

S·T·O·R·Y

STORY

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

R O B E R T M C K E E

HC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scene

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For example:

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

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

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

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

Beat

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

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

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

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

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

Sequence

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

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

For example, this three-scene sequence:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Act

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

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

Story

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

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

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

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

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

THE STORY TRIANGLE

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

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

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

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

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

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STRUCTURE
AND CHARACTER

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

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

CHARACTER VERSUS CHARACTERIZATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHARACTER REVELATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHARACTER ARC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER FUNCTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The key is *appropriateness*.

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

CLIMAX AND CHARACTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STRUCTURE AND MEANING

AESTHETIC EMOTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PREMISE

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

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

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

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

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

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

STRUCTURE AS RHETORIC

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

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

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

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

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

CONTROLLING IDEA, "Theme"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meaning and the Creative Process

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

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

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

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

Idea Versus Counter-Idea

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DIDACTICISM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

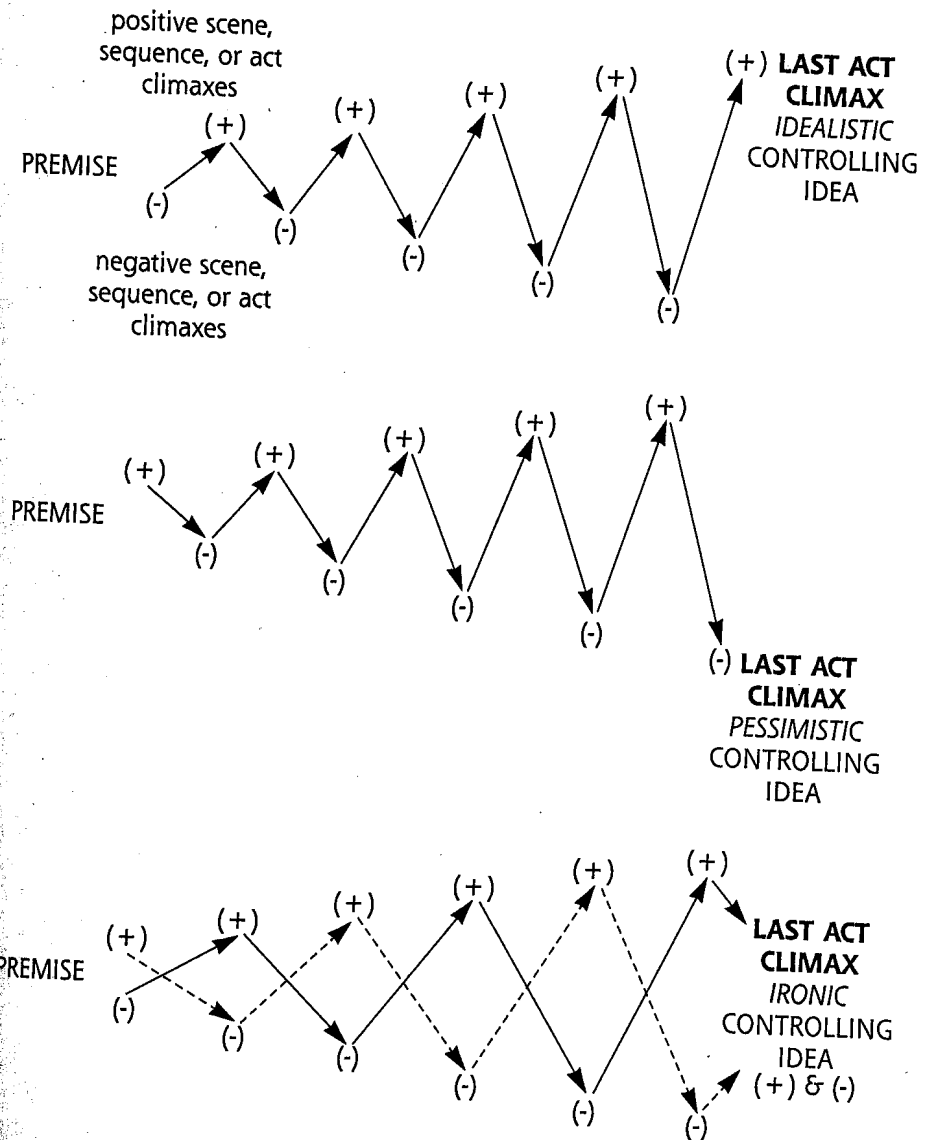
Consider the superb balance of three antiwar films directed by Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick and his screenwriters researched and explored the Counter-Idea to look deep within the human psyche itself. Their stories reveal war to be the logical extension of an intrinsic dimension of human nature that loves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

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

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

IDEALIST, PESSIMIST, IRONIST

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



Idealistic Controlling Ideas

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

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

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

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

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

Pessimistic Controlling Ideas

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

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

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

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

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

Ironic Controlling Ideas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second, the negative irony:

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

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

On Irony

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

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

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

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

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

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

MEANING AND SOCIETY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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