TEXT AND SUBTEXT

Just as a personality structure can be disclosed through psychoanalysis, the shape of a scene's inner life can be uncovered through a similar inquiry. If we ask the right questions, a scene that speeds past in the reading and hides its flaws brakes into ultra-slow motion, opens up, and reveals its secrets.

If you feel a scene plays, don't fix what works. But often a first draft falls flat or seems forced. Our tendency then is to rewrite dialogue over and over, hoping that by paraphrasing speeches we can bring it to life... until we hit a dead end. For the problem won't be in the scene's activity but in its action: not in how characters are talking or behaving on the surface, but in what they're doing behind their masks. Beats build scenes, and the flaws of an ill-designed scene are in these exchanges of behavior. To find out why a scene fails, the whole must be broken into its parts. An analysis begins, therefore, by separating the scene's text from its subtext.

Text means the sensory surface of a work of art. In film it's the images onscreen and the soundtrack of dialogue, music, and sound effects. What we see. What we hear. What people say. What people do. Subtext is the life under that surface—thoughts and feelings both known and unknown, hidden by behavior.

Nothing is what it seems. This principle calls for the screenwriter's constant awareness of the duplicity of life, his recognition
that everything exists on at least two levels, and that, therefore, he
must write a simultaneous duality. First, he must create a verbal
description of the sensory surface of life, sight and sound, activity
and talk. Second, he must create the inner world of conscious and
unconscious desire, action and reaction, impulse and id, genetic
and experiential imperatives. As in reality, so in fiction: He must
veil the truth with a living mask, the actual thoughts and feelings of
characters behind their saying and doing.

An old Hollywood expression goes: “If the scene is about what
the scene is about, you’re in deep shit.” It means writing “on the
nose,” writing dialogue and activity in which a character’s deepest
thoughts and feelings are expressed by what the character says and
does—writing the subtext directly into the text.

Writing this, for example: Two attractive people sit opposite
each other at a candlelit table, the light glinting off the crystal wine-
glasses and the dewy eyes of the lovers. Soft breezes billow the cur-
tains. A Chopin nocturne plays in the background. The lovers reach
across the table, touch hands, look longingly in each others’ eyes,
say, “I love you, I love you” . . . and actually mean it. This is an
unactable scene and will die like a rat in the road.

Actors are not marionettes to mime gestures and mouth words.
They’re artists who create with material from the subtext, not the
text. An actor brings a character to life from the inside out, from
unspoken, even unconscious thoughts and feelings out to a surface
of behavior. The actors will say and do whatever the scene requires,
but they find their sources for creation in the inner life. The scene
above is unactable because it has no inner life, no subtext. It’s
unactable because there’s nothing to act.

When we reflect on our filmgoing, we realize we’ve witnessed
the phenomenon of subtext all our lives. The screen isn’t opaque
but transparent. When we look up at the screen, don’t we have the
impression that we’re reading minds and feelings? We constantly
say to ourselves, “I know what that character’s really thinking and
feeling. I know what’s going on inside her better than she does,
and I know it better than the guy she’s talking to because he’s busy
with his own agenda.”
In life our eyes tend to stop at the surface. We're so consumed by our own needs, conflicts, and daydreams that we rarely manage to take a step back and coolly observe what's going on inside other human beings. Occasionally we put a frame around a couple in the corner of a coffee shop and create a movie moment as we look through their smiles to the boredom beneath or through the pain in their eyes to the hope they have for each other. But rarely and only for a moment. In the ritual of story, however, we continuously see through the faces and activities of characters to depths of the unspoken, the unaware.

This is why we go to the storyteller, the guide who takes us beyond what seems to what is... at all levels and not for a mere moment but to the end of the line. The storyteller gives us the pleasure that life denies, the pleasure of sitting in the dark ritual of story, looking through the face of life to the heart of what is felt and thought beneath what's said and done.

How then might we write a love scene? Let two people change the tire on a car. Let the scene be a virtual textbook on how to fix a flat. Let all dialogue and action be about jack, wrench, hubcap, and lug nuts: “Hand me that, would ya?” “Watch out.” “Don’t get dirty.” “Let me... whoops.” The actors will interpret the real action of the scene, so leave room for them to bring romance to life wholly from the inside. As their eyes meet and sparks fly, we’ll know what’s happening because it’s in the unspoken thoughts and emotions of the actors. As we see through the surface, we’ll lean back with a knowing smile: “Look what happened. They’re not just changing the tire on a car. He thinks she’s hot and she knows it. Boy has met girl.”

In other words, write as these things happen in life. For if we give that candlelit scene to fine actors, they’ll smell the lie, refuse to act it, and walk off until the scene is cut or rewritten with an actable subtext. If the cast lacks the clout to demand a rewrite, then they’ll do this: They will put a subtext in the scene whether or not it has anything to do with the story. Good actors will not step in front of a camera without their subtext.

