is still too "alive," so to speak, to be used as the basis for a screenplay. In our experience, trying to exert willpower or determining to "tough it out" in these cases simply doesn't work and, in fact, is more likely than not to lead to one or another form of writer's block. You are better off putting away the material, choosing one of your other incidents, and beginning again.

All that matters is that you end up working on (or playing about with) material in which you can take pleasure.

EXERCISES 9 AND 10: USING VISUAL IMAGES (AGAIN)

Exercise 9 takes ten minutes. Imagine an indoor hobby or activity of choice that your main character might pursue any chance he or she has. Close your eyes and visualize the setting.

Then write down the following, substituting the name of your character for X: "Night. Gusts of wind outside. X sits (or stands) at a table (or bench or whatever) working on things, completely absorbed in what he or she is doing. A long moment, and Y opens the door without knocking to come into the room."

You have ten minutes in which to describe for the camera what X is doing, how X is doing it, and what happens when Y comes into the room. If the characters go to dialogue, fine—just be sure that the emphasis remains on the visual.

If, at the end of ten minutes, you are still writing, and particularly if the description should turn into a full scene, continue on until you finish or run out of steam.

Now, for exercise 10, quickly write down the answers to these by now familiar questions: Who are you? Where are you? What are you wearing? Why are you here? What do you want at this moment? What time is it? What season? What year? Besides being windy, what is the weather like?

Take a break, short or long, and go on to the next two exercises.

EXERCISES 11 AND 12: FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

For exercise 11 think of a suitable location in which to place your main character, whom I'll call X but you call by name, and write a brief paragraph describing it. When you have done this, let X walk, run, or leap into frame and see what happens. At any point after that, let another character—possibly, but not necessarily Y—come on-screen and see what happens then. Stop at ten minutes unless you find yourself writing a scene that you might be able to use in your screenplay.

For exercise 12 consult your list of favored off-screen sounds and try to find one or more that might add mood or even significant content to either the interior or exterior scene.

ELEVENTH ASSIGNMENT: WRITING A STORY OUTLINE FOR YOUR SCRIPT

First, reread the suggestions for writing story outlines in the previous chapter. Then, using both the results of the last few exercises and your marked-up copy of the original letter, make a bare-bones outline for the screenplay of no more than a page. Put this away for a day or two, while you reflect on the tone you want to adopt toward the material.

When you are ready, look over the outline to see if you've given a step to introducing the character in his or her situation (perhaps by way of one of the exercises), included a catalyst, and offered some sort of ending, even if it is not yet one you consider the right one.

And most important—change the order of the scenes if necessary.

Second, write a more detailed story outline, in which most of the "steps" or numbered descriptions of the action, indicate a full dramatic scene. Remember to use the present tense of screenwriting, and try to give us access to your characters' thoughts and feelings through their actions and reactions.

At this point, a reading and discussion of the outline, either in class or by knowledgeable friends, should prove invaluable to you before you move on to writing your script. Take notes of any ideas or criticism that might be useful, as it is easy to forget such suggestions. We suggest that you don't rewrite the outline unless it seems absolutely necessary, but go on to a first draft of your screenplay.

TWELFTH ASSIGNMENT: WRITING A FIRST DRAFT

Consult our examples or the short screenplays in the appendix for the appropriate format. Then, keeping your portfolio of exercises and assignments nearby and your outline at your elbow, begin writing. Remember that the first draft of any screenplay is an exploration: the main thing is to get the

story on paper so that you have something to revise. If you find it difficult to work at home, go to a café; if you find the word processor wearying, go to pen or pencil; if you find any or all of the process daunting, break the actual writing into ten-minute segments.

BEFORE GOING ON TO PART II

After the usual discussion of the script in class or with informed friends, and before moving on to the next part of this book, you might want to take stock. Do you want to continue with this screenplay? Would you rather work from a myth or fairy tale? Or would you prefer to find an altogether different kind of project? In the following chapters of part II, we will suggest, among other things, routes to other kinds of source material, as well as how to revise what you've written.

NOTES

1. Raymond Chandler, foreword to *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. Dorothy Gardner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
2. Pat Cooper, "Annie's Flight," unpublished ms., 1993.

PART II

MOVING FORWARD: WRITING STRATEGIES

STORYTELLING STRATEGIES

Although screen stories have unique qualities particular to film, more often than not screen stories for short and long films share characteristics with other kinds of storytelling. In this chapter we will discuss those general qualities and suggest links to other forms of storytelling that provide the first and best source of material for short films.

STORY QUALITIES

All stories must engage the curiosity of an audience whether that audience be one or a thousand. The storyteller must build on that curiosity to engage the viewer in the life of a character. That engagement must grow to identification and so on. The storyteller must engage our curiosity, invite our involvement in a character's situation, and finally allow the viewer to identify with the character and the situation.

To hold on to the audience and to move the audience through the story, a variety of devices are used. Some are operating principles, others are artificial techniques, but in each case the goal is the same—to move the audience from curiosity to a more emotional state. If the story works, the results can range from amusement to tragedy. But in each case, it is the storytelling qualities that transcend medium and engage audiences.

These story qualities can be broken down into two groups: *character qualities* and *plot qualities*. The primary character quality of a story is that we have to identify with the main character. We have to become concerned with his or her dilemma, and we have to care about the outcome.

In order to identify with the characters we have to know who they are and how they've arrived at the point where we join the story. A main character may be active or passive, young or old, male or female. These qualities should be specific and purposeful to the story. It is no use to tell the story about a passive Olympic athlete, because the drive to become an Olympic

athlete requires by definition a forceful rather than a passive character. Specificity about culture, family, and career is also helpful in creating a person we recognize.

What are the person's goals? What are their hopes, their dreams, their fears? Any or all of these details can also help create a recognizable character. That recognition is the first step toward identification—if we recognize the character and his or her situation, we will begin to connect with the character.

As much as our identification with the main character relies on recognizing and caring about the character, that identification can be equally influenced by the role of the antagonist. The antagonist can be a mountain, a desert, a raging storm, as well as an angry father, an overprotective mother, an unjust boss. Often the most interesting antagonist of all can be one's self, so that our own flaws (fear, greed, anger, passivity) play the role of the enemy.

In a story, the more forceful the antagonist, the greater the struggle of the protagonist. If the goal of the story is to portray heroic behavior, the role of the antagonist can be crucial. If the goal is to portray more realism and greater complexity in the protagonist's actions, here too the character of the antagonist is critical.

Notable is that the character of the protagonist and antagonist are very often opposites. This may be in appearance as well as behavior. This polarity is the most overt use of opposites in storytelling. Polarized characteristics are used with characters other than protagonists or antagonists to good effect. The greater the number of polarities in the story, the greater the conflict and the resulting interest to the reader or listener or viewer. Polarity is an extremely useful storytelling device.

Plot qualities are closely related to character, but because they involve events outside of character, they can be considered separately. A good example of this notion is the role of conflict in storytelling: The more powerful the barriers that stand in the way of the character achieving his or her goal, the more compelling the plot. If the character faces no barriers in achieving his or her goal, there is no story. This is the nature and the role of conflict in storytelling—to provide barriers to the characters and their goals.

What if the character does not have a goal? This will pose a problem for developing a conflict. What if the character's goal is unrealistic? The storyteller may focus on the conflict inherent in discovering that the goal is unattainable. In both examples, the linkage of conflict to character is intentional. Plot cannot stand alone outside of character without the story being penalized. Character, plot, and conflict are intricately related to one another.

One dimension of conflict is how much a character wants to achieve his or her goal. Do they want, do they desire, do they need to achieve this goal? The greater the desire of the character, the greater the potential for conflict.

The parallel with regard to the plot is also true. The more forceful the resistance, whether through the antagonist or other forces, the greater the conflict potential. It is useful to restate that barriers to the character's goal

may be external (a place, another person) or they may be internal. What is most important to the story is that the viewers or readers understand that the barriers are the source of conflict for the character. In the most simple fable, such as "The Tortoise and the Hare," or a more complex short story, such as Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," the sources of conflict are clear to the readers, and through the story they become clear to the protagonist.

Whether the character succeeds, as in "The Tortoise and the Hare," or fails, as in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," it is the struggle to overcome the barriers that is the fabric of the story. In each case the motivation of the protagonist seems primal and that desire fuels our identification and understanding. Good stories tend to have a powerful conflict associated with a character we understand and whose desire fuels the story.

PLOT STRUCTURE

The first notable characteristic of a good story is that it presents an interesting interpretation of a situation that, on one level, we have seen before. A specific example will illustrate this: We are all familiar with the experience of the first day of school. The situation conjures up all kinds of associations for each person. Building on our familiarity with this situation, we can make it more interesting and arouse our curiosity by introducing a new factor—the age of the new student. What if the new student in the local high school is forty years old and he is joining a class full of fourteen-year-olds?

The key here is that there is comfort for the viewer or reader in known situations—birthdays, weddings, funerals, and first days in school. The good storyteller uses our knowledge of the situation and whets our appetite for the story by introducing a new element.

Another factor in the plot is that point at which the storyteller chooses to join the story. It is crucial that we join the story at a point where the dramatic possibilities of the story can be maximized. The goal of the storyteller is to energize the tale, and the point of entry is critical in accomplishing this goal.

A few examples are instructive. We join Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"¹ at the point when a civilian has been caught trespassing on a bridge held by Union soldiers during the Civil War. Will the unfortunate Southerner live or die for his transgression? This question forms the substance of the story that unfolds.

At the beginning of Raymond Carver's short story "Cathedral,"² a blind man, who has recently lost his wife, plans to visit an old friend and her husband. The issue is whether the friend's rocky marriage can bear a visitation from a sightless rival. The main character is the husband in the problematic relationship. The announcement of the visit is the point at which we join the story.

Good storytellers will find a point to join a story that will serve to generate tension and attract attention. If we do not join the story at such a point,

not only is dramatic opportunity lost, but the chance to harness our curiosity will be lost. We will, in effect, be waiting for the story to begin.

To summarize, an interesting situation, a strong entry point, and enough conflict are necessary to start the story.

PLOT STRATEGIES

In order to carry us through the story, the storyteller will rely on two plot strategies—reversal or surprise, and a rising level of action in the course of the plot. Surprise is critical because if we are maintained on a steady diet of what we expect, we become bored and leave the story. Part of the storyteller's task is not to let us get bored but to maintain, use, and stimulate our curiosity about the story.

Surprise may be found in an unexpected plot twist or an unexpected behavior on the part of the character. In either case, the reversal or surprise upsets our expectations and maintains and builds upon our curiosity. Think about your favorite film or fairy tale. How often in the course of the film or the fairy tale are you surprised by the course of events? Just as we both suffer through and enjoy a roller coaster ride, we need the same pattern of plot movement in a story.

A notable difference between a roller coaster ride and a story, however, is that, although there are pauses in a story, there tends to be a pattern of rising action rather than the peaks and valleys of the amusement park ride. That rising action means that the surprises in the plot become more intense as we move through the story. Only through this progression of greater surprises can the story move toward a climax.

Just as every joke has a punch line, every story has a climax. The climax is the payoff, the point at which the character's efforts against all odds are successful. The climax is the high point of the story, and for many storytellers, the very reason for their writing, telling, or filming a story.

Without a rising level of action, this culmination would not be a climax but merely another event in the story. Consequently, the action in the climactic scene tends to have an all-or-nothing quality. It is the scene in which the stakes are highest for the main character.

Every good story also has a sense of resolution. Too often the climax is mistaken for the resolution. The resolution is the aftermath of the climax. The resolution brings us back to an even state after having experienced a growing feeling of intensity. The resolution in terms of the plot is the very end of the plot.

REALISM VERSUS FANTASY

There is a general decision to be made by every storyteller, a decision that will affect how powerfully the audience engages with the story. That decision is the choice of realism or fantasy as the storytelling mode. Good stories

can be realistic or the opposite, fantastic, but the choice will affect how the storyteller deploys character and plot, among other things. If a story is realistic, the detailing of the plot and of character has to be convincing and recognizable. If, on the other hand, the choice is for fantasy, the characterizations will be more representational or metaphorical. Realistic characterization is complex, believable, recognizable. In a fantasy, characters may represent a class, gender, or race. In other words a character may be used as a metaphor, for a purpose that serves the story, in this case in a fantasy. Consequently, the level of detail will tend to be thinner. Plot on the other hand will become that much more important. Plot becomes important because the character in a fantasy is not as easy to identify with as a realistic character. Consequently, the plot needs to involve the viewer more actively than the character is able to.

The choice between realism or fantasy will help the storyteller determine how to deploy the other storytelling elements. Within plot devices, surprise, twists, and turns are more important in the fantasy. The narrative devices are the writer's tools. In choosing a realist approach, the author opts for character devices; in fantasy he opts for plot-oriented devices.

THE NEED FOR STORYTELLING

We need look no further than the number of television channels—to say nothing of the number of hours that television broadcasts news stories, sports stories, nonfiction stories, and fiction stories, stories of all lengths—to realize the number of stories available to the public every day. Add the number of films, the number of newspapers and magazines, the number of oral stories told from jokes to anecdotes to elaborate tales, from gossip to reportage, from free association to analytic interpretation, and it is evident we are all telling stories. There are stories on every level, from casual to the most meaningful. It's not so much that we hunger for any one kind of story but rather that we need a full range of stories. Human experience functions on a wide band from superficial to highly meaningful, and storytelling reflects human experience.

Why do we need stories? We need stories to help us make sense of our world. We need to make sense of the past and of the present so that we can make our way to a future.

But there are other reasons stories have been important beyond the need to understand, and one is the need of the teller to communicate. Whether in pantomime or Elizabethan tragedy, storytellers want to communicate with others. The cave painter and the short film director may have different means, but both want to use their medium to bind artist and audience together for that instant or that half hour of the storytelling experience. For that time, storyteller and audience become a community with all the historical implications of the relationship between artist and audience.

Another goal of storytelling is the education of the community. Many cultures have used storytelling to educate, particularly about the ethics of liv-

ing in the society. The passing on of tradition and ethics has been a central focus of storytelling from the fairy tale to the fable to the documentary film.

Finally, storytelling provides a legitimate access route to the world of our dreams and our fears. It provides an outlet for both types of psychic experiences. The goal of the story is to incorporate these dimensions of life into consciousness. Dreams and fears are important elements of storytelling.

SOURCES FOR STORYTELLING

Whether your goal is a contemporary story, a story specific to a culture, or a more universal story, there are many sources for inspiration, information, or insight.

Many writers and teachers of writing believe that the best source is your own experience. Our feeling is that your experience is only one of many sources. Should you choose your own experience for a story, clearly the detailing of the story is less problematic. The problem writers face with their own experience is their loyalty to the memory of that experience.

