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On Film-making

An introduction to the craft of the director

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The Pre-Verbal Language of Cinema

Speech involves the rationalising of our feelings and impulses, something film directors of the silent era discovered they could catch at first hand.

Through the use of different screen sizes and the framing of shots, the juxtaposition of camera angles and point of view, expressive music and lighting, and the principles of editing, they found that the camera can, uniquely, photograph thought.[1] Since that time, those directors who have made the best use of the film medium have used the camera to communicate to audiences at a level far more immediate and primitive than the spoken word. By primitive I don't mean more simplistic and less subtle. Far from it. Cinema deals with feelings, sensations, intuitions and movement, things that communicate to audiences at a level not necessarily subject to conscious, rational and critical comprehension. Because of this, the so-called 'language' the film director uses may, in fact, make for a much richer and denser experience. Actions and images speak faster, and to more of the senses, than speech does.

A recurring theme of these notes is that cinema is not so much non-verbal as *pre*-verbal. Though it is able to reproduce reams of dialogue, film can also tell stories purely in movement, in action and reaction. Cinematographic images, particularly when synchronised with recorded sound, deliver such quantities of visual and audible data that the verbal component (even, in the days of silent cinema, title cards) is overwhelmed and becomes secondary. Consequently, the essential and underlying meaning of film dialogue is often much more effectively transmitted by a complex and intricate organisation of cinematic elements that are not only not verbal, but also can never be fully analysed by verbal means. Look at this example, taken from André Cayatte's

1. Mackendrick frequently cited D. W. Griffith to students as one of the most important pioneering directors in this respect. 'Today the "close-up" is essential to every Motion Picture,' wrote Griffith in 1917, 'for the near view of the actors' lineaments conveys intimate thought and emotion that can never be conveyed by the crowded scene'. (*Focus on D. W. Griffith*, edited by Harry M. Geduld, Prentice-Hall, 1971, p. 52).

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1949 film *Les amants de Vérone*, as written by Jacques Prévert.

Some visitors are being taken round a glassworks in which the young hero is one of the skilled craftsmen who makes fantastically ornamental goblets, vases and mirrors. One of them is an attractive young actress who is being escorted by an elderly and wealthy man who obviously wants to impress her. She, meanwhile, has taken rather a fancy to the hero. While her escort is buying her a present in the showroom, the hero watches through a glass partition. The girl turns to smile at him through the glass, whereupon he makes a couple of scratches on one of the panes with his diamond glass-cutter and knocks out of it onto her side a small piece of glass in the shape of a heart. She is amused but has to conceal it quickly as her wealthy gentleman friend returns bearing a huge and ornate mirror. He presents it to her proudly. She looks at it and after a moment smiles. But the camera shows us something he cannot see: she is really smiling into the mirror at the reflection of the young man behind.

This entire incident is quick and casual. It probably takes less time in front of the camera than it does to explain in words, and is much more effective on screen than I have told it here. This is the point: it is not the sort of incident a novelist would invent because it is far clumsier to describe than to play out on film. Nor would it make a good piece of action for the stage actor because the effect depends on quick glimpses of detail, the flicker of reactions on faces and a switch of viewpoint by the camera. Prévert is writing for the cinema, and nothing else. The director Alfred Hitchcock has said that during the silent era, the great directors 'had reached something near perfection. The introduction of sound, in a way, jeopardised that perfection.'[2] Hitchcock is suggesting that a good film should be ninety per cent understandable even if dubbed into a language no one sitting in the auditorium understands. Why? Because a well-written, acted and directed film should be able to convey its emotional meaning through the inventive use of film grammar, not words. And it is, of course, the emotional and dramatic content of any scene that really counts.

There is likely to be immediate protest from those students who insist that dialogue is an entirely legitimate component of

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modern cinema. Needless to say, the spoken word can be an important element of storytelling on film, but because cinema is so well equipped to explore action and movement, together with the emotions behind the words (those physical impulses and reactions that both anticipate speech and are a response to dialogue), it is not so dependent on what is actually being said. As Truffaut writes in his interview book with Alfred Hitchcock, 'Whatever is *said* instead of being *shown* is lost on the viewer.'[3] Truffaut's cardinal 'rule' does not mean that a film's cinematography is the only medium of communication in cinema. He is not suggesting that speech has no value or that dialogue does not contribute. But he is pointing out that in cinema, mute action supplies the most basic information, while verbal information adds another, secondary dimension.