For example, an actor forced to do the candlelit scene might attack it like this: “Why have these people gone out of their way to
create this movie scene? What's with the candlelight, soft music, billowing curtains? Why don't they just take their pasta to the TV set like normal people? What's wrong with this relationship?" Because isn't that life? When do the candles come out? When everything's fine? No. When everything's fine we take our pasta to the TV set like normal people. So from that insight the actor will create a subtext. Now as we watch, we think: "He says he loves her and maybe he does, but look, he's scared he's losing her. He's desperate." Or from another subtext: "He says he loves her, but look, he's setting her up for bad news. He's getting ready to walk out."

The scene is not about what the scene seems to be about. It's about something else. And it's that something else—trying to regain her affection or softening her up for the breakup—that will make the scene work. There's always a subtext, an inner life that contrasts with or contradicts the text. Given this, the actor will create a multilayered work that allows us to see through the text to the truth that vibrates behind the eyes, voice, and gestures of life.

This principle does not mean that people are insincere. It's a commonsense recognition that we all wear a public mask. We say and do what we feel we should, while we think and feel something else altogether. As we must. We realize we can't go around saying and doing what we're actually thinking and feeling. If we all did that, life would be a lunatic asylum. Indeed, that's how you know you're talking to a lunatic. Lunatics are those poor souls who have lost their inner communication and so they allow themselves to say and do exactly what they are thinking and feeling and that's why they're mad.

In truth, it's virtually impossible for anyone, even the insane, to fully express what's going on inside. No matter how much we wish to manifest our deepest feelings, they elude us. We never fully express the truth, for in fact we rarely know it. Consider the situation in which we are desperate to express our truest thoughts and feelings—psychoanalysis: A patient lies on a couch, pouring his heart out. Wanting to be understood. No holds barred. No intimacy too private to reveal. And as he rips terrible thoughts and desires to the surface, what does the analyst do? Quietly nods and takes notes. And what's in those notes? What is not being said, the secret,
unconscious truths that lie behind the patient’s gut-wrenching confession. Nothing is what is seems. No text without a subtext.

Nor does this mean that we can’t write powerful dialogue in which desperate people try to tell the truth. It simply means that the most passionate moments must conceal an even deeper level.

CHINATOWN: Evelyn Mulwray cries out: “She’s my sister and my daughter. My father and I...” But what she doesn’t say is: “Please help me.” Her anguished confession is in fact a plea for help. Subtext: “I didn’t kill my husband; my father did... to possess my child. If you arrest me, he’ll take her. Please help me.” In the next beat Gittes says, “We’ll have to get you out of town.” An illogical reply that makes perfect sense. Subtext: “I’ve understood everything you’ve told me. I now know your father did it. I love you and I’m going to risk my life to save you and your child. Then I’m going after the bastard.” All this is underneath the scene, giving us truthful behavior without phony “on the nose” dialogue, and what’s more, without robbing the audience of the pleasure of insight.

STAR WARS: When Darth Vader offers Luke the chance to join him in running the universe, bringing “order to things,” Luke’s reaction is to attempt suicide. Again not a logical reaction, but one that makes perfect sense, for both Luke and the audience read Darth Vader’s subtext: Behind “bring order to things” is the unspoken implication “... and enslave billions.” When Luke attempts to kill himself, we read a heroic subtext: “I’ll die before I’d join your evil enterprise.”

Characters may say and do anything you can imagine. But because it’s impossible for any human being to tell or act the complete truth, because at the very least there’s always an unconscious dimension, the writer must layer in a subtext. And when the audience senses that subtext, the scene plays.

This principle also extends to the first-person novel, theatrical soliloquy, and direct-to-camera or voice-over narration. For if characters talk privately to us, that doesn’t mean for a moment that they know the truth or are capable of telling it.

ANNIE HALL: When Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) speaks directly to the audience “confessing” his fears and inadequacies, he also lies, dissembles, cajoles, exaggerates, and rationalizes, all in a
self-deceived effort to win us over and convince himself his heart’s in the right place.

Subtext is present even when a character is alone. For if no one else is watching us, we are. We wear masks to hide our true selves from ourselves.

Not only do individuals wear masks, but institutions do as well and hire public relations experts to keep them in place. Paddy Chayefsky’s satire HOSPITAL cuts to the core of that truth. Hospital staffs all wear white and act as if professional, caring, and scientific. But if you’ve ever worked inside a medical institution, you know that greed and ego and a touch of madness are invisibly there. If you want to die, go to a hospital.

The constant duality of life is true even for the inanimate. In Robert Rossen’s adaptation of Melville’s BILLY BUDD a man-o-war rests in tropical waters at night. Uncountable stars gleam above, all magnificently reflected in a black, calm sea. A low, full moon trails its light from the horizon to the ship’s prow. The limp sails tremble in the warm breezes. The cruel master-at-arms, Claggart (Robert Ryan) is holding watch. Billy (Terence Stamp) can’t sleep, so he comes out on deck, stands at the gunnels with Claggart, and remarks on what a beautiful evening it is. Claggart answers, “Yes, Billy, yes, but remember, beneath that glittering surface is a universe of gliding monsters.” Even Mother Nature wears her masks.