For example, John Updike uses personal experience and observations in the Rabbit series to tell a story about a man trying to understand his life as events and people take control of it. He uses real concerns and real observations and applies them to a fictional character in writing that shows this technique at its finest. This is how many writers proceed. Their loyalty is to the veracity of observation rather than to a detailed reliving in writing of their experience in the most literal sense. Writers like Updike use observation to comment on themselves and their readers rather than to indulge, relive, or purge themselves of a memory or experience. This is the creative response to experience and observation.

Writers, such as Clark Blaise, can be more personal than Updike, or they can be less personal, such as Frederick Forsythe tends to be. Our advice is that personal experience is an excellent source of material but that considerations of narrative and audience should be taken into account to mediate between the totally personal and the opposite, the accessible, engaging story. The personal can often be self-indulgent and sophomoric, whereas the opposite tries to engage the audience more fully. The former leaves the audience as witnesses instead of participants.

There are many other sources of stories beyond personal recollection, the most obvious being the daily newspapers. What we would like to do in this chapter is to illustrate how periodical accounts and other sources can be used as the basis for excellent stories for short films. We begin with a magazine because it is one of the most readily available materials.

The Periodical Article As A Source

In February 1992 the following story was reported from East Germany³: The recently opened Stasi files revealed that a thirty-year-old woman who was

involved in a Human Rights demonstration in the mid-1980s had been under observation for six years. The spy who reported her activities throughout this time was her husband. She had filed for divorce. In an interview with her husband, he stated that if the Communists had remained in control he would have continued to spy on her.

Here is a marital relationship, which, in an ideal world, we might expect to function as protection for husband and wife from the problems and challenges of society, in this case a Communist society in East Germany. This expectation proves to be wrong since the husband represented the intrusive government and spied on his wife whose activities defied the government's philosophy and policy. What we might expect to be the most cherished haven from Communism and government, the family unit, was, therefore, no protection for the individual. The implication is that there is no protection for the individual.

Although there is sufficient story potential here for a longer film, there are also a number of ways the story can be developed for a short film. The following is one suggestion for a short film script.

There are many points where it would be effective to join this story. We suggest that the drama is least interesting after the public discovery of the husband as a spy. What remains at that point is only resolution—what will happen to the marriage and to the husband and the wife (does he get his comeuppance?). We suggest that the presence of the state is important but needn't be elaborated. We also suggest that the story concentrate on the two characters in the marriage. A critical choice will be which character should be the main character. If it is to be the wife, then the story should focus on the danger of her activities and her expectation that the haven from the danger is her marriage. In this version she needn't find out that he is a spy, but we in the audience have to gradually discover this and realize that she will suffer without true understanding for her activities.

On the other hand, if he is the main character, we want the story to focus on why a man has to betray his family for the state. Here he may be his own antagonist. The story line should focus not only on his betrayal but also on leading us to an understanding about his character (as Bertolucci's *The Conformist* does). In *The Conformist*, set in Fascist Italy of the 30s, an upper-middle-class intellectual will do anything to belong; in this case, belonging means joining the Fascists. This rite of passage is a betrayal of his former professor.

We should confine the story to a very simple situation, let us say, the day of a human rights march. Let's assume that the woman is our main character. We needn't see the march itself but can confine the film to the preparations for the march and the aftermath. The scenes should clarify the relationship by highlighting the sense of trust on the part of the wife and the planning and preparation of a report on the part of the husband. The government-controlled media—state radio, television, and newspapers—should be omnipresent. It may be necessary to embody the state in another character—a neighbor, for example. If the person who represents the state is too far

from home—at work, say—we would dilute the emphasis in the story on the immediate threat of spies at and near home. The closer the spies, the more intense the story will be.

We can distract the audience from the true nature of the neighbor by making the neighbor an attractive woman. The initial impression should be that the husband is having an affair rather than reporting to another spy. This way when we do discover that they are spies together, the surprise and shock will be that much greater. In this state spying, not sex, is the highest form of leisure and pleasure!

It would be useful to the story if the wife suspects the husband of an affair and if the climax of the film involves her accusation and his admission of an affair with the neighbor. But we will know that the truth is more sinister. She accepts the affair, and the marriage and the spying go on. The story can grow only more suspenseful because of her husband's activities.

This short film will have much in the way of conflict between wife and husband/neighbor/state, but the situation will be simple, no more than "a day in the life of." When the wife chooses to accept her husband's story of infidelity, we begin to understand that the real danger to the individual is not infidelity but rather the state. Her choice implies much about priorities and life in 1985 East Germany.

The approach we have taken in the development of a magazine article into a short film outline can be applied to any other source. We move now to a simple source, a joke.

The Joke

Jokes or anecdotes can readily be the source of a short film since they have a character, a narrative, and a climax. The writer need only add another character or two and provide a resolution so that the audience will not be left in an unresolved state regarding the fate of the main character. The following joke will provide a constructive example.

Mark Twain tells the story of trying to get rid of a wreck of an old umbrella. First, he threw it in the ash can, but someone recognized it as his and returned it. Then he dropped it down a deep well, but someone repairing the well saw the umbrella and returned it. He tried several other methods, but always the umbrella came back. "Finally," says Mark Twain, "I lent it to a friend, and I never saw it again."⁴

Not only does this particular joke have a simple narrative, a conflict, and a main character, but it also has interesting opportunities for sound. That is not to say dialogue but rather the use of creative sound effects and music. Indeed it is possible to envision this script entirely without dialogue. It also has the virtues of visual action and personal interaction that can be easily understood visually. A short script version should include some action that illustrates why the character needed the umbrella in the first place.

We recommend a time frame of a few hours beginning with the character

preparing to leave the house. His wife reminds him to take the umbrella because of rain being forecast. The character is already resentful. Of course his wife is right, but he doesn't like to be wrong.

He leaves home with a specific errand—to purchase particular foods for dinner. His wife provides him with a list. He proceeds to the food store but is caught in a terrible downpour. A gust of wind ruins his umbrella just before he reaches the food store. He carries the ruined umbrella in and proceeds to shop. When he's finished the clouds haven't quite blown over so he keeps the umbrella. After he has walked about a block, the sun bursts out, and he makes his first attempt to discard the umbrella.

What follows are his three attempts to get rid of the umbrella. Twice he leaves it in an ash can and twice a good citizen runs after him with the umbrella, once an adult and once a young boy.

Carrying the groceries and now the broken umbrella he carries on. He drops the umbrella down a well near his home. He goes home thinking no more of it. No sooner has he unpacked the groceries than a workman who had been in the well knocks on his door and returns the umbrella. Now he is more than irked. He wants to destroy this destroyed umbrella. He can't put it in the garbage; the garbage man will no doubt return the precious object. He can't share the problem with his wife; she will not understand. And then it comes to him. He puts the umbrella back in the closet.

The next day it is raining heavily. He takes the broken umbrella and an unspoiled umbrella and goes out for a walk. He sees his friend Don. Don is getting wet trying to rush to the grocery store list in hand. Our main character displays the spare umbrella under his arm, basking in his dryness from the working umbrella. Naturally Don asks if he can borrow an umbrella from him. The main character agrees and saunters back home. Don struggles with the broken umbrella. A subtitle tells us that he never sees the broken umbrella again.

Although the use of the subtitle at the end is the easy way out, it quickly makes the point or moral about lending things to friends.

The Idiom

An idiom can provide an excellent starting point for a short story since the idiom provides a character and an editorial position on that character. It also implies a narrative.

For our example let's use the idiom "fall guy." According to a recent guide, the description of a "fall guy" is as follows: "By one account, the original fall guy was a wrestler who deliberately 'took a fall'—as commercial ('exhibition') wrestlers are still doing. Well, maybe. In British criminal slang 'fall' has meant 'be arrested' since the 1880s (it derives from a much earlier figurative sense, a descent from moral elevation, as in Adam's fall)."

A fall guy, then, was someone paid or framed to "fall" for a crime; as Sam Spade explained it to the Fat Man at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, "He's not

a fall guy unless he's a cinch to take the fall." The modern fall guy takes the blame or "carries the can" for any kind of misconduct or blunder.⁵

The premise here is that our main character is going to be a scapegoat. Why he will be a scapegoat and how he becomes a scapegoat is the narrative of this particular short film. We have to choose a person and a situation. We do not necessarily have to choose a situation that will predestine the outcome or telegraph the fate of the main character to the audience. Perhaps the most critical task here is to create a situation that will make the outcome (that the character will become the fall guy) logical and create a character with whom we can empathize in spite of his or her plight.

Our story will be about an IRS bureaucrat who decides that he has had enough of saying no, that from now on he will say yes. He is the man in charge of income tax refunds. When the IRS communicates to the Treasury Department that they need more money for refunds, the Treasury official tells them that they were about to ask the IRS for some money. (The IRS generally collects money for the Treasury.) The official at the Treasury, also a bureaucrat, will not be able to report to his superior that he has the necessary money. Its mission is not accomplished. Will he be the fall guy for the IRS?

The story can unfold in a few ways, but in any case the bureaucrat at the Treasury should be the fall guy. Clearly, the bureaucrat at the IRS is someone we all want to succeed.

This bureaucratic fantasy should focus on the fall guy at the Treasury, and we should on one level feel satisfaction at the fact: we can identify with and appreciate the prospect of greater refunds. In this story the fall guy's fate fulfills the audience's fantasy—to get a refund—and, consequently, they will not only accept the premise but also the fate of the fall guy.

The Anecdote

An anecdote, whether told to you by a friend or picked up in a newspaper, can be an excellent starting point for a screen story. The following is an example of such an anecdote:

Desmond Tutu is the Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, South Africa. With a smile and some sly wit, he is able to make important points with a minimum of bitterness, which is perhaps why he was awarded the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. He demonstrated this skill in a recent speech in New York City, where he stated, "When the missionaries first came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray!' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, the tables had been turned: We had the Bible and they had the land!"⁶

This particular anecdote does not have much narrative or a main character, as did our earlier source material. It does, however, contain a powerful irony: the subjugation, under the name of religion, of indigenous people.

This is not a unique story since it could easily be used to describe the early incursions of Western European powers into North and South America. In a sense, it is one of the major patterns of colonialism.

Our problem as writers is to use this powerful fact and metaphor and make it the spine of a short film story. Our approach can be realistic, dramatized, or animated. For the sake of providing a different type of example from those used earlier, we will approach this anecdote with the goal of creating a story suitable for animation.

In order to focus on the concept of a moment of prayer turning into subjugation, we need to decide on a narrative and a character. We also need to make the point that, at a certain time, blacks owned the land and were the power in South Africa. And if possible we should avoid the horrible cliché of traders giving gifts to the natives in exchange for property. The spectre of Manhattan being purchased for a handful of trinkets can undermine the originality of our approach.

We suggest a story focusing on the meaning of prayer, in particular a specific prayer with meaning across different cultural groups and various historical periods. We can choose from prayers thanking the Deity for the harvest, for the birth of a child, for a death or prayers asking or inviting the Deity to provide. In our story approach we will focus on prayers for a bountiful harvest. This will unify the story around prayer. It will also allow us to spotlight the land, the need to feed the local population, and the power structure in the area.

We will focus on a tribe with a king and a shaman. The characters are black. In our story a king shows his son how to lead his people successfully to a bountiful harvest. The king will speak of the need for rain, for peace with one's neighbors, and for sons and daughters to reap the harvest.

Each scene focuses on an aspect of this prayer—for rain, for peace, for sons and daughters. Each scene ends with success, and in each scene the point should be made that the son in the last scene is the king in the next. In this way continuity over time suggests success and, implicitly, ownership.

In the last three scenes white men are present, first as observers, then as traders. In the final scene there is a priest who leads the prayer for the harvest. The king closes his eyes as instructed, and when he opens his eyes, the men and women in the field are white, and he and his children stand by and watch in wonder. Then a white man offers the king a tool. He does not accept it. He offers it again. The priest sternly looks on. As the king accepts the tool and is told where to work, and as he moves into the background, the foreground fills with white priests and soldiers and their sons and daughters. The king and his people recede into the background, and our screen story ends.

The Fairy Tale

Fairy tales are often used with children to instill in them life lessons, particularly about codes of behavior. Every country has its fairy tales, generated throughout its history. Good collections of fairy tales include *Best Loved Folktales of the World*,⁷ *Spells of Enchantment*,⁸ and *Jewish Folk Tales*.⁹

For our example of a fairy tale we will use "The Pied Piper."¹⁰ The elements of the story are these: A town has a problem with rats. It has tried to rid the town of the pests but has been unsuccessful. The Pied Piper suggests that for a price he will rid the town of its rats. Skeptically the town elders agree. Playing his instrument he leads the rats into deep water where they all drown. He has succeeded where all others have failed.

He asks the town elders for payment, but they renege on their agreement and offer less. The Pied Piper refuses the reduced payment and warns that they will be sorry. He is dismissed.

The Piper begins to play, and all the children in the town follow him into the woods. The town looks on. He leads the children away from their families. The magic of his playing is successful, and the town never sees the children again.

The moral of this story is that we should honor our obligations. Subtextually the story is also about a spellbinder, in this case a pied piper whose power is so great that he can lead innocents to any fate. Parents who warn their children of strangers bearing gifts are often, at the back of their minds, thinking of the power of the Pied Piper and his hold over the imagination of children.

There are numerous strengths here—a narrative, a main character, and a purpose to the story. Rather than create a literal treatment of the fairy tale, we can modernize the story. We can also tell the story from a variety of points of view: the Pied Piper's view, a child's, the parents', or the point of view of the official who reneges on his agreement. We can also alter the genders of the participants to give the story a stronger male-female dimension, and if we wish, we can choose a time and a place for the story that would speak more strongly to a contemporary audience. The strength of the fairy tale is that it has lasted over time because of the power of the moral of the tale. As long as it is the moral that centers the story, we will not lose the narrative power of the fairy tale.

EXERCISE 13

Anecdotes, fairy tales, jokes, newspapers, real-life experiences, all provide starting points for storytelling. The writer must use narrative tools to shape the story and make it suitable for the medium he or she has chosen.

In order to give you practice at culling a story from a source and using narrative tools to shape it for the short film, we suggest the following exercise using the fairy tale:

1. Find a fairy tale or myth you like or identify with. Be sure to choose a true folk tale, not one by an author such as Hans Christian Anderson or Oscar Wilde, but one that is credited to Anonymous. (The Grimm's collections or any collected by Andrew Lang are good. There are also many ethnic collections in bookstores and libraries.) Make several photocopies.
2. Read over your story carefully. Answer the following questions.
 - a. Who is the main character of the story?
 - b. What are the person's goals?
 - c. Who is the antagonist of the story?
 - d. Outline all the opposites you recognize in the story. This can include people, settings, actions, reactions.
 - e. What is the plot of the story?
 - f. How is the plot structured around the main character?
 - g. How does the plot begin?
 - h. Name the barriers to the character achieving his or her goal.
 - i. How does the plot end?
 - j. What are the surprises in the plot of the story?
3. In order to give you preliminary experience with plot and structure, we suggest breaking down your story into three major sections (I, II, and III) and marking off each. Sections I, II, and III may be as long as several paragraphs or as short as a sentence. Each section represents a change in the character's situation.