3. *Hitchcock*, p. 17.

Though a gift for lively and playable dialogue is perhaps the skill most likely to assure you of a professional career as a scriptwriter, the dialogue-driven screenplay is actually a wholly misguided blueprint for a film. Simply, dialogue is almost always less effective than visible activity in cinema, and not until the screenwriter understands that good characterisation can be made visible through physical behaviour and the riches film grammar has to offer is he truly writing for the medium. This is one of the first things the screenwriter needs to understand before studying the craft of dramatic construction, for it is the job of the writer, *not* the director, to decide whether his film story will be built with images or merely decorated with them.

The film camera and cutting bench, able to manipulate both space and time so efficiently (just as the novelist can vary point of view, to say nothing of his ability to describe and explain internal feelings and thoughts), can do much to express those things unsaid by the characters. Between internal thought (the uncensored and unselfconscious impulse) and deliberately delivered words there may be some contradiction. What we say inside our heads is private, and by putting it into words and addressing it to others we often rationalise and even distort our original impulses and intentions. The best lines of film dialogue are sometimes those in which the real meanings lie between the words, where the spoken lines mask the true and unadulterated feelings of the speaker.

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Such emotions are often visible to the camera, just as they are to an observant human being, because the spoken words frame those revealing and fleeting moments that take place just before the character speaks or as an impulsive non-verbal reaction to what has just been said, seen by the film editor, for example, in shots containing perhaps a barely visible shift of focus in the eyes, an unconscious flexing of jaw muscles, or a gesticulation during a speech. Study, frame by frame, the performance of an expressive actor in close-up and you may be able to find the precise images where the spark of thought or feeling ignites, those impulsive moments that then find expression in the delivery of a line. In the hands of competent film-makers, even the most seemingly inconsiderable dialogue can provide a significance that would be lost if there were more talking. If a scene is genuinely interesting because it is cinematic (in the sense that without speech we can comprehend most, if not all, of what is happening), then the added component of the spoken word will probably contribute something. If the scene is uninteresting in cinematic terms, then layer upon layer of dialogue will only make it more so.

One of the tasks of the director as he transfers a screenplay to the medium of the moving-image-with-sound is almost to forget what his characters are saying and reimagine their behaviour as being mute, so that all thoughts, feelings and impulses are conveyed to the audience through sound and vision – without speech. There is a curious paradox here, for when a scene has been reconstituted in this fashion the director is often able to reincorporate elements of the original dialogue in ways that make it vastly more effective. Moreover, when a script has been conceived in genuinely cinematic terms, its sparse dialogue is likely to be free of the task of exposition and will consequently be much more expressive. A sound principle is to employ expository dialogue as the reaction to events that take place before the lens (remember: movies show and then tell). Invent action or incidents as the provocation for dialogue, because exposition in film is much more interesting after the dramatic event as a comment (or perhaps an explanation) on it. In this sense the dialogue of a well-constructed film will enrich the visuals – it is never merely an extension of what is already obvious to observant audiences (think of title cards in early silent

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films used as punctuation of what is being looked at, not as a substitute for it).

The senior writers at the film studio in London where I worked for many years used to delight in collecting examples of bad dialogue in screenplays. One of their favourites was 'Look, Highland cattle!' This was a quote from a particularly amateur-ish travelogue in which a character pointed off-screen, said this line, and the film cut to guess what? Those three words became shorthand for a piece of wholly unnecessary and redundant exposition used when the story was being told perfectly well solely through visual means. A good director will go out of his way, often in the editing process when he has both words and images in front of him, to gradually eliminate all lines that are not absolutely necessary. In the final film, many pieces of dia-logue are apt to become redundant because the on-screen action is telling the story with more clarity without them. A scene that on paper might seem to be more effective when full of witty and clever dialogue can often play far more meaningfully and effec-tively through subtle moments of silent interaction between characters (moments that are, inevitably, not so easy to appreci-ate when in script form only).

In fact, cinema can be at its most interesting and forceful when images play *against* the literal sense of the dialogue. When what is spoken by the screen actor acts as counterpoint to what is being seen by the audience, dialogue is able to express much more than the literal meaning of the words and so has extra force. In such cases, the uniqueness of the cinematic medium is most apparent. Through this sometimes extremely subtle juxta-position of words and images, the writer and director are able to focus attention on the rhythm of a scene's subtext. By doing so, and by making use of the fact that the camera is able to relate things to audiences subliminally rather than literally, it is possi-ble to tell more than one story at once.