THE TECHNIQUE OF SCENE ANALYSIS

To analyze a scene you must slice into its pattern of behaviors at the levels of both text and subtext. Once properly examined, its flaws become vividly clear. Below is a five-step process designed to make a scene give up its secrets.

Step One: Define Conflict

First ask, who drives the scene, motivates it, and makes it happen? Any character or force might drive a scene, even an inanimate object or act of nature. Then look into both the text and subtext of this char-
acter or force, and ask: What does he (or it) want? Desire is always the key. Phrase this desire (or in the actor’s idiom: scene objective) as an infinitive: such as, “to do this . . .” or “to get that . . .”

Next, look across the scene and ask: What forces of antagonism block this desire? Again, these forces may come from any level or combination. After identifying the source of antagonism, ask: What do the forces of antagonism want? This too is best expressed as an infinitive: “Not to do that . . .” or “To get this instead . . .” If the scene is well written, when you compare the set of phrases expressing the desires from each side, you’ll see that they’re in direct conflict—not tangential.

**Step Two: Note Opening Value**

Identify the value at stake in the scene and note its charge, positive or negative, at the opening of the scene. Such as: “Freedom. The protagonist is at the negative, a prisoner of his own obsessive ambition.” Or: “Faith. The protagonist is at the positive, he trusts in God to get him out of this situation.”

**Step Three: Break the Scene into Beats**

A beat is an exchange of action/reaction in character behavior. Look carefully at the scene’s first action on two levels: outwardly, in terms of what the character seems to be doing, and, more important, look beneath the surface to what he is actually doing. Name this subtextual action with an active gerund phrase, such as “Begging.” Try to find phrases that not only indicate action but touch the feelings of the character. “Pleading” for example, suggests a character acting with a sense of formality, whereas “Groveling at her feet” conveys a desperate servility.

The phrases that express the action in the subtext do not describe character activity in literal terms; they go deeper to name the character’s essential action with emotive connotations.

Now look across the scene to see what reaction that action brought, and describe that reaction with an active gerund phrase. For example, “Ignoring the plea.”
This exchange of action and reaction is a beat. As long as it continues, Character A is “Groveling at her feet” but Character B is “Ignoring the plea,” it’s one beat. Even if their exchange repeats a number of times, it’s still one and the same beat. A new beat doesn’t occur until behavior clearly changes.

If, for example, Character A’s groveling changed to “Threatening to leave her” and in reaction Character B’s ignoring changed to “Laughing at the threat,” then the scene’s second beat is “Threatening/Laughing” until A and B’s behavior changes for a third time. The analysis then continues through the scene, parsing it into its beats.

**Step Four: Note Closing Value and Compare with Opening Value**

At the end of the scene, examine the value-charged condition of the character’s situation and describe it in positive/negative terms. Compare this note to the one made in Step Two. If the two notations are the same, the activity between them is a nonevent. Nothing has changed, therefore nothing has happened. Exposition may have been passed to the audience, but the scene is flat. If, on the other hand, the value has undergone change, then the scene has turned.

**Step Five: Survey Beats and Locate Turning Point**

Start from the opening beat and review the gerund phrases describing the actions of the characters. As you trace action/reaction to the end of the scene, a shape or pattern should emerge. In a well-designed scene, even behaviors that seem helter-skelter will have an arc and a purpose. In fact, in such scenes, it’s their careful design that makes the beats feel random. Within the arc locate the moment when the major gap opens between expectation and result, turning the scene to its changed end values. This precise moment is the Turning Point.

An analysis of the design of the following two scenes illustrates this technique.
CASABLANCA

Casablanca's Mid-Act Climax is played within a unity of time and place that puts emphasis on personal conflict and expresses its primary action verbally.

SYNOPSIS

Rick Blaine, an antifascist freedom fighter, and Ilsa Lund, a Norwegian expatriate, meet in Paris in 1940. They fall in love and begin an affair. He asks her to marry him, but she avoids an answer. Rick is on the Gestapo arrest list. On the eve of the Nazi invasion the lovers agree to meet at the train station and escape the city together. But Ilsa doesn't show. Instead, she sends a note saying she loves Rick but will never see him again.

A year later, Rick runs a cafe in Casablanca. He's become an isolate, determinedly neutral, uninvolved in all matters personal and political. As he says, "I stick my neck out for no man." He drinks too much and feels as if he has killed his former self. Then Ilsa walks in on the arm of Victor Laszlo, a renowned resistance leader. The lovers meet again. Behind their cocktail chat their passion is palpable. Ilsa leaves with Laszlo, but Rick sits in the dark cafe drinking through the night, waiting.