AN EXAMPLE: PERRAULT'S "LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD"¹¹

Once upon a time there was a little village girl, the prettiest that had ever been seen. Her mother doted on her. Her grandmother was even fonder of her and made her a little red hood, which became her so well that she went by the name of Little Red Riding Hood.

One day her mother, who had just made and baked some cakes, said to her: "Go and see how your grandmother is; for I have been told that she is ill. Take her a cake and this little pot of butter."

Little Red Riding Hood set off at once for the house of her grandmother, who lived in another village.

On her way through a wood she met old Father Wolf. He would have very much liked to eat her, but dared not do so on account of some woodcutters who were in the forest. He asked her where she was going.

The poor child, not knowing that it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf, said: "I am going to see my grandmother and am taking her a cake and a pot of butter my mother has sent to her."

"Does she live far away?" asked the Wolf.

"Oh yes," replied Little Red Riding Hood; "it is yonder by the mill, which you can see right below there, and it is the first house in the village."

"Well now," said the Wolf, "I think I shall go and see her too. I will go by this path, and you by that path, and we will see who gets there first."

The Wolf set off running with all his might by the shorter road, and the little girl continued on her way by the longer road. As she went she amused herself by gathering nuts, running after butterflies, and making nosegays of the wild flowers she found.

The Wolf was not long in reaching the grandmother's house. He knocked.

Toc Toc.

"Who is there?"

"It is your little granddaughter, Red Riding Hood," said the Wolf, disguising his voice, "and I bring you cake and a little pot of butter as a present from my mother."

The worthy grandmother was in bed, not being very well, and cried out to him: "Pull out the peg, and the latch will fall."

The Wolf drew out the peg, and the door flew open. Then he sprang upon the poor old lady and ate her up in less than no time, for he had been more than three days without food.

After that he shut the door, lay down in the grandmother's bed, and waited for Little Red Riding Hood.

Presently she came and knocked.

Toc Toc.

"Who is there?"

Now Little Red Riding Hood on hearing the Wolf's gruff voice was at first frightened, but thinking that her grandmother had a bad cold, she replied: "It is your little granddaughter, Red Riding Hood, and I bring you a cake and a little pot of butter from my mother."

Softening his voice, the Wolf called out to her: "Pull out the peg, and the latch will fall."

Little Red Riding Hood drew out the peg, and the door flew open.

When he saw her enter, the Wolf hid himself in the bed beneath the counterpane.

"Put the cake and the little pot of butter on the bin," he said, "and come up on the bed with me."

Little Red Riding Hood took off her clothes, but when she climbed up on the bed she was astonished to see how her grandmother looked in her nightgown.

"Grandmother dear!" she exclaimed, "what big arms you have!"

"The better to embrace you, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big legs you have!"

"The better to run with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big ears you have!"

"The better to see with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big teeth you have!"

"The better to eat you with!"

With those words the wicked Wolf leaped upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up.

DIVIDING THE STORY INTO SECTIONS

Section I would cover the first four paragraphs. Section II would begin with her meeting the Wolf and end with her arrival at her grandmother's cottage. Section III would include the action in the cottage: her undressing and climbing into bed with the Wolf. The section ends with her being eaten by the Wolf.

When we develop the outline and treatment of the proposed script, we will have to make decisions about what to include and what to exclude, but at this stage it will be more important for you to think about how to grip the contemporary audience. A literal treatment of the fairy tale won't speak to an audience your own age. It is important to understand what has gripped you so powerfully about the fairy tale. What about this story has a hold on you?

The answer may have something to do with listening to your elders, or it may have something to do with the fear of the forest—fear of the unknown, fear of animals. Whatever it is, it is important for you to get in touch with that core idea.

A creative way to articulate that core drive is to begin to collect images of forests, children, animals, that may give you a clue. What you are simultaneously looking for is the tone of the story. For this story you might also look in children's books, where illustrations are often a supplement to the written story. Once you have found the images that contribute to your core notion about the fairy tale, you will be ready to proceed more deeply into writing a short screenplay based on the fairy tale.

For now the structure you've outlined and the tone you have decided on will help you use the answers to the questions about character and plot.

NOTES

1. Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," in Ernest J. Hopkins, ed., *The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).
2. Raymond Carver, "Cathedral," in Shannon Ravennel, ed., *The Best Short Stories of the Eighties* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990).
3. "Stasi Files Now Open," *Time*, 3 February 1992, 33.
4. In E. W. Johnson, ed., *A Treasury of Humor* (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), 202.
5. In R. Clairborne, *Loose Cannons and Red Herrings* (New York: Ballantine, 1988).
6. In Johnson, *A Treasury of Humor*, 144.
7. Joanna Cole, ed., *Best Loved Folktales of the World*, (New York: Doubleday, 1982).
8. Jake Zipes, ed., *Spells of Enchantment* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).
9. Pinhas Sadeh, *Jewish Folktales* (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1989).
10. "The Pied Piper," in Cole, *Best Loved Folktales of the World*, 228–31.
11. Charles Perrault, *Perrault's Fairy Tales* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988).

VISUALIZATION STRATEGIES

In the preceding chapter we highlighted the storytelling characteristics that transcend particular media, including film. In this chapter we want to highlight the principal difference between film and other forms of storytelling—that film is a visual medium and, consequently, that stories told in film form must take advantage of the visual or the story may disappoint or fail to reach its intended audience.

This does not, however, mean that film has more in common with painting or photography. As a narrative form it has more in common with theater and the novel than it does with a single photograph or painting. But when directly compared with these narrative forms, it quite quickly reaches the limits of that comparison.

The best way to understand film and film writing is to consider film writing to be a narrative storytelling form that shares common narrative qualities with other narrative forms such as the play or the novel. Film, however, is also a visual medium that must conform in its narrative to the qualities unique to film, qualities that will differ considerably from other narrative forms. In this chapter we will clarify the similarities and highlight the differences.

STORYTELLING IN THE CONTEXT OF FILM

As we have established, film stories come from many sources. Looking at a number of recent films, we find stories, such as Miller's *Lorenzo's Oil*, based on newspaper accounts of real-life events (in that particular case, a parent's search for a scientific cure for her child's illness in spite of the medical establishment pronouncement that her son is incurable). Other films are based on national figures such as James Hoffa (David Mamet's screenplay *Hoffa*) and Malcolm X (Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*). In both cases, published biographies were a major source of the material for the films. Robert Redford

turned to the Norman McLean novella *A River Runs Through It* to make his film of the same name. Rob Reiner turned to the Aaron Sorkin play *A Few Good Men* for his film of the same name. Francis Ford Coppola went back to the Bram Stoker original to make his own version of Dracula (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*), and James Ivory and Ismail Merchant turned to the E. M. Forster classic *Howard's End* to produce the film of the same name.

Whatever the source, all of these films have strong visual qualities, and each has transcended the form and, in some cases, the quality of the original.

Another storytelling quality of the film story is the importance of genre films. Audiences know what to expect in terms of visual qualities from a Western, a science fiction film, a horror film, or a musical. The result is the creation of a visual shorthand for the writer of these genre films. We bring a set of expectations to a Western such as Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (script by David Webb Peoples). And we know what to expect when we see the horror/science fiction film *Alien 3* (written by David Giler, Walter Hill, and Larry Ferguson), at least in terms of visualized action.

But audiences also want to be surprised. While the writer has to adhere to particular narrative conventions to facilitate audience recognition, he or she has to throw a curve that surprises or shocks. The risk is that the writer will lose the audience if the story veers away from convention. The gain can be a unique insight into an experience. This is precisely what happened in Neil Jordan's mixed-genre thriller/melodrama *The Crying Game* and in Agnieszka Holland's satiric war story *Europa Europa*. However, although the narrative strategy may shift, the corresponding need for visual action does not. Both films remain powerfully visual.

FILMIC QUALITIES

In terms of visual characteristics, film stories can take advantage of both the physical and dramatic properties of film. Perhaps no quality is more apparent or more underutilized in screen stories than the appearance of reality. Because it looks real, the viewer will enter into the film experience more readily and in a more unconscious manner than, for example, when watching a play in a theater.

The appearance of reality also offers the writer the opportunity to develop complexity of character or situation in a more believable manner. The benefit here for the writer and the audience can also be considerable.

Film can also offer the writer the power of movement. Not only does the camera record the motions of people, but editing offers the viewer a range of time and place limited only by the imagination of the writer and the budget of the producer. The resulting dynamism means that the writer doesn't have to be confined to one geographical place or to one time. You are free, and if you tell your story well, we in the audience will follow.

But time and space are not the only variables the writer can introduce. Sound design can help create alternate places and spaces without actually

going there. For example, Alfred Hitchcock in his first sound film *Blackmail* (1929) wanted to allude to the sense of guilt the main character feels. The setting is the breakfast table, in a diningroom behind the parent's store. A customer speaks to the main character about a murder that happened the night before. What the customer doesn't realize is that the main character was the accidental perpetrator of the murder. She is overwhelmed by guilt while the customer gossips about ways of killing people. The visual we see is the bread knife in the hand of the main character. On the sound track we lose the gossip and hear only the word *knife*. Here sound and image together create the subjective emotional state of the main character—guilt!

Sound juxtaposition is one option. Visual juxtaposition is another. That can mean juxtaposition of two disparate shots to introduce a new meaning beyond the meaning of each visual separately, or it can be juxtaposition within a single shot. An image is contextual: it has a right side, a left side, a middle, a foreground, and a background. If you wish, you can present a particular visual juxtaposition that highlights a power relationship, the shifting importance of two elements, or a developing relationship. All are visual interpretations of what the audience will see.

Although writers do not write camera shots in their scripts, they are constantly dealing with relationships and shifts in relationships. Our point here is that visual detailing by the writer can articulate those juxtapositions and shifts.

Finally, in terms of physical properties, the level of visual detail will create as much complexity as you need. An example will clarify our meaning. In a theatrical stage scene where the goal of the scene is to suggest the character's obsession with appearance, we see only one set of clothes; few in the audience can see the makeup or the clothing changes made earlier. Consequently, if we want to make the point about the character's obsession, we have to have a full closet on stage or have the character or another character comment on this particular obsession.

In film, on the other hand, we have the option of showing characters trying on one set of clothing after another. We can see characters change their makeup, we can follow them to shops, and, of course, we can see them add to their closet of clothing. The level of physical detail can suggest that a character is a kleptomaniac, or simply insecure about her appearance. In other words, we can make the point about the obsession, and if we wish, we can begin to explore the psychology of the obsession. How complex we want to be depends totally on our writerly wish. We can have complexity or simplicity; it's strictly a matter of visual detail.

In terms of dramatic properties, the principal quality of film is that visual action is crucial to the establishment of motivation, to the characterization of both the main and secondary characters, and to advancement of the plot. The story spins out through visual action. If the story was spun out through dialogue, there would be very little to differentiate a film from a play. In the theater dialogue is everything. In film, visual action is everything.

A more subtle, but no less important, characteristic of film is that the point

of view of the narrative is underscored visually. The narrative may point out that X is the main character, but it is the fact that events happen to X, events where he is not an observer but rather where he is somewhere between victor and victim, that will underscore the point. These visual articulations will also facilitate identification with X and will if necessary give us insights into his subjective world. It is the struggle of his subjective world with the objective real world that is at the heart of the drama of the film. Only by understanding his world can we appreciate the deepest dimensions of his struggle in the larger world. All this must be accomplished visually if the film writer is to work with this medium.

CALLING THE SHOTS

The two most familiar types of shots in film are *close-ups* or *long shots*. Films are made up of disparate fragments of film, of which close-ups and long shots are but two types. Also included would be extreme long shots (dolly, tracking, trucking, stedicam, tilt, pan).

Having mentioned the visual variety of images in film, we must also state that determining shots is the prerogative of the film director. What creative decisions then does this leave the writer? And should the writer think in terms of shots (single images) or in larger dramatic units?

The answers to these questions are both simple and complex. The writer should be thinking in terms of images as he or she writes the script, but it is not necessary for him or her to actually detail those shots in the script. Indeed it will probably be counterproductive to do so.

How then can you tell your story in images if you can't list those images in detail? In order to answer this question, we turn to the terms used in writing film scripts.

FILM WRITING DEFINITIONS REVIEWED

The dramatic terms introduced earlier can be divided into two groups: those that are character-related and those that are plot-related.

There are two groups of character types: main characters and secondary characters.

The Main Character

The *main character*, the subject of your story, often called the *protagonist*, is the reason for your film story and should be situated in the middle of the action of the story. The story, or plot, gives the main character the opportunity to overcome his or her dilemma.

The main character should have the energy or drive to carry us through

the story and should also appeal to us in some way. Some writers will use a charismatic main character; others will place a goal-directed character in a situation that creates an identification or empathy with that character. In both cases the main character should be visually and behaviorally defined in such a way that it helps the story.

The more visual consideration given to who the character is and what he or she looks like, the more likely the character's look can help the story. Whether the main character is a heroic character or a tragic character, the writer should be very clear about the goals of the character.

A word about goals. In a sense a character has a goal in every scene. That goal may be simple. What the writer also needs to keep in mind is the character's overriding goal, sometimes called the *supergoal*. The supergoal forms the larger issue that drives the character throughout the story. Many writers now talk of their screen story as a journey for the character (after the writings of Joseph Campbell on the importance of myth). The supergoal is what prompts the main character to undertake his or her journey.

Secondary Characters

Secondary characters have much simpler roles in the screen story. Often they are almost stereotypic. They have a purpose, and they live out that purpose in the course of the story. They, too, have goals, but their goals are more related to that of the main character. They are either in the story to help the main character, or they are present as a barrier to the main character's goal. Secondary characters should also have visual and behavioral characteristics that help the story.

The most important of the secondary characters is the antagonist, whose goal is diametrically opposed to the goal of the main character. Often the antagonist is the most complex of the secondary characters.

The Plot

The *plot* is the series of scenes that leads the character from dilemma to confrontation to resolution, following a line of rising action. In the course of the plot the writer should never forget where the main character is. Plot cannot exist without character. If it does, we lose our involvement and as an audience become voyeurs rather than participants in the film story.

The Catalytic Event

The *catalytic event* is that critical event that precipitates the main character's action. It is the trigger for energized action to achieve his or her goal. In the short film the catalytic event is central because it precipitates the story.