Consider this simple example from Truffaut, who writes of the 'mundane occasions [such] as dinner and cocktail parties, or of any meeting between casual acquaintances':

If we observe any such gathering, it is clear that the words exchanged between the guests are superficial formalities and quite meaningless,

4. *Hitchcock*, p. 17.

5. One figure cited repeatedly in Mackendrick's Film Grammar handouts whose work gives us a deeper understanding of these ideas is German psychologist and theorist Rudolf Arnheim, author of the 1933 book *Film as Art* (Faber and Faber, 1983). In a handout that elucidates Arnheim's ideas, Mackendrick notes that it was during the first thirty years of silent cinema when the underlying and immutable grammar of cinema – the visual and kinetic 'language' which distinguishes it from theatre and literature – was established by the more imaginative directors. 'It's been claimed that before the coming of synchronised sound most of the important techniques of cinema had already been established,' explains Mackendrick. In this respect, he adds, 'talking pictures' were deemed by some to be a 'retrogressive step'.

whereas the essential is elsewhere; it is by studying their eyes that we can find out what is truly on their minds. Let us assume that as an observer at a reception I am looking at Mr Y as he tells three people all about his recent holiday in Scotland with his wife. By carefully watching his face, I notice he never takes his eyes off Mrs X's legs. Now, I move over to Mrs X, who is talking about her children's problems at school, but I notice that she keeps staring at Miss Z, her cold look taking in every detail of the younger woman's elegant appearance. Obviously, the substance of that scene is not in the dialogue, which is strictly conventional, but in what these people are thinking about. Merely by watching them I have found out that Mr Y is physically attracted to Mrs X and that Mrs X is jealous of Miss Z.[4]

Puzzled by the difficulties encountered by many students as they tackle the problems of writing for the cinema, I wonder if this is because we are educated to think verbally. This conditioning to express oneself in literate word systems can be a stumbling block to young writers and directors, a handicap to those trying to master the pre-verbal structures of narrative cinema. For most students, ideas that spring to mind are so swiftly transformed into words that we automatically equate thought with speech and writing, rather than visuals. It has even been argued by psychologists that thinking is not possible without the capacity to verbalise.

It does certainly appear that during our psychological development through the stages of babyhood, infancy and pre-adolescence, the point at which we are said to be capable of thought and abstract reason seems to date from the period when we are also learning to speak. But I am not entirely convinced by this argument. Just as a cartoonist can tell a story in sequential images of action without captions, so a film-maker can imagine a scene told in the pure language of the cinema, a language invented before the birth of Talkies (sync sound). Nevertheless, to translate certain concepts into cinematic forms comprehensible without words, the student may actually have to unlearn habits of verbal thought and return to patterns that are in some ways more primitive. This can be a ruthless learning experience, requiring elimination of our habits of talking in generalities, of failing to be specific and concrete, and of intellectual concepts.[5]

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What is a Story?

Can we define the nature of what we call a story? What are the distinguishing characteristics of a story? Is it content or form? Must a story be a work of fiction? Surely not, since there have been documentaries, biographical and historical, that carefully represent only factual material but nevertheless have as gripping a narrative structure as any work of complete invention. Are there characteristic elements? Does, for instance, a story, whether it presents factual reality or imitations of real life, have to be structured in a particular way? And if so, what are the necessary elements of this structure?

One way to tackle these questions is to explore the origins of the impulses of storytelling as they are seen in the earliest human civilisations and then echoed in the psychology of infants emerging into childhood. It has been pointed out that when a child begins to ask a question like 'Where do babies come from?' and the mother explains about the stork that flies over rooftops, carrying a swaddled bundle that it brings as a present to Mummy and Daddy, this is a much more acceptable reply than information about the semen from Daddy that fertilise the ovum inside Mummy. The tale about the stork (told to a child who has never even seen such a bird) is believable. He or she can handle it, while the stuff about fertility is unacceptable because it raises a lot more unanswered questions. Incomprehensible, it becomes implausible and unbelievable. Note that this point was made a few hundred years before Christ by the man who first tried to set down some laws about drama, Aristotle. He wrote that 'a poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities.'[1]

The child, with its limited experience and simplistic comprehension of life, is trying to make coherent sense out of profound mysteries, and needs any explanations to be satisfying at the

1. S. H. Butcher translation (Dover, 1997), p. 51. Richard Janko's translation makes this point most clearly: 'Impossible [incidents] that are believable should be preferred to possible ones that are unbelievable.'