Hours after midnight she reappears. By now Rick is very maudlin and equally drunk. Ilsa tells him guardedly that she admires but doesn't love Laszlo. Then, before she can tell him that she loves him, Rick, in drunken bitterness, belittles her story by comparing it to one told in a brothel. Staring at her with a twisted smile he adds insult to injury: "Tell me. Who'd you leave me for? Was it Laszlo? Or were there others in between? Or aren't you the kind that tells?" This slur, implying she's a whore, sends her out the door as he collapses in drunken tears.
THE MID-ACT CLIMAX

The next day Ilsa and Laszlo go in search of black market exit visas. While he tries to make a deal in a cafe, she waits at a linen stall on the street. Seeing her alone, Rick approaches.

Step One: Define Conflict

Rick initiates and drives the scene. Despite inner conflict over the pain he has suffered since she abandoned him in Paris, and the anger he suppresses at seeing her with another man, Rick’s desire is clear: “To win Ilsa back.” His source of antagonism is equally clear: Ilsa. Her feelings are very complex and clouded by mixed emotions of guilt, regret, and duty. She loves Rick passionately and would go back to him if she could; but for reasons only she knows, she can’t. Caught between irreconcilable needs, Ilsa’s desire can be phrased as “To keep her affair with Rick in the past and move on with her life.” Although entangled with inner conflicts, their desires are in direct opposition.

Step Two: Note Opening Value

Love governs the scene. Rick’s insulting behavior in their last scene turned the value toward the negative, yet it leans to the positive because the audience and Rick see a ray of hope. In previous scenes Ilsa has been addressed as “Miss Ilsa Lund,” a single woman traveling with Laszlo. Rick wants to change that.

Step Three: Break the Scene into Beats

BEAT #1

EXT. BAZAAR—LINEN STALL

The sign over the Arab Vendor’s stall reads LINGERIE. He shows Ilsa a lace bed sheet.
Vendor's action: SELLING.

ARAB
You'll not find a treasure like this in all Morocco, Mademoiselle.

Just then, Rick walks up behind her.

Rick's action: APPROACHING HER.

Without looking Ilza senses his presence. She feigns interest in the lace.

Ilza's reaction: IGNORING HIM.

The Vendor holds up a sign reading 700 FRANCS.

ARAB
Only seven hundred francs.

BEAT #2

RICK
You're being cheated.

Rick's action: PROTECTING HER.

Ilza takes a second to compose herself. She glances at Rick, then with polite formality turns to the Vendor.

ILSA
It doesn't matter, thank you.

Ilza's reaction: REJECTING RICK'S ADVANCE.
To win Ilsa away from Lazlo, Rick’s first task is to break the ice—no easy task given the recriminations and angry emotions of their last scene. His warning seems to insult the Arab Vendor, who takes no offense, but in the subtext it hints at more: her relationship with Lazlo.

BEAT #3

ARAB
Ah . . . the lady is a friend of Rick’s? For friends of Rick we have a small discount. Seven hundred francs, did I say?
(holding up a new sign)
You can have it for two hundred.

RICK
I’m sorry I was in no condition to receive visitors when you called on me last night.

Rick’s action: APOLOGIZING.

ILSA
It doesn’t matter.

Ilsa’s reaction: REJECTING HIM AGAIN.

ARAB
Ah! For special friends of Rick’s we have a special discount.

He replaces the second sign with a third, reading 100 FRANCS.
Rick's protective action of the first beat comes naturally; the apology in the second beat is more difficult and rare. He masks his embarrassment by using an excessive formality to make light of it. Ilsa is unmoved.

BEAT *4

RICK
Your story left me a little confused. Or maybe it was the bourbon.

Rick's action: EXCUSE MAKING.

ARAB
I have some tablecloths, some napkins . . .

ILSA
Thank you, I'm really not interested.

Ilsa's reaction: REJECTING RICK FOR THE FOURTH TIME.

ARAB
(exiting hurriedly)
Only one moment . . . please . . .

The Arab vendor enriches the scene in a number of ways. He opens it in a comic tone to counterpoint a dark ending; he sells lace which adds connotations of weddings and the sexuality of lingerie; most importantly, however, he tries to sell Rick to Ilsa. The vendor's first line declares Rick a treasure. To demonstrate the power of Rick, the vendor drops his
price for “friends of Rick’s.” Then, hearing something about last night, the vendor cuts it even more for “special friends of Rick’s.”

This is followed by Rick’s second reference to his drinking, as he tries to make this take the blame for his insulting behavior. Ilse will hear none of it, and yet she stands and waits and it’s safe to assume she isn’t waiting to buy lace.

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**BEAT #5**

A small silence as she pretends to examine the lace goods.

RICK

Why’d you come back? To tell me why you ran out on me at the railway station?

Rick’s action: GETTING HIS FOOT IN THE DOOR.

ILSA

(quietly)

Yes.

Ilse’s reaction: OPENING THE DOOR A CRACK.

After hearing no four times in a row, Rick wants her to say yes to anything. So he asks a question that supplies its own answer. Her quiet yes opens the door—keeping the chain on, perhaps, but indicating she’s willing to talk.

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**BEAT #6**

RICK

Well, you can tell me now. I’m reasonably sober.
Rick's action: GETTING DOWN ON HIS KNEES.

ILSA
I don't think I will, Rick.