The Climax

The *climax* is that point when the character is faced with making his or her choice. It is the ultimate scene in which the main character will finally achieve or not achieve his or her goal.

The Subtext

Every story has a surface meaning and a secondary, often more important, meaning. If the surface meaning in Little Red Riding Hood is beware of wolves in grandmother's clothing, the *subtext* is that children should listen carefully to their parents.

Plot Twists, Surprises, and Reversals

Plot twists, surprises, and reversals all refer to the same device. The writer employs twists and turns in the plot in order to create tension and maintain viewer interest. Plot twists and turns, whether they are called twists and turns, plot points, surprises, or reversals, are necessary mechanically to the film story. They keep us guessing and involved with the story.

STRUCTURE

The dramatic organization of the film story is referred to as the *structure*. The structure is chosen as a mode of organization that best suits the narrative goals of the story and often revolves around a number of acts.¹

Writers will emphasize plot over subtext in particular film genres. Some genres, such as adventure films, are all plot and virtually no subtext. Others, such as film noir and the horror films, have much more subtext than situation comedies, for example. The genre the writer is working within will determine the balance of plot to subtext. The best structural choices are made when the writer is thoroughly familiar with the narrative characteristics of the genre. Structure is the shape of the plot.

The Scene

The *scene* is the basic building block of the structure. One act will comprise a number of scenes. Scenes are sometimes clustered in a sequence of 2 to 4 scenes that share a similar narrative purpose.

Each scene should advance the plot. Within each scene characters have specific goals. The scene is visually constructed around a narrative purpose but worked out in terms of character goals. If character 1 has one goal and

character 2 has an opposing goal, the scene will proceed until character 1 or 2 has achieved his or her goal. When that has happened the scene is over. In the course of the scene, the other character does not achieve his or her goal. The success of one character or the failure of the other links directly into the advancement of the plot.

Scenes tend to be relatively short and specific. Transition scenes are less common than they used to be. Consequently, the best test for the validity of a scene is to answer the question, does this scene advance the plot? If it does, how? If it does not, the scene should not be included in the screenplay.

THE OUTLINE

The first step in the film writing process, after conceiving an idea, is forming an *outline*. The outline is actually a brief summary of the idea. The focal point of the outline is the character. After identifying the character, the writer should define the premise in terms of a conflict for the main character. It would also be useful to identify the catalytic event.

The outline should not be a plot summary and, consequently, should be written easily on a single page.

THE TREATMENT

After the development of the idea, the character, and the premise of the outline, the writer next faces the task of creating a *plot line*, which when completed and broken down into a series of scenes is called the *treatment*.

For a short film, a treatment should be two to four pages and should be presented in a form where the scenes are summarized in single paragraphs or numbered paragraphs. Treatments are sometimes called *step outlines*.

THE SCRIPT

The *script* is essentially the elaboration of the treatment including visual description and dialogue. The script should always be presented in *master scene format*. An example of master scene format is found later in this chapter. The key controversy about script format is whether to include short descriptions in the scenes. We recommend omitting them.

The master scene format allows readers of the script to visualize the story more readily than if they were stopping for technical descriptions, such as of a close-up or long shot, in the body of the script.

These are the primary film script terms you will encounter. We turn now to the principle of visualization in order to assist you in telling stories in images.

THE PRINCIPLE OF VISUALIZATION

Whether the writer imagines the film, conjures up a dream, or simply draws an image, the operating principle is that the writer should visualize rather than verbalize. The key to the success of that visualization is the meaning the visualization gives to the story. Images can be neutral or moving or overwhelming. The creativity of the writer and later the director makes the difference between functional and fantastic. We propose to take you through a process of visualization that will help you aspire to the latter.

THE PROCESS OF VISUALIZATION

The first step in visualization is to consider the way you tell your story. We suggest that a retrospective approach to telling a story is less effective than telling the story in the present. Presenting a story so that it seems to be occurring as we are watching it gives the story immediacy and energy and puts the writer in the strongest position to direct the story.

To tell the story retrospectively is to tell it in the past tense, therefore making it more distant. To tell the story in the present is to use the active, action-oriented grammatical option.

The second step in the process of visualization is deciding how to present your main character. A character who is lost or confused or passive is more likely to talk than to do. A character with a goal is likely to act in order to achieve that goal. Consequently, presenting your character as goal-directed will help you visualize his moving toward that goal.

The third step is to set the action of the story in settings where there are visual opportunities and where the setting helps your story. The young girl in "Little Red Riding Hood" is in a forest. Forests can suggest tranquillity or danger. In either case, the setting of the forest adds visual opportunity to the story.

The fourth step for the writer is to apply the magnifying lenses of "watching, waiting, wanting" to the story. By this we mean as follows: The idea of watching should permeate your story. The audience should be watching events unfold for the main character.

Waiting involves a second layer of interaction with the story. What visual events can we interject into the story to help propel the character into a setting that is also in a sense contributing to the story?

Finally, the tool of "wanting" needs to be developed. What is the character willing to do to achieve his or her goal? The writer needs to provide steps to allow the character to climb toward the goal. As the character strains to reach the height of the goal, the viewer should also experience the shortness of breath due to that climb. Only by taking this upward journey with the character can we in the audience join the character in wanting to reach the summit.

The fifth step is to provide visual surprises along the way. Those visual

surprises may be exciting and an expression of the character's anticipation. The visual surprises may be character-related or plot-related. In either case, they help flesh out the visualization of the story.

By this time it should be clear that the writer's goal is to move the viewer from the position of "voyeur" of the story to the position of "participant" in the story. This happens through identification with the main character and the main character's struggle to attain his goal.

The question of whether you are maintaining viewers outside the story as voyeurs or bringing them into the story as participants is a question you should return to on a continuing basis throughout the writing process.

In order to reinforce the sense of being inside the story with the character, the writer should rely on visual detail to cement the believability of the character, place, time, and plot. Visual details can range from the time of day to the climate particular to a place, clothing, gait, mode of interaction, and so on. The greater the visual detail in the script, the greater the believability in the story.

One more step remains to fully exploit the visualization process. Look over your story and rethink it and rewrite it as a silent film. Distancing yourself from language will help you think and make writing decisions visually.

Now that you have thought about your script in visual terms, we recommend that you add sound in order to add another level of credibility. Sound can also help you introduce a level of metaphor to the story. We will discuss this point in the following section.

SOUND DESIGN AS COMPLEMENTARY TO VISUAL DESIGN

Whether the sound is synchronized (i.e., directly related to the visuals, such as the sound of a door opening when we see the door open) or is used asynchronously (in contrast to the visual presented), the overall pattern of the sound adds another dimension. In this way, the sound can be used to support an aura of realism arising out of the visuals, or it can be used to create an alternate or multilayered view, as described in Chapter 3.

The key is to use the sound purposefully. Having used the visual dimension to tell your story, to characterize, and to create a sense of place, you should view sound as yet another opportunity to tell your story even more powerfully.

SOUND AS THE INTERPRETER OF VISUAL IDEAS

Sound can alter visual meaning; it can complement visual meaning. In Ken Webb's *The Waiters*, sound does both.

This film about the process of waiting moves through a variety of characters and settings—a suburban commuter waiting for a train, a woman wait-

ing for a sign from above, an actor waiting to be discovered, a young man waiting to fly, a young boy waiting for Santa Claus. The narrator explains in an amusing way why each is waiting. The reasons given range from the rational to the irrational. Nevertheless, the visuals suggest that most of the characters get what they want, particularly when the wish was irrational or supernatural. Consequently, the surprise of seeing them get what they want, no matter how preposterous, is extremely funny. Webb ends the film with a low-angle single visual of a waiter listing the items on a menu in an Italian restaurant. The shot makes up a quarter of the entire film. The result is to shift our attention away from people waiting and wanting to people waiting on and offering. The result is to bring us back to earth.

In *The Waiters* it is the sound track that explains the diversity of visuals, linking them to one another. The narrator also tells us why the people are waiting. When each person's situation resolves, it is the narrator who explains how that resolution has been achieved. That is not to say that the visuals are unnatural at this point, but rather to underscore that the diversity of people and visuals means that the visuals cannot do the entire narrative job on their own. They need sound and narration to tie them together and to help us understand the solution and lead us to a response to the diverse expectations. The subtext of the story—that all of us wait for something out of our control to resolve dilemmas—is quite touching, and Ken Webb's ability to make us laugh about the issue reflects how effectively sound and visual have worked together in this short film.

FORMAT

The format that you use will help emphasize the importance of the visual in your script. The format we suggest, as discussed earlier, is the widely used master scene format, an example of which follows:

Title _____
By _____
For _____
(TV program or production company)

1. It is raining, a thunderstorm. A young man, Brad, walks to his mailbox. He opens the box with much anticipation. He opens it. The rain is falling like a sheet. He can barely read, but he notices the words "pleased to offer you." He stuffs the letter into his pocket and begins to run.

BRAD
Mom! Dad! I'm in! I'm in!

He runs and is lost in the hail that begins, but we can hear his voice. Brad is a happy man.

Cut To:

2. Int. Kitchen. Day.

Brad's Mother is stirring the soup. He is soaked to the skin.

MOTHER

You'd better get out of those clothes or you won't live long enough to go to that fancy school.

BRAD

It's not fancy. It's just good.

MOTHER

Good and fancy.

BRAD

Good.

MOTHER

They won't make you soup like this.

BRAD

You can mail me some every week.

MOTHER

Now you're making fun of me. Wait till you're up there. You'll probably think of me and your dad as sources for your humor. I hope you won't forget us, Brad.

BRAD

I haven't left yet, Mom.

MOTHER

And don't forget where you came from, son, don't forget.

End of Scene²

What is notable about the master scene format is that it is organized so that the reader can visualize the story as easily as possible. There are no camera angles, no detailed technical instructions, only description and dialogue. You should acquaint yourself with the format and use it to develop your own short screenplay.

EXERCISE 14

In a ten-minute writing exercise, write as fast as you can without stopping to think or worry about logic, spelling, or punctuation. Use a timer and try not to look at the timer.

1. Place a picture in front of you. Imagine the picture as a freeze-frame. Imagine that the character of the picture begins an action. Write for ten minutes. Put aside your work without reading it.
2. Do the same with a second picture.
3. Now list ten sounds that are particularly evocative for you.
4. Make a list of five sounds that could establish the feeling-tone of the first picture.
5. Make a list of five sounds that could establish the feeling-tone of the second picture. Note that silence is also "a sound."
6. Read over what you have written for visuals and the associated sound. Make notations about what the particular sound images you've chosen add to the visuals. Do they make the visuals more realistic? Do they add a level of metaphor?
7. Now, using your visual and sound notes, write the opening sequence to a short film. Make sure you follow the proper format.

NOTES

1. See Ken Dancyger and J. Rush, *Alternative Scriptwriting* (Boston: Focal Press, 1991) for examples of two-act and four-act film stories.
2. Ken Dancyger, *Broadcast Writing* (Boston: Focal Press, 1991), 76–77.

DRAMATIC STRATEGIES

You have an idea for your story, and the problem before you is to find the drama in your idea and to shape it into a story.

Something about the idea, which may have come from any one of the sources mentioned in chapter 6, has captured your imagination and has unlocked an emotional reaction. Whether it touches your unconscious or conscious synapses, the deed is done and the idea seems to haunt you. It won't go away until you convert it into a script and from a script into a film that you can share with others. The film gives others an insight into you: it's a gift to them and an invitation to join with you for the length of the film experience.

These are the motivations for converting an idea into a dramatic story. We turn now to the means to achieve that transformation.

THE IDEA

At the beginning of the process of developing an idea into a dramatic story, it's important to consider a number of questions whose answers will direct you.

First, does the idea have only the shape of a photograph or does it have an implied narrative? The observation or photograph of a young girl rushing down the wintry street carrying her winter coat and a knapsack implies that she is going to school. Will the story be shaped around the events of this day at school? Is there something special about this day? Or is it simply an ode to the freedom of being sixteen and having no greater obligation than to join your friends at school?

If the idea or observation does not suggest a direction, it is important to decide what it is about the image that stays with you. Let's decide that it is the latter feeling—that it's great to be young—that appeals so much to you about this image. The basic idea, then, revolved around the joy (and other qualities) in being young. What other notions or events might support that feeling about being young and enjoying it?

The key at this stage is to let the idea breathe. Respond to it, and around it. You are looking for a direction. Young girls like to window shop and stop to shop if they have money. They like to meet their friends en route to school and travel together. They like to exchange clothing as a bonding device that makes each feel closer to one another. They like to assess males they observe and comment if they are in company. They like to eat muffins and orange juice. Some like to smoke.

At school they might assess their status based on the number of members of the opposite sex who greet them or attend to them. They like to talk in class. They make dates to talk more. They make plans for the weekend. They discuss potential companions and destinations for the weekend. They talk about college. They talk about their siblings and sometimes their parents.

When desperate for something to do they will exchange views on their teachers. They do schoolwork. They exercise, eat lunch, and eventually go home.

Narrative design options here include the following: a day in the life of, life at sixteen, girls and boys, contemporary style, herding, high school style. If the emphasis is on the joy of being sixteen, any of these shaping devices can work. Joy is the overarching attitude you want to be evident in the narrative. You will want to avoid the pain of being sixteen and emphasize the pleasure.

In order to dramatize the story, however, you must find a framing device that will tell the story from your chosen point of view.

FRAMING THE STORY

The writer has a number of shapes or forms available to him or her to frame the story. Since this is the first important decision you make in directing the presentation of your idea, you should deliberate carefully about the frame.

In the longer film, these shapes are referred to as *genres*. But this device isn't as useful in the short film. The framing devices of the gangster film or the melodrama or the film noir or the horror film are not as helpful in the writing of the short film (although they can be critical in writing the long film).

The story forms that are available and useful to the writer of the short film include the docudrama, the "mockumentary," the comedy, the satire, the fable, the morality tale, the journey, and the event.

The Docudrama

If your idea is generated out of the daily news or is about a famous person or should be related as closely as possible to real life, the docudrama could be an important framing device for you.

The docudrama requires a level of veracity that suggests detailed research around your idea. You need recognizable people and events reinforcing and placing your story into a category of believability far beyond the conventional drama.

In a docudrama the writer often refers to the media—at least television and possibly radio. Just as Orson Welles used radio news techniques to create a panic reaction to his *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938, so too will the docudrama writer employ television news style that should be convincing on the issue of veracity. You have to observe qualities of the news, reporters, the types of observations they maintain in the news and avoid the type of observations you don't see on the news. You are trying to use the patina of the evening television news to enhance the believability of your story.