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2. Claude Lévi-Strauss,
The Savage Mind
(Oxford, 1972), p. 22.

level of his or her understanding. While the stork story is usable, the biological data must wait till the child can cope with it. One can argue, therefore, that such a tale – like the myths of prehistoric times – functions as a 'poetic' explanation of concepts that are beyond the limited intellectual capacities of the listeners to deal with. This may be how drama began. In his book *The Savage Mind*, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss says that 'art lies halfway between scientific knowledge and magical or mystical thought.'[2]

The Greek mind of Homeric days personified all its beliefs. Science was conceived in parable form, with abstract concepts symbolised in the semi-human forms of the gods. This is surely how the imagination of every one of us functions when we are small children. Indeed, it is the way we dream, for dreams are the unconscious mind at work and they have their own language. Psychotherapists will warn you that a figure in a dream should not always be thought of as a person in the same way that the waking mind conceives individuals. Dream-figures are more often personifications of some aspect of the dreamer's psyche. This could be a clue to the psychological purpose of all stories. A story that has fictional characters may be using these figments of the imagination or unconscious in order to act out an abstract thought, an idea, a theme (the underlying dramatic point of the story).

It can be argued that form, in all of the arts, has a mnemonic purpose. A mnemonic is, in popular terms, a device like a piece of doggerel verse that helps you remember some information you might otherwise forget if you could not rattle off the rhyme without thinking. The scansion and rhymes of poetry, whether vulgar limericks or Shakespearean blank verse, have this much in common: they come easily to the lips because the sounds of the words, their formal qualities, make them easy to recall. In a way, a story does this too. The pattern of its dramatic unities, an articulation of connected incidents that function as the plot, makes it easier to memorise. The contrasts of the characters and their patterns of antagonism or of affection are the design of a closed system, the unifying theme of which is, thinking of Aristotle, 'unity of action'.

Anthropologists argue that this was one of the original functions of rites and myths. Primitive magical rituals use rhythmic

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movement, repetitive gesture and musical noise to give sensory unity and comprehension to some otherwise disturbing and fearsome mystery. A myth, it is said, is the verbal equivalent of a rite that serves the same archaic need: to help the primitive mind take hold of a mystery. Stories, even in the contemporary context of mass entertainment, would seem to be successful when they, too, fulfil such a need, something audiences need not even be aware of.

One of the essential components of drama is tension. This tension may or may not be the result of conflict between people on the screen – it doesn't necessarily have to be at the level of plot (though plot suspense is no bad thing). It is rather a tension in the imagination of the audience that leads to feelings of curiosity, suspense and apprehension (for example the audience being torn between contradictory elements of a character). Drama, so said drama critic William Archer, is almost always the effect of 'anticipation mingled with uncertainty'. A good director, therefore, is always asking himself certain fundamental questions. What is the audience thinking? In relation to what has just happened and what might or might not happen next, is it approving, disapproving, fearing or hoping?

In trying to invent film stories that have some narrative/ dramatic tension, it can be useful to recognise the factors that work against tension (though this is not to say that these factors are necessarily bad or wrong). Over a period of some years, I have noted elements of storytelling that a would-be screenwriter should avoid, those things that involve evasions of the more demanding task of real cinematic writing. All of these things are no more than variations on the basic point: don't put into a script things that the camera cannot photograph in action.

Passivity in a character is a real danger to dramatic values. 'Protagonist' (the name given to the leading character in your story) literally means the person who initiates the *agon* (struggle). But a figure who does not (or cannot) actually do things or who hasn't got the gumption to struggle in a way that produces new situations and developments is apt – in dramatic terms – to be a dead weight on the narrative. In effect, a bore. A scene of something 'not happening' will usually be undramatic unless it is

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presented in active terms. This imperative need for positive action to produce tension towards crisis is not (or not quite) as necessary in the literary media. It is generally easier for a literary work than a film to describe non-happenings. A novelist can write several pages about the motives of a character who, in the end, decides to take no action. He can explore the characteristics of his hero and heroine, analyse their feelings past and present, explain their psychology to readers, and act as historian and critic as he interprets the influences that contribute to certain states of mind. A novel or short story can have, in a sense, no story or dramatic progression, no conflict or crisis. Maybe some forms of experimental and personal cinema have little need for dramatic tension, but a narrative fiction film is (more often than not) something else.