Ilsa's reaction: ASKING FOR MORE.

The taciturn Rick insults himself over his drinking for the third time. In his tough guy manner, this is begging, and it works. Ilsa demurs, opposing him in a mild, polite way, yet continuing her lace-buying guise. To paraphrase her subtext: “That begging was nice for a change. Could I hear a little more, please?”

BEAT #7

RICK
Why not? After all, I was stuck with the railroad ticket.
I think I'm entitled to know.

Rick's action: GUILT-TRIPPING HER.

ILSA
Last night I saw what has happened to you. The Rick I knew in Paris, I could tell him. He'd understand—but the Rick who looked at me with such hatred:

Ilsa's reaction: GUILT-TRIPPING HIM BACK.

These two people have a relationship. Each feels like the injured party, and each knows the sensitivity of the other so well that they hurt each other with ease.
BEAT #8

ILSA
(turning to look at
Rick)
I'll be leaving Casablanca
soon. We'll never see each
other again. We knew very
little about each other when
we were in love in Paris. If we
leave it that way, maybe we'll
remember those days—not
Casablanca—not last night—

Il'sa's action: SAYING GOODBYE.

Rick simply stares at her.

Rick's reaction: REFUSING TO REACT.

In the subtext, Il'sa's kind, forgiving prose is a clear goodbye. No matter how well-mannered, no matter how much her lan-
guage implies her love for Rick, this is the kiss-off: "Let's be
friends, let's remember the good times, and forget the bad."

Rick will have none of this. He reacts by refusing to react;
for ignoring someone's action is, of course, a reaction.
Instead he starts the next beat.

BEAT #9

RICK
(voice low and
intense)
Did you run out on me
because you couldn't take it?
Because you knew what it would be like, hiding from the police, running away all the time?

**Rick's action: CALLING HER A COWARD.**

**ILSA**

You can believe that if you want to.

**Ilsa's reaction: CALLING HIM A FOOL.**

Rick's had a year to figure out why she left him, and his best guess is that she was a coward. She, however, dares death with Laszlo every day, and so she insults him in return with a cool sarcasm that implies: "I don't care what you think; fools believe such nonsense; if you want to join them, believe it too."

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**BEAT #10**

**RICK**

Well, I'm not running away anymore. I'm settled now—above a saloon, it's true—but walk up a flight. I'll be expecting you.

**Rick's action: SEXUALLY PROPOSITIONING HER.**

Ilsa drops her eyes and turns away from Rick, her face shaded by the wide brim of her hat.

**Ilsa's reaction: HIDING HER REACTION.**
Despite her denials, he senses that her feelings lean the other way. He well remembers their sex life in Paris, and has seen the cold, aloof Laszlo. So he takes a chance and propositions her on the street. Again, it works. Ilsa too remembers, and hides her blush under her hat brim. For a moment Rick feels she’s within reach, but he can’t resist sticking his foot in his mouth.

BEAT #11

RICK
All the same, some day you’ll
lie to Laszlo—you’ll be there.

Rick’s action: CALLING HER A WHORE.

ILSA
No, Rick. You see, Victor
Laszlo is my husband.
And was . . .
(pause, coolly)
. . . even when I knew you in
Paris.

Ilsa’s reaction: CRUSHING HIM WITH THE NEWS.

With dignity and poise, Ilsa walks away, leaving the stunned Rick to stare after her.

Rick can’t contain the pain caused by Ilsa’s abandonment. As in the climax of their previous scene, he strikes out with a sexual slur, implying that she’ll betray Laszlo to come back to his bed. Called a slut for a second time, Ilsa reaches back for the hardest thing she has, and strikes Rick with it as hard as she can. Notice, however, that this is a half-truth; she doesn’t add that she thought her husband was
dead. Instead, she leaves a terrible implication in her wake: She was a married woman who used Rick in Paris, then walked out on him when her husband came back. Therefore, her love was never real. We know from the subtext that the opposite is the truth, but Rick is devastated.

**Step Four: Note Closing Value and Compare with Opening Value**

The Central Plot turns sharply from a hopeful positive to a negative at a darker depth than Rick could have imagined. For not only does Ilsa make it clear she doesn’t love him now; she implies she never did. Her secret marriage turns their Paris romance into a sham and Rick into a cuckold.

**Step Five: Survey the Beats and Locate the Turning Point**

1. Approaching Her/Ignoring Him
2. Protecting Her/Rejecting Him (and Arab)
3. Apologizing/Rejecting Him
4. Excuse Making/Rejecting Him (and Arab)
5. Getting His Foot in the Door/Opening the Door
6. Getting Down on His Knees/Asking for More
7. Guilt-Tripping Her/Guilt-Tripping Him
8. Saying Goodbye/Refusing to React
9. Calling Her a Coward/Calling Him a Fool
10. Sexually Propositioning Her/Hiding Her Reaction
11. Calling Her a Slut/Destroying His Hope

The action/reaction pattern builds a rapid progression of beats. Each exchange tops the previous beat, placing their love in greater and greater risk, demanding more and more willpower and capacity to take painful, even cruel actions, but at the same time remain in cool control.