It's a good idea to study very good docudramas such as *The War Game*, *All the President's Men*, and *David Holzman's Diary*. Learn from the masters.

What you are trying to do is to frame your story as if it really did happen or just as it did happen. In either case, the credibility of your dramatic story will depend on successfully using the frame of the docudrama.

The Mockumentary

Ever since *This Is Spinal Tap*, student films about performance, filmmaking, writing, and music have relied on the hybrid form loosely called the *mockumentary*. This is a form that both references realism and simultaneously pokes fun at it. Not quite as intense as the satire, the mockumentary criticizes gently the subject of the film, which is often the media as it interacts with and often creates a media star. In this sense, the mockumentary is a self-reflexive and self-critical form, as the "mock" in *mockumentary* suggests.

If your idea centers on the relationship between the public and a character and if the media can play a role in the story, the mockumentary is an amusing and often insightful story form.

In order to use this particular framing device, detailed research into the creation of the music video, the political advertisement, the television show, the rock concert, is critical. References to production will help create a level of believability.

Beyond the research, the mockumentary also implies a particular structure for the story—the rise and fall of a film or television show, a weekly episode of television, even the day-long production of a soap opera. The pattern of the structure must be quickly understood and accepted by the viewer.

One final comment about the mockumentary. This frame affords many opportunities for humor. And the more outrageous the humor, the more likely the story will succeed. If your goal is to make a humorous film, the mockumentary is a natural story frame.

The Comedy

The mockumentary is a particular comedy story frame. The writer has other options to choose from. *Comedy* runs the gamut from farce, which is principally visual, to more sophisticated forms where character and dialogue are

more important. If the idea is character-oriented, what are the characteristics that lend themselves to comic opportunity? If they are physical, the comedy is aimed at the character. To put it another way, we laugh at the character. If the characteristics are more behavioral, we have a broader band of comic opportunity. We needn't laugh at the character but may laugh with the character. How does the source of humor blend with your attitude about the idea? If we laugh at your character, in other words, does it undermine or support your idea?

Similarly, if your idea is situation-driven, do you want us to see your character victimized by the situation or victorious over the situation? And in each case, does the approach support or undermine your idea?

Another approach is to examine what humor, rather than a more straightforward approach, will add to the story. The humor, aside from its understandable appeal, should bring other narrative dividends. For example, the fact that the balloon in *The Red Balloon* does the unexpected (it follows the boy and later displays a mind of its own) is humorous, but it also humanizes the balloon. The balloon through humor becomes the boy's friend rather than remaining an inanimate object.

Using comedy should help your story. It should make your story seem fresh. And it can, if deployed well, energize your story. Comedy, whether farcical or cerebral, visual or verbal can help you frame your story in such a way that your idea is strengthened.

The Satire

Satire is a very particular form of comedy. It is more savage than other forms because the object of the satire, in the mind of the writer, deserves to be ridiculed.

There is a long tradition of satire from the Greeks through Kurt Vonnegut, Terry Southern, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Eric Rohmer, Michael Verhoeven, Earl Morris, and Lizzie Borden. The key decision for the writer considering satire is whether the target of derision merits the treatment. The form works best when the target is important or well known because the bigger the target, the more likely the target is a candidate for satire. Modest subjects will appear overdone when presented in a satire.

Satire is a genre of excess—excessive humor, exaggerated character, story, and language. The rules of realism are readily bent in the genre.

Examples of subject matter successfully treated in film satires include middle-class values (by Buñuel in *L'Age d'Or* and Lizzie Borden in *Working Girls*), a shameful history and a community's attempt to hide it (Michael Verhoeven's *The Nasty Girl*), and the excessive power of television (Paddy Chayevsky's great script *Network*). Other notable targets are the health care system in the United States (Paddy Chayevsky's script *The Hospital*) and in Great Britain (David Mercer's *Britannia Hospital*) and, in one of the greatest film satires, nuclear war (Stanley Kubrick and Terry Southern's *Dr. Strangelove*).

Satire is a very free writing form but does involve the constraints of the scale of the subject and the attendant idea. The more important the subject, the more likely that the frame of satire will be effective.

The Fable

Fable, a term most used in the sense of a short story devised to convey some useful moral lesson, but often carrying with it associations of the marvelous or the mythical, and frequently employing animals as characters. Famous examples include Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels and George Orwell's Animal Farm.¹

The fable genre emphasizes a moral lesson, draws on the mythical, and often uses animals as important characters. If your idea is best presented with these elements, the fable can transport your idea from the realistic to the fantastic. Although the fable may pose particular filmmaking challenges, it can be done. Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Bear* is a recent example.

Fables require a powerful moral at their center. Without it they can seem preachy. If you are going to use the fable to frame your story, consider whether the idea can carry its moral freight. Keeping this requisite in mind may help you freshen up the other narrative properties so that you avoid the pitfall of preachiness. If you can avoid that, you may well have a charming and fresh story.

The Morality Tale

The *morality tale* is an allegorical story whose intention, like the fable, is to take a position on an issue. The goal of the morality tale is to be a life lesson to those who would veer in another direction. The key difference between the morality tale and the fable is the use of human beings rather than animals in the story.

If your idea lends itself to allegory and seems to serve as a life lesson for a particular group—adolescents, young women, elderly men—the morality tale could be a very useful device.

As a form the morality tale seems fresher, more creative than a more realistic approach. The danger, however, is that your audience may not be receptive to the treatment if it is too simple and is interpreted as being aimed at young children rather than adults. This is the most subtle problem associated with using the morality tale as a framing device.

The morality tale offers the widest possibilities for stories. Your story can be as simple as the tale of a property tax collector and a property owner or a script about the origins of war, such as Norman McLaren's great short film *Neighbours*. There are numerous collections of such tales that can illustrate

the form for you. Reading such tales will help you appreciate the shape of this particular form.² Elizabethan drama, such as *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, is also a good source for morality tales.

The Journey

The journey has a broader shape than the morality tale or the fable, but because it is so often used we include it as a shaping option.

The *journey* is the oldest, truest, most inescapable shape for a story. From the nursery story to biblical narrative to contemporary novel, someone is always setting out from home.³

Whether the idea revolves around life as a journey or a specific journey, the form offers a wide band of opportunities. And as a form it is more open-ended regarding interpretation than the morality tale, fable, or satire. If you are less sure how you feel about a subject, the journey is a safer form to undertake.

The Event

The *event* is another general shaping form, but it is less open-ended than the journey. Using this shape emphasizes a particular happening. It also has implications, particularly for the character. Either the character will achieve greatly or fail greatly in the course of the event.

One of the benefits of using the event as a shaping device is that it concentrates the drama of the story, creating a useful intensity and a natural rise to the story. Once you determine how you want the audience to feel after the event, you will have a strong sense about whether the event is the best shaping device for your idea.

VOICE

Once you decide upon the shape that will frame your story, you need to bring to bear the operating principles that will help us move through your story. How we should feel about the events of a story and a character are colored by the voice of the writer. If no voice is present, the script seems shapeless.

The first operating principle to decide on is *voice*, your attitude toward the idea. How do you want us to feel at the end of your story?

In order to articulate a tone, you need to make a number of choices. How close do you want us to get to the events of your story? If you want to get us deeply involved, you will choose events that place the character in intense

situations, close to the dramatic core of the story. If, on the other hand, you want us to have a more distanced relationship with the events, you position the character further from the dramatic core. In fact, if you want to create a sense of detachment, you should employ irony to distance us from the story. That distance will allow us to reflect upon the character and what is happening to the character. This sense of detachment or irony is particularly useful in the morality tale, in the mockumentary, and in the satire. An ironic tone will give you a more deeply intense approach. Is it useful to you to interpose yourself so definitely into the story?

TONE

The second operating principle, *tone*, is an offshoot of voice. An ironic tone is most related to voice. Irony is directional about how we should feel about plot and people. If you are telling a love story from a cynical point of view, your tone will be cynical. On the other hand, if your goal is to describe a positive relationship, a romantic tone may be more appropriate.

The writer creates tone by relying on the type of observation incorporated into the story. If romance is your goal, the beauty of the day can be as useful as the beauty of the date.

Beyond the issue of visual detail, a second element of the tone is the relationship of your main character to the screen story.⁴ Is the character in the middle of the story, or positioned as more of an observer? Every decision you make about dialogue, visual detail, and narrative structure will support a particular choice of tone.

CONFLICT AND POLARITIES

The central role of conflict in the development of your story cannot be overemphasized. Throughout your story the struggle of character against character, character against setting, character against community, and character against society mines the dramatic possibilities. And you should maximize those dramatic possibilities in order to tell your story.

This may seem synthetic, mechanical, and forced, but it must be that way. Unlike real life, dramatic life relies on coincidence, intensification, and artifice in order to fulfill the dramatic intentions of the writer. Real life too has its conflicts, but they are not quite as accelerated as dramatic life. A writer must use conflict to advantage in the story.

You should make the most of all the opportunities the frame you've chosen yields in terms of conflict. You should also highlight the opportunities the voice and tone choices offer as well. Clearly a more distant voice neutralizes some of the opportunities for conflict. Nevertheless, you should make the most of those that remain.

Use polarities to facilitate conflict. Conflict is amplified by polarities of character, behavior, goals, and situations. It is crucial for you to use as many polarities as possible. Using them will make your job as a writer easier.

Here are some illustrations of useful polarities:

A physical polarity is readily apparent in the blind detective. How is he going to discover the solution to the crime if he can't see? A detective investigates a crime. How can he investigate (see) and solve the crime (interpret) if he is blind? Here the opposites pose more conflicts within the character.

A behavioral polarity is the sadistic minister in Ingmar Bergman's autobiographical screenplay *The Best of Intentions*. The minister is expected to be loving and filled with charitable feeling; instead he is needy and cruel when it comes to his own family. We expect a minister who is father to his congregation to be a great father, the ideal to his family. But this minister is so needy that he becomes the opposite of the ideal father.

Other behavioral polarities would include the ignorant professor, the licentious pediatrician, and the meek athlete.

If you add other characters who are opposites to the characters described (for example, the fiercely competitive coach of the meek athlete, the saintly son of the sadistic minister, the brilliant student of the ignorant professor), you create polarities with dramatic possibilities.

This same technique applies to setting as well. Maximizing polarities increases your storytelling options.

CHARACTER

Decisions about character are key in the writing of your screenplay. Not only do we enter the story through the character, we also translate the events of the story through the eyes of the main character.

Consequently, how to position your character in the story is the first decision to be made. The second task is to explore who the character is and how the character can help amplify your idea. The romantic nature of the main character in Robert Enrico's *Incident at Owl Creek* makes his fate all the more tragic. If he were a Confederate spy, the story would not have the same resonance. Indeed, if he were a spy, the metaphorical level of the film regarding the tragedy of war would be lost. If he were a spy, the story would be a tale of retribution rather than a humanistic condemnation of war.

The third task is to examine the relationship of the main character to the antagonist. The more powerful this relationship of oppositional characters, the greater the dramatic impact of your story.

Finally, you should examine how the issue of character relates to the question of allegory. Does the character have the capacity to be considered "everyman" or "everywoman"? If the character has this more general quality as well as the other characteristics you have given him, the story is elevated to an allegorical level.

THE DRAMATIC CORE OF THE STORY

You are gripped by your idea, you have found a frame for the story, and you've developed conflict, polarities, and character in the film script. What is the dramatic heart of your story? Until you can answer this question, you won't be able to determine the proportions of scenes to one another. Where should the emphasis be placed? The answer to this question will determine the shape of your story.

In *Incident at Owl Creek*, the core of the story is that the condemned man, although he dreams of freedom and his family, will be executed for the crime of being found near the railroad tracks. His crime and the punishment for that crime should inform and shape the whole story. It is the dramatic core of the story.

The dramatic core in Norman McLaren's *Neighbours* is that belligerence—no matter how trivial—once it has begun, is all but impossible to stop. There is an escalation to territoriality that goes from possessiveness to competitiveness to active rivalry to hostility and on to murder. Nothing can stop the disagreement until it reaches its logical conclusion: the mutual murders of the two neighbors.

There is a drive to the core idea that influences the writing of all scenes. Its energy source is a magnet for the character and his actions. In a sense, the core idea is the engine of the script.

To illustrate the development of the dramatic core, we turn to a treatment by one of our students at New York University, Adisa Lasana Septuri, entitled *The View from Here*.⁵

We are in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, the home of Iron Mike Tyson. A community filled with laughter, pain, and hope. MONTAGE OF NEIGHBORHOOD—young men on the basketball court, girls playing hopscotch, old men sitting on milk cartons, etc. A thirteen-year-old boy named Derrick is leaving his house carrying a football. He pauses a moment to secure his leg brace, and then hurries off. He bumps into a neighbor; they greet, but Derrick is in too much of a hurry to stay long.

Derrick runs over to a group of kids. They are selecting teammates for a game of touch football. Everyone is picked except Derrick—being left out and unable to play, Derrick sits on his porch watching the game from the sidelines.

Unexpectedly, one of the kids twists his ankle, and Derrick gets his golden opportunity to play—although, now

the kids won't throw the ball to him. After two unsuccessful plays, Derrick's team decides to throw him the LONG BOMB. As the quarterback releases the football, it goes high in the sky. Derrick runs the length of the block while the football is going higher and higher. As Derrick crosses the street, a car almost runs him over.

The driver comes to a halt just long enough to look up and see the football flying overhead. Next we see Derrick catching a subway train to Manhattan. When he comes out of the subway exit, he looks up and sees the football soaring way up high. We then see Derrick knock a woman down at a bus stop.

We cut back to Derrick in the neighborhood. The football is coming down, and Derrick dives for it. The football just glides off the tips of his fingers, and rolls to the curb. Derrick's face shows grim disappointment. As the kids all gather around him, the air becomes very tense. After two long seconds the kids laugh, encouraging Derrick to do the same.

FADE TO BLACK

The dramatic core idea of *The View from Here* is that a thirteen-year-old boy wants to belong so much that he can run all over the city trying to catch a football finally thrown to him. His desire to belong is so great that the fantasy that a football could be thrown so far seems suddenly believable. Consequently, this football game is not just a football game. His efforts surpass what is realistic. His desire to belong is so great that we accept a reconfiguration of the meaning of "the long bomb."

PLOT POINTS

It's a good idea to write down a list of plot events that might help your story. You should be as generous in terms of plot as possible at this stage. You will not necessarily keep all these events in your story, but the list will help you look for a logic in the plot to surround the dramatic heart of your story. The list will also help you begin to think about proportion between events. Is one event more important to the plot than is another?

Preference should be given to those events that introduce surprise into the plot. Consideration should also be given to those events that reveal character.