Dramatic tension generally requires an element of conflict. The nineteenth-century theorists suggested that conflict requires the presentation of an onstage clash of wills between the hero and his antagonists. Later critics pointed out that in many cases, when a story is really rewarding, the tension may be a matter not of *what* happens, but *how* it happens. This is the effect of tension arising out of aspects of character rather than plot (which we can define, rather untidily, as the sequential progression of incidents with the cause-and-effect connections that have a forward momentum). For example, the suspense in de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* is really much less the problem of Ricci's stolen bicycle than about his relationship with his son.

With Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* – a play that can be studied as the first of all whodunnits – we are pretty sure at a very early stage of the solution to the mystery of Laius's murder, and are not surprised to find out that the guilty man is Oedipus himself. The plot consists in the piecemeal unravelling of a mystery upon which tension is built. Pieces of information and narrative exposition are fed to us in very carefully contrived sequences. Piece by piece, the jigsaw builds the picture of Oedipus's crime. The thing to note is that Sophocles was writing of events that Athenian audiences knew by heart. They knew how it was all going to turn out. But to think that surprise is not a factor when audiences are watching or listening to stories they know the ending of is to misunderstand the very nature of drama. In the case of

Oedipus, the real surprise (to the extent that there is one) is in the reaction of Oedipus himself, something the audience looks forward to no matter how many times it has seen the story told in previous productions. Any parent who tells bedtime stories to infants will recognise something similar in the way their child insists on hearing the exact same story over and over again, as if each new turn of events were quite unexpected. Indeed, there is apt to be emotional protest if the narrator takes undue liberty with the yarn. When finally Oedipus's reaction is presented to us, tension is resolved and the story ended.

When characters are presented in a static relationship, dramatic tension is apt to be weak (remember: 'drama' means the 'thing done'). The beginner is apt to think of character in terms of outward physical appearance, the age, sex, social class or profession of the person in the story. But this matters very little in the sense of the drama. A dramatic character is definable only in relation to other characters or situations that involve tension. A dramatic scene is usually one in which something happens: an incident or an event takes place, the situation between the characters is different at the end of the scene from what it was at the beginning. The equilibrium has been altered and there is some narrative momentum that drives the characters (and us the audience) to a new situation in the next scene.

Many successful screenwriters have a gift for duologues, two-handed scenes that have the vigour of a singles match between two strong players. There may be one character who is more important to the story, but the other (even if he or she is acting as a foil in order to provoke exposition) is kept in play to sustain the other end of the dramatic tension. An all-too-common weakness of the inept dramatist is to write a scene between two characters who are so much in agreement that there is no real conflict or cause-and-effect dramatic progression. When this happens the result is apt to be that their positions are quite interchangeable, an almost certain indication that the scene will have little tension. As a great deal of television drama seems to prove, two-handed scenes can become so much the ping-pong game of service and return that monotony sets in. Note, however, that for characters to create dramatic tension, they need not always clash. Romeo and Juliet's balcony scene, for example is a

3. Mackendrick was impressed by adept use of the foil in all forms of storytelling. He would hand out to students a selection of cartoons from the pages of *The New Yorker* as examples of how to tell stories purely in images, and in particular commended Charles Addams's use of 'the foil, the figure which has been added to the scene as the straight man to the comic absurdity'.

concordance of wills and yet is certainly dramatic. There is tension not because of any struggle between the characters, but because the audience understands that the relationship between boy and girl is going to lead to some later crisis. The powerful suspense in Shakespeare's story may be absent from the emoting of the boy and girl, but it is very well established in our minds as we watch the scene.

Students often exclaim they are uninterested in on-screen conflict, that the most interesting kind of tension is internal, within the mind of the hero. Why, they ask, is it necessary to have an antagonist at all? The answer is that a state of mind is something static. In terms of the camera it is passive, dramatically inoperative and not easy to dramatise in active cinematic terms. When on-screen characters are frustrated, bored or alienated, the situation is not yet dramatic. A bored character becomes dramatically interesting only in the context of the possibility of some escape from his frustration, when his state of mind becomes a catalyst for positive story action. For example, when contrasted with active characters or placed in certain situations, an inactive character is liable to create certain tensions. Simply, if your protagonist is passive it may be necessary to create strongly aggressive antagonists or antagonistic circumstances.