The gap opens in the middle of the eleventh beat, on the revela-
tion that Ilsa was married to Laszlo while having an affair with Rick. Until this moment, Rick has hopes of winning her over, but with this Turning Point his hope is shattered.

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

In contrast to the stationary dialogue duet in CASABLANCA, the Climax of the Karin/God plot in THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY shifts from place to place with slight ellipses of time, involves four characters, anchors itself at the level of inner conflict, and conveys its primary action physically.

SYNOPSIS

For this film Bergman designed a Multiplot of six interconnected stories. The most powerful is the conflict between Karin and her “God.” She suffers from delusional schizophrenia. During a period of lucidity, she’s released from a hospital to join her family for a brief holiday at their cottage on an island in the Baltic. While she struggles to hold on to her sanity, she’s surrounded by weak, troubled men who turn to her for support.

David, Karin’s father, is outwardly kind but emotionally repressed. He’s a popular novelist but hounded by his lack of critical recognition. He prefers to observe life at a safe distance before cannibalizing it for his art. Karin wants her father to be happy and prays for his artistic success.

Karin’s husband, Martin, is an MD. She craves his understanding and approval; instead, he patronizes her like one of his patients and pesters her for sex.

Karin’s brother, Minus, is her only true intimate. She confides in him, telling him the secrets of her terrifying delusions, but he’s so troubled with adolescent sexuality and estrangement from his father that he gives her little consolation. Instead, Karin, sensing his fears, offers Minus comfort.
Soon Karin’s acute sensitivity (perhaps even psychic awareness) gives way to hallucination. She hears voices from behind an attic wall, telling her that God will appear. Scared, she turns to Martin, but he humiliates her over the lack of sex in their marriage. When she seeks out her father, he gently dismisses her like a child. Alone, Karin sneaks a look at her father’s diary and discovers that his only interest in her is as a character study for his next novel. She tries to tell her brother about the coming miracle of God’s visitation, but Minus is so confused and tormented by his cravings that he doesn’t understand. Suddenly, Karin’s madness takes a sexual turn. With feral intensity, she drags her brother down into incest.

When David discovers what has happened, he’s moved more by self-pity than by concern for his children. Amazingly, Karin sympathizes with him, and knowing that he’s only interested in her as story material, gives her father insights into her illness. Martin interrupts, declaring that he must take Karin back to the mental hospital. He calls for an ambulance and starts to pack.

**Step One: Define Conflict**

Karin drives the scene. She believes in her voices and desperately hopes to see God, not only for her own needs but for her men. She wants to give them her epiphany, perhaps to win acceptance, but more importantly to help their troubled lives. Her sources of antagonism are two: first, her husband. Martin is drawn to her sexually and pities her, but he can no longer cope with her madness, so he wants to take her away from her “God” and put her safely back in the hospital. The second, and more powerful, is herself. While she hopes to have a glimpse of heaven, her subconscious waits to give her a vision of hell.

**Step Two: Note Opening Value**

Hope, in a strange way, fills the opening of the scene. Karin is the most empathetic character in the film. We want her desire to see God to be fulfilled. Even if it’s a mad fantasy, it would give joy to a
tormented woman. Furthermore, her many psychic experiences earlier in the film have led us to suspect that she may not be hallucinating. We hold out hope for a supernatural event; Karin’s triumph over the self-centered men around her.

**Step Three: Break the Scene into Beats**

**BEAT #1**

**INT. COTTAGE BEDROOM—DAY**

Karin and Martin pack for the ambulance. Martin rummages through a chest of drawers, searching for a shirt. Karin’s thoughts seem far away as she struggles with an over stuffed suitcase.

**KARIN**

Your shirts are washed but not ironed.

**Karin’s action: PLANNING HER ESCAPE.**

**MARTIN**

I’ve got shirts in town anyway.

**Martin’s reaction: CONCEALING HIS GUILT.**

**KARIN**

Help me shut the case, please.

Martin wrestles with the lid, but a pair of shoes keeps the latch from catching. He takes them out and looks at them.

**MARTIN**

It’s my shoes. I can leave them here.
KARIN
Why not wear these and leave those?

MARTIN
(indicating the pair he is wearing)
These have to be mended.

He drops the shoes on the floor and hurriedly puts on his jacket. Karin slowly closes the suitcase lid.

This beat is almost comic. Karin’s dressed and packed, but Martin, like a boy needing a mother, fumbles around. She’s a psychiatric patient returning to electric shock treatments, yet remains practical and composed; he’s a doctor flustered over which shoes to wear. On the text Karin seems to be packing, but in the subtext she’s planning her next move. He’s so distracted by his guilty conscience, he doesn’t see that her outward calm conceals a mind scheming to pursue her “miracle” in the attic.

BEAT #2
Karin fingers the suitcase, quietly and thoughtfully. Then:

KARIN
Have you a headache pill?

