THE STORY PROBLEM

THE DECLINE OF STORY

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

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

Traditionally humankind has sought the answer to Aristotle’s question from the four wisdoms—philosophy, science, religion, art—taking insight from each to bolt together a livable meaning.
But today who reads Hegel or Kant without an exam to pass? Science, once the great explicator, garbles life with complexity and perplexity. Who can listen without cynicism to economists, sociologists, politicians? Religion, for many, has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in traditional ideologies diminishes, we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of story.

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

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

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

Yet, while the ever-expanding reach of the media now gives us the opportunity to send stories beyond borders and languages to hun-
dreds of millions, the overall quality of storytelling is eroding. On occasion we read or see works of excellence, but for the most part we weary of searching newspaper ads, video shops, and TV listings for something of quality, of putting down novels half-read, of slipping out of plays at the intermission, of walking out of films soothing our disappointment with “But it was beautifully photographed…” The art of story is in decay, and as Aristotle observed twenty-three hundred years ago, when storytelling goes bad, the result is decadence.

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

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

By the 1990s script development in Hollywood climbed to over $500 million per annum, three quarters of which is paid to writers for options and rewrites on films that will never be made. Despite a
half-billion dollars and the exhaustive efforts of development personnel, Hollywood cannot find better material than it produces. The hard-to-believe truth is that what we see on the screen each year is a reasonable reflection of the best writing of the last few years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As for technique, what the novice mistakes for craft is simply his unconscious absorption of story elements from every novel, film, or play he’s ever encountered. As he writes, he matches his
work by trial and error against a model built up from accumulated reading and watching. The unschooled writer calls this "instinct," but it's merely habit and it's rigidly limiting. He either imitates his mental prototype or imagines himself in the avant-garde and rebels against it. But the haphazard groping toward or revolt against the sum of unconsciously ingrained repetitions is not, in any sense, technique, and leads to screenplays clogged with clichés of either the commercial or the art house variety.

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

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

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

Screenwriters abroad have had even less opportunity to study their craft. European academics generally deny that writing can, in any sense, be taught, and as a result, courses in Creative Writing have never been included in the curriculum of Continental univer-
sities. Europe does, of course, foster many of the world's most brilliant art and music academies. Why it's felt that one art is teachable, another not, is impossible to say. What's worse, disdain for screenwriting has, until recently, excluded it from study in all European film schools save Moscow and Warsaw.

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

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

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

THE STORY IMPERATIVE

When I moved to Los Angeles, I did what many do to keep eating and writing—I read. I worked for UA and NBC, analyzing screen and teleplay submissions. After the first couple hundred analyses, I felt I could write up in advance an all-purpose Hollywood story ana-
lyst's coverage and just fill in title and writer. The report I wrote over and over again went like this:

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

But I never wrote this report:

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

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

The sign on the door doesn't read "Dialogue Department" or "Description Department." It reads "Story Department." A good story makes a good film possible, while failure to make the story work virtually guarantees disaster. A reader who can't grasp this fundamental deserves to be fired. It's surprisingly rare, in fact, to
find a beautifully crafted story with bad dialogue or dull description. More often than not, the better the storytelling, the more vivid the images, the sharper the dialogue. But lack of progression, false motivation, redundant characters, empty subtext, holes, and other such story problems are the root causes of a bland, boring text.

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

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

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

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

If both TENDER MERCIES and RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK are wonderful stories beautifully told for the screen—and they are—what on earth do they have in common? If HANNAH AND HER SISTERS and MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL are both
brilliant comic stories delightfully told, and they are, where do they touch? Compare THE CRYING GAME to PARENTHOOD, TERMINATOR to REVERSAL OF FORTUNE, UNFORGIVEN to EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN. Or A FISH CALLED WANDA to MAN BITES DOG, WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT to RESERVOIR DOGS. Moving back through the decades, compare VERTIGO to 8½ to PERSONA to RASHOMON to CASABLANCA to GREED to MODERN TIMES to THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN—all superb screen stories, all vastly different, yet all produce the same result: an audience leaving the theatre exclaiming, “What a great story!”