The most effective way of doing this is to think of the antagonist as a foil character, a figure who – like the audience – is ignorant of essential information and therefore asks the questions to which the audience needs to know the answer.[3] These characters are confidants or interlocutors created especially for the purpose of contrasting with other on-screen personalities in order to reveal certain things to the audience (for example Horatio in *Hamlet* and the Fool in *King Lear*). In many examples they externalise the conflicts of the hero, bringing them out into the open, thus creating active on-screen situations. A good example is in *Oedipus Rex* where Creon is antagonist to Oedipus. If you consider that Oedipus's real battle is not with his brother-in-law but with the Gods who punish him (somewhat unfairly) for crimes committed in ignorance, then Creon is simply a dramatic foil. In the Western *High Noon*, the sheriff's crisis of confidence is externalised not through an antagonist but through his newly married Quaker wife.

It is sometimes necessary to create dramatic situations that counteract a character's inaction. How, for example, do you show a man torn between the natural instinct to run away from his responsibility and his reluctant sense of duty? In *High Noon* the sheriff bolts from town and then discovers he simply has to return. His negative thought has been characterised by contrasting it with positive action – his inaction has been shown as the direct cessation of an action. In many cases when something is about to happen but for some reason is prevented from taking place, the non-happening can become dramatic. A similar problem is the need to show a character's disinterest with something, often a negative and passive quality of dramatic importance. On the cinema screen the scriptwriter has to contrast this attitude with active interest. Stanislavsky[4] once asked the question: 'How do you play a man who is bored?' If the actor does nothing then the point is not properly made. But as soon as you define the idea of boredom as being 'interested, but not enough', then it become playable. A bored man is an individual who finds everything interesting to a limited extent. As such, the actor should contrive to be interested in so many things that he isn't really interested in anything very much.

Other things students of screenwriting should avoid are generalisations and indeterminate action. Film treatments (basic plot details in prose form, perhaps with the odd line of dialogue) and scripts are almost always written in one tense: the present. Complex as time dimensions in film may be, they are less free than in the novel where the reader will find several tenses (past, present, future, subjunctive). But there is no equivalent in cinema for indeterminate time. While a novelist can write the adverb 'frequently', an event in a film happens only as often as you show it happening. The author of a screen treatment who writes, 'From time to time, she made a habit of . . .' is simply postponing to the screenplay stage the task of presenting this indefinite and continuing action in an economical and dramatically viable way.

Take the phrase 'the cat sat on the mat.' You can say this in words and the meaning is clear, but it is left to the listener or reader to imagine what kind of cat and what kind of mat. Are we to see in our mind's eye an elegant Siamese with blue eyes, white fur and

4. Constantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938), Russian theatre director and theorist, founder of the Moscow Art Theatre.

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brown markings as it poses on a Navaho rug of intricate design? Or is it a black tabby squatting on a rubber doormat? Words, whether spoken or printed, can communicate relatively abstract and intellectual generalisations. Not so cinema, for though a picture is (so it's said) worth a thousand words, photography cannot help but communicate to the mind's eye a great quantity of very specific data about precisely how things look and move.

What we might call interpretations and editorial comment should also be viewed with suspicion by the screenwriter. Drama, historians tell us, probably originated from ceremonies that centred on choral recitations of narratives about the Gods. As the first Greek playwrights devised the earliest patterns of dramatic presentations, the choral commentary became a standard device. Within a few centuries the function of the chorus was progressively diminished in favour of exposition through interaction and explanations by characters within the story, until nowadays dramatic exposition has come to mean essentially all explanation made through dialogue.

A novelist might not use the first-person pronoun 'I' but will still allow himself total liberty to describe to his readers all manner of things that belong only to his imagination and not necessarily the characters in his story. By describing the internal feelings and thoughts of a character, the novelist becomes omniscient, with an all-seeing godlike mind that can look into the souls of men and interpret them for the benefit of the reader. But the film and theatre writer – regardless of how often his creative-writing teacher encouraged him to express his ideas, thoughts and feelings directly, as 'the voice of the author' – does not have this privilege. His task is to give expression to all his narrative ideas through action and reaction, things done and said. In effect, when translating into dramatic form a story that has been written only for reading, the first character to be removed is often the author himself. The screenwriter will work through the original text and ruthlessly eliminate all editorial comment, every phrase, adjective or adverb added by the author as a clue to how he himself wishes the action to be interpreted by the reader. He will retain only those adjectives, adverbs, similes and metaphors that are of immediate practical value to the actor, cameraman, editor or any of the other craftsmen whose media of

expression are images, gestures and sounds – those things that can be represented on screen.