Karin’s action: ESCAPING TO HER “GOD.”

MARTIN
(looking around the room)
Where’s the brown case?
Martin's reaction: HELPING HER.

KARIN
In the kitchen.

MARTIN
(remembering)
Yes, so it is.

Martin rushes into the

INT. KITCHEN—SAME

and finds his medical case on the table. He takes out some pills, fills a glass with water, then pads through the

INT. MAIN HALL—SAME

back to the

INT. BEDROOM—SAME

As he enters, a quick glance tells him that Karin's gone. Martin puts down the water and pills and rushes back into the

INT. MAIN HALL—SAME

looking for her.

Karin is more perceptive than Martin, but it's a measure of his self-absorption that she gives him the slip so easily. He knows schizophrenics can't be left alone, but his guilt over taking her back to the hospital has him doing everything possible to please her. His caring attitude isn't about her suffering but his.
BEAT #3

He glances outside, then runs to

INT. DAVID'S BEDROOM—SAME

and opens the door, surprising David at the window.

MARTIN

Seen Karin?

Martin's action: SEARCHING FOR KARIN.

DAVID

No.

David's reaction: HELPING HIM SEARCH.

As Martin leaves in a panic, David follows out into the

INT. MAIN HALL—SAME

where he and Martin exchange uncertain glances.

________________________________________________________________________

BEAT #4

Then suddenly they hear Karin's voice in WHISPERS ... upstairs.

Karin's action: PRAYING.

Martin prepares a sedative while David climbs the stairs.

David's reaction: RUSHING TO HER.

Martin's reaction: PREPARING TO RECAPTURE HER.
UPPER HALL

Karin's WHISPERS grow louder.

KARIN
(repeating the phrase)
Yes, I see, I see . . .

Karin's hallucination gives these men what they want. For Martin, the chance to play doctor; for David, the chance to observe his daughter's illness at its most dramatic.

BEAT #5
David quietly steps to an unused

INT. ATTIC ROOM—SAME

and opens the door a few inches to peer inside.

DAVID'S POV

through the half-opened door of Karin standing in the middle of the room, staring at a wall with a closed closet door. Her voice is formal and prayerlike as she nearly chants the words.

KARIN
(talking to the wall)
Yes, I quite see.

Karin's action: PREPARING FOR HER EPIPHANY.

ON DAVID

staring at his daughter, transfixed by the scene she's creating.
KARIN (OFFSCREEN)
I know it won’t be long now.

David’s reaction: OBSERVING KARIN’S MADNESS.

Martin, carrying his medical bag, joins David at the door. He glares at the sight of Karin talking to her imaginary listener.

KARIN (OS)
It’s good to know that. But we’ve been happy to wait.

Martin’s reaction: FIGHTING HIS EMOTIONS.

Karin supplicates before the voices behind the cracked wallpaper, but she’s been well aware of the efforts to find her and of the now watchful eyes of her father, the suppressed anger of her husband.

BEAT #6
Martin hurries into the room and over to Karin, who anxiously twists the beads around her neck and stares fixedly, reverently, at the wall and closet door.

Martin’s action: STOPPING HER HALLUCINATION.

KARIN
(to Martin)
Walk quietly! They say he’ll be here very soon. We must be ready.

Karin’s reaction: PROTECTING HER VISION.
BEAT #7

MARTIN
Karin, we’re going to town.

Martin’s action: PULLING HER AWAY.

KARIN
I can’t leave now.

Karin’s reaction: STANDING HER GROUND.

BEAT #8

MARTIN
You’re wrong, Karin.
(looking at the
closed door)
Nothing is happening in there.
(taking her
shoulders)
No God will come through the
door.

Martin’s action: DENYING THE EXISTENCE OF HER GOD.

KARIN
He’ll come at any moment.
And I must be here.

Karin’s reaction: DEFENDING HER FAITH.

MARTIN
Karin, it’s not so.
BEAT #9

KARIN

Not so loud! If you can’t be quiet, go.

Karin’s action: ORDERING MARTIN AWAY.

MARTIN

Come with me.

KARIN

Must you spoil it? Leave me alone.

As David watches from the door, Karin pulls away from Martin, who withdraws to a chair, sits down, and cleans his glasses.

Martin’s reaction: RETREATING.

Karin is simply stronger than Martin. Unable to match her powerful will, he gives up and withdraws.

BEAT #10

Karin kneels to face the wall and clasps her hands in prayer.

KARIN

Martin, dearest, forgive me for being so cross. But can’t you kneel down beside me? You look so funny sitting there. I know you don’t believe, but for my sake.
Karin’s action: DRAWING MARTIN INTO HER RITUAL.

Tears well up in Martin’s eyes, as in helpless anguish, he comes back to her and kneels.

Martin’s reaction: SURRENDERING TO HER.

All the while David watches from the doorway.

Karin wants everything to be perfect for the arrival of her God, so she brings the unbelieving Martin into her strange ritual.

BEAT #11

Martin takes Karin by the shoulders and buries himself in the crook of her neck, rubbing his tearful face against her skin.