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

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

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

**GOOD STORY WELL TOLD**

“Good story” means something worth telling that the world wants to hear. Finding this is your lonely task. It begins with talent. You
must be born with the creative power to put things together in a way no one has ever dreamed. Then you must bring to the work a vision that's driven by fresh insights into human nature and society, coupled with in-depth knowledge of your characters and your world. All that . . . and, as Hallie and Whit Burnett reveal in their excellent little book, a lot of love.

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

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

Just as a composer must excel in the principles of musical composition, so you must master the corresponding principles of story composition. This craft is neither mechanics nor gimmicks. It is the concert of techniques by which we create a conspiracy of
interest between ourselves and the audience. Craft is the sum total of all means used to draw the audience into deep involvement, to hold that involvement, and ultimately to reward it with a moving and meaningful experience.

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

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

**STORY AND LIFE**

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

In an office setting we meet a protagonist with a problem: She deserves a promotion but she's being passed over. Angry, she heads for her parents' home to discover that Dad's gone senile and Mom can't cope. Home to her apartment and a fight with her slobbish, conniving roommate. Now out on a date and smack into a failure to communicate: Her insensitive lover takes her to an expensive French restaurant, completely forgetting that she's on a diet. Back to the office where, amazingly, she gets her promotion . . . but new pres-
asures arise. Back at her parents' place, where just as she solves Dad's problem, Mom goes over the edge. Coming home she discovers that her roommate has stolen her TV and vanished without paying the rent. She breaks up with her lover, raids the refrigerator, and gains five pounds. But chin up, she turns her promotion into a triumph. A nostalgic heart-to-heart over a dinner with her folks cures Mom's woes. Her new roommate not only turns out to be an anal-retentive gem who pays the rent weeks ahead with cashier's checks, but introduces her to Someone New. We're now on page ninety-five. She sticks to her diet and looks great for the last twenty-five pages, which are the literary equivalent of running in slow-mo through daisies as the romance with Someone New blossoms. At last she confronts her Crisis Decision: whether or not to commit? The screenplay ends on a tearful Climax as she decides she needs her space.

Second is the "guaranteed commercial success" bad script:

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

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

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

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

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

CGI is neither a curse nor a panacea. It simply adds fresh hues to the story pallet. Thanks to CGI, anything we can imagine can be
done, and done with subtle satisfaction. When CGIs are motivated by a strong story, such as FORREST GUMP or MEN IN BLACK, the effect vanishes behind the story it’s telling, enriching the moment without calling attention to itself. The “commercial” writer, however, is often dazzled by the glare of spectacle and cannot see that lasting entertainment is found only in the charged human truths beneath the image.

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

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

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

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

Likewise, writers of spectacle must realize that abstractions are neutral. By abstractions I mean strategies of graphic design, visual
effects, color saturation, sound perspective, editing rhythm, and the like. These have no meaning in and of themselves. The identical editing pattern applied to six different scenes results in six distinctively different interpretations. The aesthetics of film are the means to express the living content of story, but must never become an end in themselves.

POWERS AND TALENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

**CRAFT MAXIMIZES TALENT**

Rare as story talent is, we often meet people who seem to have it by nature, those street-corner raconteurs for whom storytelling is as easy as a smile. When, for example, coworkers gather around the coffee machine, the storytelling begins. It’s the currency of human contact. And whenever a half-dozen souls gather for this mid-morning ritual, there will always be at least one who has the gift.
Let's say that this morning our storyteller tells her friends the story of “How I Put My Kids on the School Bus.” Like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, she hooks everyone’s attention. She draws them into her spell, holding them slack-jawed over their coffee cups. She spins her tale, building them up, easing them down, making them laugh, maybe cry, holding all in high suspense until she pays it off with a dynamite last scene: “And that’s how I got the little nosepickers on the bus this morning.” Her coworkers lean back satisfied, muttering, “God, yes, Helen, my kids are just like that.”

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

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

Story talent is primary, literary talent secondary but essential. This principle is absolute in film and television, and truer for stage and page than most playwrights and novelists wish to admit. Rare as story talent is, you must have some or you wouldn’t be itching to write. Your task is to wring from it all possible creativity. Only by using everything and anything you know about the craft of storytelling can you make your talent forge story. For talent without craft is like fuel without an engine. It burns wildly but accomplishes nothing.
A beautifully told story is a symphonic unity in which structure, setting, character, genre, and idea meld seamlessly. To find their harmony, the writer must study the elements of story as if they were instruments of an orchestra—first separately, then in concert.