ORGANIZING TO TELL YOUR STORY

In organizing events around a core, it is critical that you include a rise in action in your story. This may mean the organization within the natural dimensions of the form. For the journey, for example, this may mean that the journey has a beginning, a middle, and a destination.

The rise in action may also be organized in terms of the character and his or her goal. In this case, the story begins with the articulation of the goal and ends when the character either achieves his or her goal or fails to achieve it.

The Beginning

Where and how you begin your story will set the tone for the script. It will also be the invitation to the audience to engage with your story. The more compelling the opening, the more likely we will be engaged quickly with your story. This is all the more true with a short script. The opening should maximize the dramatic possibilities of the story.

Middle

The journey has begun, the event is underway. In the middle of your story, you must concentrate on the mechanics of the struggle, of the confusion, of the desire, so that we understand how difficult the undertaking is for the main character.

What is notable about the middle of the story is that the character's goal seems more difficult to achieve than it did at the beginning of the story. The journey is now more complicated; the event is not what it seemed. There may now be doubt that the character can achieve his or her goal.

End

The concluding section of the screen story should answer the question, did the character achieve his or her goal? Was it as he or she expected? There also should be a sense that the character has in some way changed or gained understanding because of having undertaken the journey or having experienced the event. What has brought him or her to that understanding is of greater dramatic intensity than the struggle of the middle or the articulation of the goal in the beginning.

Climax

One key event takes the character to the summit and that event is the climax of the story. The event will involve the antagonist and the resolution of the main character's struggle with the antagonist.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

It is very easy for writers to rely on mechanical solutions to narrative problems. Transforming an idea into a script means attending to dramatic principles and forms; however, too often the writer unwittingly can fall into the trap of taking the path of least resistance: the mechanically correct rather than the creatively desirable dramatic solution.

In essence, avoiding mechanical solutions means keeping your awareness of, excitement about, and commitment to the original idea in the forefront. Only by finding energetic and interesting solutions to problems encountered in translating your idea into a short film will you end with a story as exciting and as interesting as your original idea.

THE ROLE OF ENERGY

Your dramatic story needs a level of energy in the script that keeps the viewer primed and more receptive to the creative solutions you develop. Energy should come from every source—the frame of your story, the nature of your character, the character's goal, the barriers to that goal.

If you have done your job well, you will not have to write dialogue at the level of a scream in order to simulate energy in the screenplay. The development of polarities and the interjection of an element of surprise will provide the story with energy.

THE ROLE OF INSIGHT

Surprise and energy lead to insight. When you and I discover something about a person, a place, a time, something we never knew or had forgotten, we've experienced an insight. Just as your main character should experience insight about him- or herself because of experiences in the script, so too should the audience gain insight about themselves.

All of us want to learn all the time. It's the great payoff from reading or viewing stories. When they are very good, they teach us, as all positive and negative experiences should.

Insights into people, places, and times give us clues to our own lives—what we want and what we don't want from our lives. Insights are the shared moments between writer and viewer, the point at which we are closest. In script writing, they are the most powerful moments in the act of telling a dramatic story.

EXERCISE 15

Identify two ideas for short films that you will work with in this exercise. One idea should be autobiographical. It should be a painful incident from

the past. One approach to articulating this idea is to write a letter to a real person who was not involved in the matter.

A second idea should be drawn from a newspaper, also describing an incident that captures your interest. Use the incident to write a letter to a person who was involved in the incident. Write the letter as if the incident happened to you.

Using these two ideas choose a frame or genre for each story. Once you have decided upon a genre, answer the following questions or complete the tasks below:

1. Do you want an intense or distancing treatment of this story?
2. Name five strategies to intensify your story.
3. Name five strategies to distance us from your story.
4. Identify five potential conflicts in each of your stories.
5. Identify five polarities that you will use in each story.
6. What is the most important idea in your story?
7. How does this idea relate to each of the conflicts in your story?
8. List ten events or plot points in your story.
9. Organize those events along a rising action.
10. Which event best opens your story?
11. Which event best closes your story?
12. What is the climax of your story?
13. Add three surprises suitable to your story.

NOTES

1. Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 335.
2. Two collections of such tales are Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1988) and Bernard Gotfryde's *Anton the Dove Fancier and Other Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1990).
3. Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1991).
4. For an elaborate treatment of this relationship, see K. Dancyger and J. Rush, *Alternative Scriptwriting* (Boston: Focal Press, 1991), 154.
5. Adisa Lasana Septuri, *The View from Here*, Graduate Department of Film and Television, New York University, New York, 1990.

CHARACTERIZATION STRATEGIES

Who is your story about? And why have you chosen this person? The answers to these key questions will go far toward helping you write your short script.

The first impulse of writers is to spend less time on the characters in a short film. The thinking is that because you have less time, you, therefore, implicitly need less characterization. This is totally wrong. In fact your short film relies principally on character. Unlike the long film, there is less time to deal with the complexity of relationships, but the viewers must feel that your main character has a complexity purposeful to the type of story you choose to tell. For example, in *Incident at Owl Creek*, it is true that we don't have a profound understanding of all the dimensions of the principal character, but we fully understand his desire to live rather than to die. Similarly, we understand the two men in *Two Men and a Wardrobe* to be naive in a cynical world. But at least they believe in something! In both cases we understand and empathize with the characters in the context of their goals. Short films, therefore, do not tend to develop complex relationships between characters, but they do rely on complex characters.

Another feature of characterization in the short film is the speed with which the main character must be established. Again, the issue of time constraints means that the writing has to exercise considerable economy in characterization. Here the suggestions of E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* are relevant. Forster speaks of *flat characters* and *rounded characters*. Flat characters, he says, in their purest form are constructed around a single idea or quality. And one advantage of flat characters is that they are easily recognized whenever they appear. Round characters, however, are more complex and, unlike the flat, capable of surprising us. A round character has the incalculability of life about him or her and is a more unpredictable character.¹

Flat characters, because they are readily recognizable, are often the starting point for the writer. Two naive men, one southern gentleman, a young

urban boy—these are all at one level stereotypes. Again, the advantage is that they are readily identifiable. It is for the writer to shift them slightly so as not to lose the benefit of recognition by the audience but, at the same time, to gain an edge of surprise once the character is ever slightly rounded.

A third aspect of character development draws on the Aristotelian position that character is habitual behavior. Or to put it another way, we are what we do.² The characters in screenplays are also defined by their actions. Working with Konstantin Stanislavsky's ideas we begin to add a dynamism to those actions. Stanislavsky suggests that the inner life of the character is concealed by the outer circumstances of his or her life.³ If Aristotle suggests that action defines character, Stanislavsky suggests that the energy of character is often a byproduct of the tension between what the character wants to do and what the character feels he should do in a given situation. Elia Kazan, the great director of theater and film, used this dynamic tension and suggests how the character could externalize these complex feelings. As a director, he is looking to turn psychology into behavior.⁴ This means transforming what a character is thinking and feeling into physical action. If Aristotle emphasizes behavior as character and Stanislavsky links that behavior to an inner life that may be at odds with external circumstances, Kazan points out the dominance of inner life as the more complex—or for character, more *true*—source of character. The relationship between inner feeling and outer action is very useful for the writer because it is those outer actions that define character.

POSITIONING THE CHARACTER

In most forms of storytelling, there are a variety of options available to the storyteller as to the position of the main character in the story. A third-person position makes the character an observer; a second-person position places the character in the position of guide through the story; and, finally, the first-person position places the character in the middle of the narrative. The story is happening to the character.

In prose, poetry, the short story, long pieces of fiction, and plays, all of these choices can work and not be detrimental to our experience of the story. In film, however, the story works best when the first-person approach is taken so that the character is positioned in the middle of the story.

To illustrate, let's explore what happens when the character is presented in the third person. In this type of story, the plot evolves, and the character watches it evolve. The character does not suffer because of the plot. The character may alter his or her views because of what he or she sees happen, but the character does not have a great deal at stake. The question then is, what is the influence on us when we see the story as voyeurs, watching the story just as the main character watches the story?

Watching the story results in a diminution of dramatic opportunity. What conflict can the main character have beyond a difference of opinion? The

main character as voyeur does not have his or her goal directly challenged. Characters in the third person may modify their goals because of what they see, but there is no direct challenge in the narrative to their goals because they do not come into contact with the other characters in the story. The result is that conflict, if it does exist between the main character and other forces or characters in the story, remains cerebral rather than emotional. And the dramatic tension in the story diminishes.

Why other forms of storytelling can succeed using a main character positioned in the third person has to do with the possibility in the other forms of having more than one voice. It is not unusual in a play or a poem to be aware of the author's voice as well as the character's voice. In film the author's voice must be subsumed under the voice of the main character. The reason for this is that there is a level of suspension of disbelief in a play that is necessary in order to accept the play as an experience. This is the case as well in a poem, although in a poem the reader has far more control over the experience than he does when attending a play. A poem is privately read; it can be discarded at any point or picked up at any point. A performed play begins and although viewers can choose not to stay, if they do stay the actors and director hold greater control over the experience than the viewer does. Suspension of disbelief and control influence the readers and the viewers to accept the form and its characteristics.

In film, on the other hand, the story looks real. Far less suspension of disbelief is necessary, and the viewer has no control over the place or nature of the story. Consequently, the invitation to the viewer is to engage directly with the story. The main character offers us the most direct access to the story, and so the viewer enters the story through the main character. Multiple voices confuse us and determine identification with the main character. First person identification is the most powerful. Third person is used in film satire, a form not as involving as first person.

We may be aware as viewers of short film of the voice of the author, but the voice is generally secondary to our relationship with the main character. Authors, filmmakers, and writers whose views are not subsumed under the main character's are accused of being stylists or, worse, pretentious filmmakers. Both labels imply a failure to engage the viewer in the film narrative. The route to that engagement is through the main character.

What happens if the writer attempts a second-person position, the position of character as interpreter? There are film stories in which the main character shares first- and second-person point of view. In John Osborne's screenplay of *Tom Jones*, the main character is generally a conventional first-person main character and occasionally a second-person main character. At those moments he turns directly to the screen and addresses the audience. The same technique of using the main character to narrate is found in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Whether it is a direct on-screen second-person appeal to the audience or whether it is the use of the main character as an off-screen narrator, the result is to alter our relationship with the main character from one of involvement to one where we step out of the relation-

ship and reflect upon it. This distancing device serves to generate empathy for Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*.⁵ However, the technique does nothing but draw attention to itself in *Tom Jones*. In this sense the Brechtian device of alienating us from the character in order to reflect upon the subtextual political or social commentary does not work. It is a style that is counterproductive to the dramatic elements of the story much as the third-person position is.

The second-person position, then, is a risk for the writer. The danger is that the writer can fracture our relationship with the story. The gain can be that the writer succeeds in commenting upon the character, his or her behavior, and his or her view of society.

The best approach to the main character is in the first-person position where the character is in the middle of the story. Events happen to the character. Barriers exist in the story that challenge the character's goals. In this classical situation, the position of the character best serves the narrative purpose of the film script, and the writer can take advantage of the mechanics of conflict, polarities, and a rising action in order to engage the viewer most effectively in the screen story.

The Main Character and Secondary Characters

The main character's positioning in the story is only one issue of positioning you will have to consider. The second concern has to do with the positioning of the secondary characters in relation to the main character. The reason that this is crucial is that it is only through interaction with the other characters that the main character moves through the plot. The rungs of the dramatic ladder are, in a sense, built with the secondary characters. The issue for the writer, then, is how to deploy the secondary characters for maximum impact in the story.

Given the issue of scale in the short film, writers employ fewer secondary characters than in the long film. The amount of time used in characterizing the secondary characters is also far less. Although this may mean disproportionate reliance on stereotypes for the secondary characters, a more productive approach is to relate the secondary characters to their role in the plot of the film. They have a specific purpose in the plot, so complex characterization is far less important in their case.

In this sense, the secondary characters may be considered catalysts for the plot. Generally, there are two types of secondary characters: those who propel the main character toward his or her goal and those who stand as barriers to the achievement of that goal. In *Incident at Owl Creek*, the Union soldiers are clearly barriers to the main character's achieving his goal. His wife is also a secondary character, who helps move the main character toward his goal.

The Main Character and the Antagonist

One particular secondary character, the antagonist, acts as the greatest barrier to the main character. In *Incident at Owl Creek* this is the commanding Union officer who officiates at the execution.

It is the complexity and dynamics of the relationship between the antagonist and the protagonist that is at the dramatic core of the film narrative. The more powerful that relationship, the more powerful the screen story. Because this relationship is so important it merits further discussion here.

In the longer film the relationship of the main character to the antagonist is used to create a heroic dimension to the main character. The greater the adversary, the greater the hero. However, heroic action is less credible in the short film, given its scale. Consequently, the antagonist has to fulfill other narrative goals. The antagonist is the principle barrier to the main character as presented in the plot. The characterization of the antagonist however is not used to amplify the character of the protagonist. The relationship is no less important than it is in the long film, but by necessity it is different.

What is the narrative goal of the antagonist? The antagonist must provide a scale of opposition to the main character that makes the main character's goal difficult. To illustrate, let's take a look at the great student film by George Lucas, *THX 1138*. The main character in this futuristic film is a human being who is trying to escape his life as a drone in an underground world controlled by technology. In the main character's particular journey, there is no one character who fulfills the role of antagonist. Rather there is a plethora of control devices that are computer-driven and machine-operated. In this world, computers, as an expression of technology, are the enemies of human beings. As a group, they function as the antagonist of *THX 1138*. They are the masters from whom the main character is trying to escape.

In the plot of the film, the difficulty of mastering the computers because of the scale of technology they can call upon makes it seem almost impossible for the main character to escape. They oppose all forms of humanness. The antagonists require total submission by the main character. The protagonist requires freedom from the tyranny of the machines. Here the classic science fiction struggle between humanity and technology works because the protagonist-antagonist relationship is at the very core of the dramatic idea.

Short films work best when the protagonist-antagonist relationship drives the plot of the screen story.

CHARACTERIZATION

The full range of physical and behavioral characteristics should be employed to develop your story. The physical looks of character can help your story. Height, weight, age, gender, together with cultural and professional characteristics, flesh out the look of a character. The more specific you can

be about the character, the more likely those qualities can be helpful in your story.

If your story concerns peer relationships, the emphasis on appearance becomes very important. Recall the young African-American boy in Adisa Lasana Septuri's *The View from Here* described in the last chapter. The fact that the boy has a limp and that the other boys are playing football presents a situation where the main character has a physical impediment to being accepted by his peer group.

We can imagine other stories where the physical characteristics of the main character are central to the story. For example, let's imagine a story of a first-time director who gets his chance when his mentor is fired. This story is vitalized by the youth of the main character and his relationship with the older mentor. Another story of powerful forces in place to oppose the main character might be the story of the poor-sighted bureaucrat who begins to have visions of a new way of doing business. Here sight and poor sight are key physical elements.