A narrative is driven by character progression, something that can take more than one form. It can, for instance, be the kind of progression where changes do not take place within a character but rather in the audience's increased understanding of him or her. Or it might be the kind of development in which the protagonist's personality is changed through his or her experiences. The change-of-heart formula is an old one (example: Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*), though it is often too simplistic and not really believable. It has been pointed out that when character changes are convincing they are likely to be the eventual resolving of two conflicting elements that exist within a single personality. An obvious suggestion, therefore, when you are devising characters: look not only for interesting qualities in their personalities but also for those social masks that hide other dramatically exploitable temperaments. Think of characters who may at first appear in a sympathetic light but are then revealed, thanks to certain active developments in the story, to have uglier traits – or vice versa.

Student film-makers are often uncomfortable with the task of inventing characters not as individual entities but as interactive personages. One suspects this is because in the early stages of experimenting with storytelling, the beginner chooses a protagonist that in psychological terms is something of a projection of his own point of view, someone who clearly represents his own attitudes, feelings and thoughts, a thinly disguised or idealised version of themselves. There are two potential problems that need to be considered here.

First, there is a tendency to surround this protagonist with characters who are not nearly as fully realised. Every protagonist needs an *agon*, a struggle with surrounding antagonists, and the nature of this struggle is rather misunderstood among many student writers. So misunderstood, indeed, that the student will insist it is not necessary to have such conflict (or even a plot).

Second, changes of personality are not envisaged, which means such characters may have nowhere to go in the story. Or, to put it another way, the writer might not be able to envisage the direction his protagonist should move because he cannot conceive of such changes of attitude and emotion taking place

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5. *The Third Man* (Faber and Faber, 1988; first published Lorrimer, 1968), pp. 7–9.

6. See 'Exercises for the Student of Dramatic Writing' below.

within himself. But classic patterns work in a very different way. Oedipus comes onstage as proud, noble and more than a little arrogant to open a story that will lead to his disgrace and humil-iation. So when planning a character reversal it is important to begin at a different place from the one you want to end up at. If you have in mind as your protagonist a figure with whom you identify, it makes good sense when you start writing to look for (and even accentuate) those aspects in him or her that you would like to see completely abandoned by the story's end.

In a well-told story, every fictional character functions within a network or nexus, a cat's cradle of character interactions. Certain characteristics of the protagonist and antagonist are revealed often only through relationships with each other or with circum-stances (either external or internal) and events played out in action and reaction. Under the pressure of situations, conflicts, clashes of will or story tension, the ideas that lie behind a story's themes cease to be merely abstract and become people actually *doing* things to each other or *reacting* to the action. As has been already explained, film dialogue is best when it has an immediate purpose and produces visible reactions in others. This is the essence of drama. Because character is not a static quality that belongs to a specific figure, rather than thinking of individual characters in the world it is far more useful for the writer to consider the notion of character-in-action-and-reaction. A story's energy comes from the degree to which its characters are warring elements, complemen-tary aspects that illuminate each other by contrast and conflict. The only practical reason for a particular character's existence, in fact, is to interact with other characters.

The published screenplay of Graham Greene's film script *The Third Man* contains descriptions (presumably written by Greene after the film was completed) of the story's four principal char-acters, followed by notes on subsidiary characters, those neces-sary as foils or for the development of the incidental action.[5] These are worth your study because they serve as a good model for the kind of thing I have asked you to attach to your efforts at writing Step Outlines.[6] When outlining character relationships it is important to be able to distinguish between those characters indispensable to the central theme and those needed only for the smooth mechanical running of the plot and its exposition.

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One reason why Greene's descriptions are interesting is that he defines his characters not as individual figures or separate elements but strictly in terms of their connections with the other principals. The main roles are envisaged as a web of tensions. Indeed, the pattern is very often a push-pull tug of war, one that takes triangular patterns where character A is torn between opposing connections represented by character B and character C. The pattern is built by successive steps that establish the dramatic interactions and tensions as they grow in force, making for ironies and surprise reversals that lead, by stages, to a final denouement of the main lines of tension. When called on to write similar descriptions of characters for your own story, you should do so as though you were looking from the point of view of the final resolution of their conflicts and relationships.[7]

7. Mackendrick was aware that director Peter Brook had written something similar when discussing *King Lear* in his book *The Empty Space*: 'Experimentally, we can approach *Lear* not as a linear narrative, but as a cluster of relationships.' (Penguin, 1990, first published 1968) p. 102.