Behavioral characteristics can be as important as physical ones. In *Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lechter (played by Anthony Hopkins) is a brilliant, but insane, psychiatrist who is a great danger to his patients. The behavioral quality of madness in a man whom, in particular, society expects to be sane is an excellent example of how behavioral characteristics can be used in a dramatically dynamic manner.

Behavior needn't be as extreme as that of Hannibal Lechter. It can be less obvious. Here Psychology 240 becomes useful. In a recent classroom discussion, considerable student dissatisfaction was voiced about a character in Joe Eszterhas's *Music Box*. The problem was that the character was a good father and grandfather and seemingly a good citizen of his adopted country. He was also tremendously fit for a senior citizen. The flaw was that he had been a Nazi collaborator in Hungary and had killed ruthlessly. The students were dissatisfied that the character in the screen story did not own up and confess his past to his own daughter, the protagonist of the story, who defends him legally and emotionally until the evidence is irrefutable.

How could the character lie so deftly even to his own daughter? The answer is that the behavior he exhibits is that of a sociopath. He believes in all sincerity what he says. But in the next breath he can be caught up in a lie, which he will deny with some indignance. What the students were confronted with in this character was a behavioral characteristic that was right at the character's dramatic core. Lying was at the core of this character's behavior. Without it, the plot and the main character's dilemma are far less interesting.

Behavioral characteristics run the full gamut of human behavior. They require that writers be sufficiently observant so that they may use these characteristics for effect.

In both physical and behavioral characterizations writers tend to use extremes. Not only are extremes more useful dramatically, they are also more memorable for the audience. We are gripped by extremes for an obvi-

ous reason: they are more sensational than middle-range qualities. Film stories are extremely well suited for the sensational.

Singular Qualities of Character

The behavioral and physical qualities of characters are important dimensions. However, they do not necessarily link character to goal. Here a sense of purpose is necessary. It is critical that writers link the character to a goal powerfully in order to animate the plot.

Different writers will speak of intentional characters or energized characters. It doesn't matter which term you use. What is important is that there is a palpable internal quality that pushes your character in a particular direction. This drive is as important to your story as the dominant behavioral or physical qualities you have given your character. The drive is the fuel for the plot. Without it your character is passive and acted upon rather than reacted to. A passive character can work in a short film, but by choosing a reactive character, you flatten the conflict and position your character as much as an observer as a participant. The result can be counterproductive in dramatic terms. The active, obsessed main character is the most useful in the narrative. Once the plot begins, there is a natural tension between plot and character that will carry the audience more easily through the story.

Drawing Out the Character

Writers may use several other devices to make a character more vivid for an audience. The quality most often used to engage us with the character is humor. Whether the character uses humor to deal with his or her situation or whether the humor arises from the character's response in a situation, humor plays a critical role.

A second device is to allow the character to step out of his or her public self for an opportunity at private revelation. While the audience primarily sees the character in action in the world, the writer can introduce the private dimension by putting the character into a vulnerable situation. We expect a particular response from the character based on our experience of the character so far. If, instead, we see a vulnerable or more private, less-anticipated response or side to the character, the writer will have succeeded in setting up the kind of paradox that yields sympathy for the character. We feel the character has shared a private moment with us, the viewers, and the relationship between character and viewer is thereafter transformed.

A third device writers use to draw us into a character is the role played by the antagonist. The more powerful the antagonist's resistance and hence power, the more likely we will empathize with the plight of the main character. All of us have had goals thwarted by people or events. We understand the position of the main character, and we will empathize with him or her.

It is critical that the character try to move toward his or her goal. But it is just as critical that the writer draw us into his or her struggle.

The Importance of Research

It should be clear by this point that the writer not only must have a clear understanding of the craft of writing but also should be a student of human behavior.

To understand behavior is to be able to use action purposefully in a story. We are not suggesting that you rush off and do a Ph.D. in psychology. We are, however, suggesting that you become curious about human behavior.

We suggest that you make notes and observations of behavior. When you observe a young child pinching a dog, speculate as to why. You don't have to be right about the reason, but you should formulate a reason that makes sense to you. Why does your doctor write prescriptions with a fountain pen? Why does the grocery clerk double-check the punched-in prices and the bagged groceries? Why does the professor arrive late every week for class? Why does the surgeon doze off as soon as he sits down at lunch?

The questions are endless, and only by observing, asking, and understanding will you begin to be able to employ human behavior characteristics in a dramatic way. The key here is research. It doesn't matter if the script you are working on is a work of fiction. The characters in your story have to attain a certain credibility, and so your powers of observation will be called upon so that the characters are interesting and believable.

Your research can be observational or based on others' observations and conclusions. Whether you depend on the library or the lunch bar as your research center, the key is to use those resources to help your storytelling. If you are open to it, your stories will improve markedly.

How much research is enough? Put it this way, when it comes to human behavior we are all students always. There is never enough. There are only the deadlines, self-imposed and real, to suggest it's time to make the film.

Achieving Believability

The drive of the character can be interpreted as manic energy, or it can be interpreted as a drive to fill a deep-seated need. In either case, the comprehension of the drive is the first step toward the audience's believing the character and believing in the character. And by understanding motivation the writer can begin to imagine the physical and behavioral characteristics of the main character.

It is critical for the writer to use a character who has both physical and behavioral qualities that aid the story. If the emphasis is on one element over the other, the characterization may be too flat and believability will be com-

promised. If both coexist in balance, the main character is more rounded and more useful.

Just as the dramatic possibilities are optimized when the writer places the character in the middle of the story, believability will be enhanced if the writer appropriately places the character in the scene. Place your character in a situation that will optimize the opportunity for believability.

The character's behavior in the scene should be an indirect expression of his or her character. Characters whose behavior can be expressed as "get me out of this scene" are not only less credible, they are not very interesting. Taking the opposite strategy of describing a character who wishes nothing better than to be there but acts as if he or she doesn't, we have a tension between character and action that is purposeful to the process of characterization. Simply put, the tension between thought and action creates the sense of seeming caught, possibly trapped. The tension is recognizable as all too human, and implicitly the character seems more credible.

Finally, the specifics of the character's speech in pattern and dialect can enhance believability. We all come from a specific place, belong to a family, and live in a particular time. It's not simply a matter of giving the Scotsman a Scottish accent. The words of his region, the phrases of his profession, the influence of his father, and so on, all will influence his speech. If the writer has been specific about the qualities of speech (here the research is important), we will believe the character.

In this phase of writing it is helpful for you to develop a full character sketch with as much specificity as possible. Include details such as birth order, colloquialisms, and turns of phrase specific to the time period. Middle children, for example, tend to be overlooked. They can talk a lot to get that attention. The meaning of what they say is less important than the degree that they talk in order to get attention. You should note gender, age, and profession, with specific attention paid to how these elements might influence speech.

Achieving Complexity

Characters may have drive as well as numerous characteristics that make them believable. They may employ humor to be charming and use language that tells us they are working-class Scots from the far north of the British Isles. But there remain a number of steps in the writing process before we view the character as a complex human being, inscrutable, fascinating, real.

In order to achieve complexity, the writer needs a character who is a person as well as a symbol, in a sense a character who is both a type and an archetype. Start with the signature of the character. By signature we mean identifiable *signage*. Some characters have a particular phrase identified with them; others have a marked behavior or response to situations. Whether it is a phrase or a behavior, signage is very useful in marketing your character. It is also the first step in the creation of a more complex character.

The next step is to give your character a repetitive behavior pattern. This may be habitual behavior or opportunities to reinforce verbal or behavioral signage. In either case you should introduce this early in the story and reinforce it as the story proceeds.

Repetitive behavior, particularly in situations of stress, is understandable and will both identify and humanize your character. Excellent examples of habitual behavior include eating and greeting people in a particular manner, a compulsive need for human contact such as touching, always mailing letters from the same postbox, and always taking the same route to work. The key element here is that repetitive behavior particularly around everyday events suggests the power of the emotions over the power of reason.

Repetitive behavior also suggests an underlying feeling. The contrast between the emotional and the rational conveys the idea that both levels are constant and are in conflict. The behavior also implies that the emotions are winning out. The resulting impression is of a character struggling with him- or herself, and the repetitive behavior suggests he or she is failing.

This process creates the sense that the character is a more complicated person than it might seem. The impression is very useful to the writer. It deepens the credibility of the character.

Perhaps the most challenging dimension for the writer is to create a character who is both an individual and an archetype. At what point does the little boy in *The Red Balloon* become every little boy? At what point do the two men who carry the wardrobe in *Two Men and a Wardrobe* become everyman? In both films the repetitive behavior of the characters is excellent habitual signage. But we have to turn to the plots to illustrate how the archetype is achieved in these films. Neither film employs a realistic tone. Or to put it another way, the antirealistic impulse to fantasy runs freely in the narrative. How else can we explain the devotion of these two men to a wardrobe? Or that the balloon takes on more human characteristics than many of the humans in *The Red Balloon*?

Realism suggests that a balloon can't be human and that slavish devotion to a wardrobe is either extreme anxiety or sheer madness. An antirealistic approach, on the other hand, tolerates the humanized balloon and the devotion to a dresser. When a balloon becomes the stand-in for a human, the discovery of the little boy in each of us is not far behind. Fantasy in the plot is the first prerequisite in creating a character who is both a type and an archetype.

A second prerequisite for the creation of an archetype is to frame the story in a genre that favors such a use of character. Satire, the fable, the morality tale all use character in such a way that an archetype is very useful in supporting the core idea of the frame.

Finally, the catalytic event that begins the plot can be a tool in creating an archetype if it is an event with which the audience can readily identify: the delivery of a letter mailed four years earlier from a post office seven blocks away; the arrival of a draft notice; the traffic gridlock that prevents the character from arriving for the job interview; or the long-anticipated date to the

semiformal. All of these catalytic events create a situation each of us can identify with.

What is the advantage of creating a character who is both type and archetype? Essentially, there is the layer of complexity arising from the kind of identification the viewers have with the situation of the character. When an archetype is created, the space for symbolism becomes greater, and, consequently, the meaning of the film can be more layered than is first apparent.

We turn now to the two extreme forms of complex characters: the comic character and the tragic character.

The Comic Character

The comic character and the tragic character are essentially negative versions of one another. The comic character is, however, more flexible in that the writer can employ irony through the character. The comic character will also allow you a range of feeling much broader than the tragic character will allow. For example, you can present the comic character as a clown who reflects on his or her behavior or as a fool who can reflect on the behavior of those around him or her as well. Although you may present both characters as victims, they are far less victims than the tragic character. There are even narrative circumstances under which the writer can even present the fool as a hero, at least in relative terms.

The comic character also has potential for a measure of charisma or appeal because he or she tends to stand apart from peers, whether or not this is a result of their scorn or of his or her choice.

Finally, the benefits of humor in the narrative accrue more readily when the main character is a comic character. The result may be charm, or it may be biting satire. In either case, the comic character tends to energize the narrative in a variety of positive ways.

The Tragic Character

The tragic character tends to be presented as a victim of the narrative. In fables, morality tales, and satire, as well as other types of stories, it is useful to have a tragic main character.

The challenge for the writer, however, is to show the main character struggling not to be a victim. Without that struggle, the narrative is flattened. It is also useful to overdevelop the narrative so that the odds against the main character seem overwhelming. When the plot proceeds like an avalanche, we will have some empathy for the main character as he faces the inevitable.

Finally, the tragic character needn't be sacrificed in vain. But to achieve this you need a witness, a secondary character, in the narrative, someone who will proceed with life differently after having observed the main character's struggle—a person, in other words, who absorbs the lesson of the

narrative. When the main character is a victim, we subtly shift our allegiance over to the witness, thus surviving for another day.

EXERCISE 16

1. List ten objects you own that are meaningful to you, objects you would not want to give up. Characterize these objects briefly, e.g., my grandfather's jackknife, the piece of blue glass I found at Jones Beach, and so on. Choose the five most important. Write any changes in the descriptions you would like.
2. Pick a fairy tale and picture the main character. Describe his or her life. Imagine the possessions that might be meaningful to him or her. List five of these in the same way as in number 1. For instance, in "Little Red Riding Hood" you might list the following: the red-hooded cape my mother made for me; my new patent leather shoes; the little clock my grandmother gave to me for my birthday; my jump rope; my collections of stones from the forest.
3. Write a short paragraph in which your character is alone in a room, then perhaps outside, and, in some way, handles, wears, or uses each of the objects. Remember to use present tense, as in all scriptwriting, and be sure to describe only what you can see and hear. Do not include thoughts or feelings—these must be expressed in the handling of the objects. Remember also that character can be fleshed out by habitual behavior; here is a chance to show us how your protagonist is when alone.
4. After you've finished the last two exercises, read them aloud and try to answer the following questions from the evidence on the page: Does your character enjoy life? Is your character active physically? Is your character reflective? Is your character sensuous? Is your character sad or uneasy? Is your character eager to find new ways of doing things?

The goal here is to understand as much as possible about your character before you begin to write your script.

NOTES

1. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1956).
2. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. Francis Fergusson, trans. and introduction by S.H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 62.
3. Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, ed. Hermine I. Popper (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1961).
4. Elia Kazan, notebook on directing *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Also in Elia Kazan, *A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).
5. As a thoroughly despicable main character, he needs all the empathy he can get if we are to, in any way, identify with him, whether as a young person, a rebel, or a victim.

DIALOGUE STRATEGIES

Like every other dimension of the short film, dialogue has to be exercised with economy and purposefulness. There is no time for lengthy speeches or excessive exposition. Perhaps the most useful strategy with dialogue is to view it as another opportunity to further the emotional drive of your screen story. In this sense, dialogue should be as animated, intentional, and active as the visual dimension of your story. Consider dialogue as much a part of the action of the script as the visualized actions.

The underlying premise here is that language can create a sense of activity and intensity that one usually associates exclusively with visual action. Dialogue and visuals must be partners in the short script. Our goal in this chapter is to show you how to make them partners. Before we do so, however, we will begin with the warning, don't use too much dialogue. This may seem to contradict the previous assertion, but a few illustrations will clarify and contextualize the caution.

What if a film were made up entirely of dialogue. It could work, but the energy, characterization, maturation, and plotting would all come from the same source: the dialogue. Unless that dialogue were tremendously vital, we in the audience might not engage with the screen story as readily as we would if there were visual variety. We also would tire or tune out when sound and dialogue overload took place, in part because the viewer needs more time to interpret sound than visuals. The danger here is that the screen story will bore or tire the viewer.

Even in a less extreme case in which dialogue was not exclusive of other elements, but simply excessive, there would still be an imbalance of too much aural and not enough visual stimulation.