Below: Character relationship map: *The Third Man*.

HOLLY MARTINS

CRABBIT

uses Crabbit to frustrate the police

-feels affection for Martins
-is ready to use him.
But is also ready to kill him

HARRY LIME

-feels old loyalty to Harry Lime
-is ready to defend his memory.
(later also some jealousy over Anna and moral outrage at the racket)

Acquaintances

admires Martins books

feels suspicion of

feels old loyalty to Harry Lime and his racketeers

mild contempt

Disinterested

indignation and anger

falls deeply

Harry's

in love with Lime still loyal after he is exposed as a criminal

Partners

-feels some pity and

is dedicated to the capture of Harry Lime

Nervous

then bitter

associates

and scared

SGT. PAINE

loyal to police

in love.

sympathy

BARON KURTZ

COLONEL CALLOWAY

Anna is more afraid of what Calloway can do to Lime than her own deportation

ANNA SCHMIDT

DOCTOR WINKEL

-has some sympathy for Anna but will use her to get Lime

traced Harbin's

veiled antagonism

ruthless in the deportation of Anna

connection to Lime

murder?

POPESCU

THE PORTER

THE RUSSIAN COLONEL

Previous murder?

HARBIN

WHAT IS A STORY?

19

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In any project that you have already worked on or that you have scripted and might be planning to make, can you answer these questions? It helps if you can be as specific as possible. (It is also useful to ask these questions of your favourite films.)

1 How many characters are there in your story? Select three that can be considered as principals. I tend to feel uneasy when a student explains that there is really only one character. As we have seen, drama normally involves a conflict between people, therefore you need at least two characters. Often it is more effective to have at least three because this gives the possibility of a triangular relationship, a bind involving a central figure who is pulled in opposite directions by two others. Note that there are examples of characters in films who have dramatic scenes in which no other character is present, but these tend to be of the kind where the environment itself plays the role of antagonist, placing the protagonist in some circumstances that require a reaction from him or her.

2 Who is your point-of-view character? Sometimes it can be difficult to decide between who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist. Though occasionally there are stories in which the audience is not invited to feel identification with any one of the characters, it is far more common to have a figure who represents the viewpoint of the story and who has a final 'objective' of some kind. Ask yourself: by the end of the story what does this character want to achieve? What is required is a character intention that will produce a dramatic action, a visible result on screen. As has been explained, for a character merely to express his or her feelings is seldom enough in cinema. There can be, of course, a negative objective: to prevent something from happening, but this too should be conceived as a result of action (a incident that can be photographed).

3 Can you define what obstacles there might be to this objective? Can you also identify some other character who is a personification of these obstacles? Such a character is the antagonist whose dramatic function is to create conflict with the central figure (though importantly this does not necessarily imply we have less sympathy with the antagonist than with

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the protagonist). Note that the existence of an antagonist in the story does not mean there is not also conflict *within* the central figure (where, for example, he is being pulled in conflicting directions by certain emotions or beliefs). There is, in fact, conflict within all well-defined protagonists, and many characters who seem tame when it comes to extroverted action will have clearly defined introverted tensions brought into the open at times by the antagonist for the audience to observe. Note too that in the buddy movie there is always some thread of conflict between the twin protagonists, one that typically climaxes somewhere in the third act. But whatever tension develops between these two characters, it will usually take second place to the dramatic conflict in which the twin heroes confront some third antagonistic faction. Their conflict is a subplot (often vaguely comical), a secondary case of character-in-action that runs parallel to the main narrative tension.

4 How does the conflict lead to crisis? What is at stake for the main characters? Is there a confrontation scene? In a well-constructed story the audience is held in expectation of what is called an obligatory scene brought about by a reversal (or, indeed, a series of reversals). Note that the obligatory scene, usually the denouement of a story, classically expresses the theme. It is an expression of the story's central moral, the point expressed as a generalisation as seen in character-in-action. (A good way of defining this moment, in fact many moments in a dramatic narrative, is to ask: 'Who does what with which to whom and why?')