The writer needs to find a proper balance between dialogue and visuals in order to provide viewers with the variety they need to interpret what is being said and seen and to be stimulated by both.

THE PURPOSES OF DIALOGUE

Good dialogue, in the most general sense, gives the characters who speak credibility. Writers know this intuitively every time they wince on hearing bad dialogue. The message is registered: I don't believe this character.

Without this credibility all else fails, since disbelief in character quickly leads to disbelief in plot and in the other dramatic elements of the script. Consequently, the writer does not want to fail with dialogue.

In addition, dialogue can characterize. When characters register their responses to situations, they characterize themselves as bigots or big shots or as highly anxious or supremely confident. While speech is only one path to an understanding of character, it provides the writer with a complement to visualized behavior. And it is through the mix of visual behavior and verbal behavior that we gain an understanding of character.

Dialogue also advances plot. Although, as mentioned earlier, dialogue should not entirely replace visual action, but rather aid and complement it, often effectively placed dialogue abbreviates the need for visual action. For example, imagine a scene in which we stand before an awesome mountain watching some people climb. We can't see the peak; it is covered in the mist and clouds. The visual option is to watch them climb. To show how daunting the task is we can emphasize the difficulty of the climb visually. After sufficient screen time, we will understand the plot: they are trying to go all the way to the summit.

An alternative approach using visuals and dialogue would have the two climbers engage in the following dialogue at the foot of the mountain:

CHARACTER 1

We have about six
hours of light.

CHARACTER 2

You have your boots,
I have my bible.

CHARACTER 1

Let's go. Heaven
is waiting.

They look up at the mist, and then begin to climb.

The purpose of the dialogue is to tell us they want to climb all the way to a peak neither can see. The reference to heaven alludes to the goal but does not state it directly, although to do so is also an option.

Another goal of dialogue is to modulate the tension in a scene. This is usually done with humor. Since this is a very important function we will deal with it later in the chapter, after discussing issues of character and plot in relation to dialogue.

DIALOGUE AND CHARACTER

It is in the specific details of dialogue that the writer develops credibility. Everyone is a member of a family, a community, a country. Speech patterns and phrases are often associated with particular communities. It's not simply a matter of dialect; it's also the slang and the level of formality or informality that is different from one community to the next. The writer who has done research will know that. The members of the audience who know people who "speak that way" will recognize those particulars of speech.

Age and gender will also influence a character's choice of words. And what about profession? A lawyer does not have the same speech pattern as a baseball player. And a young lawyer from Regina, Saskatchewan, will not share the same phraseology with an older lawyer from Manhattan. And an African-American female lawyer from Santa Rosa will again speak differently from the lawyer from Manhattan.

So every factor—age, gender, race, profession, regional association—will alter speech. And if the goal is credibility of character, what that character says will help us believe in who the character is and where the story might be located.

The emotional makeup of a character is also crucial for credibility, and dialogue plays a role in this because it is there that character and plot meet. The reason is not always apparent so let's be explicit. It is the emotional reasons that motivate a character toward a goal, a place, a person and that make that journey dramatic. "I want," "I need," "I must" are the modus operandi of every dramatic form, including the short film. And so we turn now to that meeting point of dialogue, character, and emotion—the plot.

DIALOGUE AND PLOT

Dialogue marries character and plot by demonstrating the emotional motivation of the characters, whether directly or indirectly. The writer articulates the characters' feelings through the particular goal in a scene.

Once the writer determines that the scene's purpose is to suggest that the characters want to climb to the peak of a mountain, for example, or that they will wait endlessly for the Long Island commuter train, the central issue for the dialogue becomes clear: how does the character who has a goal feel about the barriers to attaining that goal? That feeling is what should fuel the dialogue.

The writer's choice of words will make facilitating the relationship of emotion to plot easier. Direct, active words convey more feeling than indirect, passive words. Too many words can be a barrier as well. The conditional tense distances the audience, as does the past tense. That is not to say that a reminiscence about the past can't be emotional. Rather, the writer should try to keep the action in the present and in development and that means active, present-tense dialogue. The more immediate the dialogue is, the more emotional and the more surprising the story will be.

Remember, when dialogue intended to develop plot is separated from character, emotion is lost, and it becomes no more than descriptive. For dialogue to be vital to the plot it must be related to the desires of the character as he or she moves through the plot. Dialogue is only dynamic when it forwards the plot.

DIALOGUE AS TRANSITION

Dialogue can be very useful in providing transitions between scenes. One of the problems the writer faces is the task of collapsing a story that may take place over a lengthy time period and in a number of geographical locations into a script that is less than thirty minutes long. Even the story of one day or one moment, as in the case of Enrico's *Incident at Owl Creek*, requires transitions that will convince us of the dimension, time, and place of the script. Changes of time and place occur in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," making the story seem to take place over a full day whereas this thirty-minute film actually refers to the last five minutes in the life of the main character. The writer has to convince us of the dramatic time, creating a sense of real time by punctuating the end of the action.

Writers can facilitate transitions by simply repeating a phrase. In *Citizen Kane* the repetition of "Merry Christmas" and "Happy New Year" allows us to leap twenty years into the future. Of course, the time shift can be more modest. Either way the writer can use repetition to alert the viewer that one scene or location is related to the next.

A more direct approach is simply to tell the audience in one scene where we will be in the next. When the two climbers in our imaginary film tell us they want to go to the peak of the mountain, we are prepared for the following scene on the mountain or at the peak. The dialogue here can be as pleasing as you want it to be. If this climb is but one of a series of climbs in a series of locations, the dialogue can alert us specifically to the next mountain range or the next phase in this journey. Once alerted, we are prepared for the transition in place or time and will go along.

Because of the dramatic collapse of real time and place in the screen story, dialogue is very important in preparing the transitions so that we can more readily accept and enter the time and place frames of the screenplay. Without those transitions, we would be lost, or worse, indifferent to the screen story.

DIALOGUE TO INTENSIFY TENSION

Just as dialogue is the expression of the emotions of the character in terms of arching toward a goal, it is also the barometer of that arch as the character moves through a scene. Perhaps the best way to understand this notion is to consider that every scene has an arch from the point where we understand the goal of the character in the scene to the point where the character either succeeds or fails in achieving that goal. In either case, the scene should be shaped by a growing anticipation of achieving the goal or the tension between the character and the barrier to success. As the character tries more forcefully to achieve the goal, the tension should grow. Once we know the fate of the character in terms of the goal, that tension is resolved. Dialogue plays a critical role in the articulation of that growing tension.

As with other dramatic elements, the writer should not rely solely on the dialogue to create that tension. Visual action, interaction between characters, as well as the nature of the setting can and should contribute to the scene. If these elements are effective, they free the dialogue to be less direct and more effective. Less direct is the overt expression of feeling, less direct or oblique. More direct would make the dialogue overtly purposeful, less masked and consequently less effective. For example, returning to our mountain-climbing scene, we see that the scene already has an overlay of religiousness in terms of one of the characters and of irreverence in terms of the other. The failing light introduces an element of danger to the goal. If we also introduce another factor, a twisted ankle, we develop a physical barrier to the goal. We have then a personal tension between the climbers; a visual danger, the loss of light; and a physical danger, a twisted ankle, as barriers to the goal. There would be an obvious visual explanation for the danger or tension in the scene. This is more effective (and less direct) than their speaking about the danger of the climb, the time, and their health.

As you might imagine, there are any number of other external factors we could introduce to raise the tension in the scene. But working with the factors we have named—personal differences, the loss of daylight, and an injury—we can construct a scene that progresses through a series of stresses, from the least stressful to the most. These factors can be elements in the dialogue throughout the scene, but when we want to increase the tension, we should shift that dialogue to a factor that understandably yields more tension. For example, references to discarding sunglasses might humorously imply concern about the impending nightfall. The irony increases tension.

The most dangerous factor in the climb to the peak is the loss of daylight. If the personal injury were to worsen, they would stop the climbing. The personal differences are always there regardless. But the daylight, whatever they do or say, will be running out as they progress through the scene. Therefore, in order to increase the tension in the scene, the writer can focus on the loss of daylight in the dialogue, such as the reference to the sunglasses. By shifting the focus between the three factors, the writer can modulate and make more effective the rising tension.

DIALOGUE TO RELIEVE TENSION

Dialogue can be used equally effectively to relieve tension. The writer must keep in mind the arch of the tension as it builds throughout the scene. In order to reduce tension, the writer can employ humor at strategic points.

Humor should not be as direct as a character suddenly stopping in a scene to tell a joke. Although this approach might work, it tends to take the viewer out of the scene. Relief of tension in a scene should keep us in the scene but simply drop the stress of the characters in that scene.

Humor is useful when it surprises and disarms us. As with the other dramatic elements, it can be derived from a visual action. More often, however, it comes out of the reaction of a character to a visual situation. A reference to escalators by a climber who has a physical injury and is attempting to climb a mountain is a surprise, which helps to relieve tension for the audience. Such a reference is an improbable wish than can also give voice to the stress the character feels during the climb.

Humor can range from the aggressive to the absurd. Often writers will have one character in a scene say the wrong thing, tell a joke, or voice a funny complaint that relieves the tension. In this sense, character can be the source of humor. Often that character is the most anxious, the character who carries feeling on his or her sleeve.

NARRATION

Narration occurs more frequently in the short film than in the longer dramatic form. The most obvious reason is the best: there is too little time available to the writer to allow the action to develop. Whether to frame the story or to establish the point of view toward the narrative events, writers of short films often will resort to use of a narrator.

The narrator may be on-screen, as is the grandmother in Lisa Shapiro's *Another Story* (the script is reprinted in the appendix). Or the narrator may be off-screen, a guide or interpreter for the story. The actual dramatic needs of the story will determine whether the narration will be interior or exterior.

Interior Narration

Interior narration is a private monologue on the events of the story. Perhaps it's easiest to think of it as a confession by the narrator to the viewer.

Writers resort to interior dialogue to foster intimacy, deeper emotion, or revelation in the narrative. Some writers believe that a counterpoint of visual and voice strengthens both. In this case, objectified visuals are undermined by the subjective narrator. The interior voice whispers an interpretation that clashes with the visuals that are not intimate but rather formal.

Where an intimate, closer relationship between the character and the

audience is the goal, the interior narration can act as window between viewer and screen story.

In order to intensify a sense of inner voice, some writers will resort to a poetic narration. Others will use the language of passion over the language of science. The dialogue would include words such as "love," "want," and "possess" rather than "respect," "conclude," and "contain." Whatever the approach, the writer chooses language that emphasizes intimacy, feelings, sharing, and insight.

Exterior Narration

An external or distant voice is useful when the writer wants to distance us from or present an alternate view to the visual drama. Many approaches can distance the viewer, but most often the writer will borrow from journalism by using an "on-the-air" narrator or off-screen voice. The purpose is not only to distance the viewer but also to lend an air of credibility to the proceedings.

If the drama is presented as reportage rather than fiction, the audience will develop a different relationship with the dramatic material. This is not always a relationship of respect; the journalistic narration can also undermine the credibility of the drama or supersede it with a new reality. In either case, the exterior narration introduces another voice into the drama. If that voice is purposeful, it can strengthen the dramatic impact of the script.

The specific language of the exterior narration tends to be objective, journalistic, even scientific. The narration is organized to enhance credibility, perhaps a credibility not present in the visuals. Consequently, past tense, conditional verbs, subjunctive phrases, all support the distancing goals of the exterior narration. Too much subjectivity and passion undermines belief; a sense of believability derives from information, usually statistical or scientific.

SILENCE

After discussing narration, we need to note that the visual and dramatic dimensions of the script may become crowded. It is worth considering the absence of dialogue and narration, particularly where one or both have been used in the script.

When a silence is juxtaposed with a scene filled with sound, that silence, momentary or protracted, can be deafening in its dramatic impact. Just as the counterpoint of visual and sound can heighten the drama, so too can a counterpoint of sound and silence. Let's turn back to our climbers on the mountain. They have personal differences, one of them has a physical injury, and as they climb they are quickly losing light. We spoke of the growing tension conveyed in the dialogue, particularly around the issue of impending darkness. A way of using silence effectively would be to shift to silence at

that moment when darkness arrives. Suddenly there is no more dialogue, and it is the characters' sudden silence that screams out their fear. Silences can be as powerful as dialogue and narration.

DIALOGUE AND REALISM

Dialogue as sound is the most immediate device with which the writer creates a tone for the film. The writer can choose to use dialogue to convince viewers that what they are experiencing is real or to undermine the film's sense of reality. In either case, dialogue is the most immediate vehicle to achieve these ends, but the writer has only a brief time to capitalize on that first impression.

In order to deepen the impression of realism, the writer must flesh out and capitalize on the dialogue. This means doing in-depth research and making informed decisions as to time, place, age, gender, race, education, physical qualities, and behavioral characteristics. Every factor about character will and should influence what the character says. And each time the character speaks that sense of realism should be deepened. There is no better way to convince an audience to believe in your characters than through what they say. How realistic and credible your characters are will influence the audience's response to the characters and their story. That's how important dialogue is!

You have to decide what level of realism suits your story, and it is to this issue that we now turn.

THE LEVEL OF REALISM

Many short film genres do not rely on an absolute sense of realism. Perhaps only the mockumentary requires a sense of belief that lasts until the very end of the story. The other genres (the fable, for example) require some realism, but not so much that it crowds out the fantastic, the supernatural from the screen story.

Dialogue can be useful here. In an animated film where the donkey speaks of going to Harvard and the frog speaks of going to M.I.T., we see visually how absurd the notion is, but if the dialogue is sincere and intelligent, on one level we will believe the donkey and the frog. Here, where visually it's difficult to see past the animals before us, the writer must use the dialogue to interject a sense of realism and sincerity.

In genres such as the fable and the parable, it is the balancing between realism and fantasy that is the challenge for the writer. And here, too, the dialogue is critical to introduce that balance. If the language is too objectified it will flatten out the fantastic dimension of the parable; if the language is too passionate, subjective, it will also undermine the parable by seeming too much the viewpoint of the particular character.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we have suggested a variety of strategies regarding the uses of dialogue in the short film. Dialogue can be a highly charged expression of emotion, or it can be a vehicle for moderation in the story. But when in doubt about the use of dialogue, the writer can always rely less on it. If you set up the visual action and the interplay of characters, the drama will unfold with or without words. Many people are intimidated by writing words; they think of Shakespeare and freeze when it comes to the dialogue. If that is your concern, simply use less dialogue and, where you use it, keep it simple. It might not help you as much as you would like, but simple dialogue won't hurt you either. Too many scripts are ruined by inappropriate or excessive reliance on dialogue. Our message is that you can always get away with less dialogue. This is an option you might think about, or if you want to go for broke, reread this chapter.