MARTIN
Karin, dearest, dearest,
dearest.

Martin’s action: CARESSING HER.

Karin is repulsed. She pries his hand off and yanks away.

Karin’s reaction: FIGHTING HIM OFF.

Helpless in the face of her madness, Martin instinctively tries to seduce her out of her mania, but his caresses fail miserably.

BEAT #12

Karin folds her hands in front of her in prayer.
Karin's action: PRAYING WITH ALL HER POWER.

Suddenly an ear-splitting ROAR fills the room. Karin's eyes shift along the wall to the closet.

"God's" reaction: ANNOUNCING "GOD'S" ARRIVAL.

BEAT #13

The closet door swings open, seemingly of its own accord.

"God's" action: APPEARING TO KARIN.

Karin stands respectfully and smiles at something that seems to be emerging from the empty closet.

Karin's reaction: RECEIVING HER "GOD."

Outside the window, an ambulance helicopter descends from the sky.

In the background, David eyes the scene intently.

How and why does the door open by itself? Vibrations from the helicopter perhaps, but that's not a satisfactory explanation. By pure coincidence, just as Karin prays for a miracle, door and helicopter join forces to give it to her. Yet, amazingly, the action doesn't seem contrived. For Bergman's created, in Jungian terms, an event of Synchronicity: the fusion of meaningful coincidence around a center of tremendous emotion. By allowing us to hear Karin's voices, by showing us her acute sensitivity to nature, and by dramatizing her burning need for a miracle, we come to expect the supernatural. Karin's religious passion is at such a fever pitch that it creates a synchronous event that gives us a glimpse of something beyond the real.
BEAT #14
Karin stares into the closet; her face freezes as she sees something startling.

Karin’s “God’s” action: ATTACKING HER.

Suddenly, she screams in terror, and as if being pursued, runs across the room, jamming herself into a corner, bringing her legs and arms up to protect herself.

Karin’s reaction: FIGHTING OFF HER “GOD.”

BEAT #15
Martin grabs her.

Martin’s action: RESTRAINING HER.

She pushes him off and flees to another corner.

Karin’s reaction: ESCAPING MARTIN.

BEAT #16
As if something were crawling up her body, she presses her fists into her groin, then flails wildly at an unseen assailant.

“God’s” action: TRYING TO RAPE KARIN.

Karin’s reaction: BATTLING “GOD’S” RAPE.

Now David joins Martin and tries to hold her.

David’s reaction: HELPING HOLD HER.
BEAT #17

But she breaks away and rushes out of the door into the

INT. UPSTAIRS HALL—SAME

and down the stairs.

**Karin’s action:** FLEEING.

INT. ON THE STAIRS—SAME

Suddenly, Minus appears at the bottom.

Minus blocks her way. Karin stops and stares at her brother.

**Minus’s reaction:** TRAPPING HER.

BEAT #18

David grabs her and pulls her down onto the stairs. Martin arrives with a syringe. Karin fights like a trapped animal.

**Martin’s and David’s action:** SEDATING HER.

**MARTIN**

Hold her legs.

She thrashes in their arms as Martin struggles to give her an injection.

**Karin’s reaction:** WILDLY RESISTING THE NEEDLE.

BEAT #19

She leans against her father and looks steadily into the anxious face of her brother.
The sedative's action: CALMING HER.

Karen’s reaction: SURRENDERING TO THE DRUG.

David's and Martin's reaction: CALMING THEMSELVES.

Minus's reaction: TRYING TO UNDERSTAND.

BEAT #20

KARIN
I was suddenly afraid.

Karin’s action: WARNING MINUS.

All three men's reaction: LISTENING QUIETLY.

KARIN
(slowly explaining
to her brother)
The door opened. But the god that came out was a spider. He came towards me and I saw his face. It was a horrible, stony face. He crawled up me and tried to force himself into me. But I defended myself. The whole time I saw his eyes. They were calm and cold. As he couldn’t force his way into me, he climbed up onto my breast, onto my face and went up the wall.

(a long look into
Minus's eyes)
I have seen God.
Although the spider-god rape is a delusion thrown up from her subconscious, once back in reality she treats the hallucination with ironic respect. She offers her terrifying discovery to all three men, but primarily to Minus as a cautionary tale, warning her brother that prayers will not be answered.

Step Four: Note Closing Value and Compare with Opening Value

Karin’s encounter with the spider-god turns the scene from hope to hopelessness. She prays for an epiphany and gives this “miracle” to her father, knowing that because of his own incapacity for authentic emotion, he’s hungry for the life experiences of others to fill the pages of his novels. She offers faith to her husband, but his responses are limited to sexual gestures and medical posturing. Her “miracle” then explodes into a nightmare and her trust in God is shattered.

In the final beat, Karin gives her grotesque vision to her brother as a warning, but this last gesture is slight, compared to the scene’s dramatization of overwhelming despair. We’re left with the feeling that intellectualizing love, as the novelist and doctor do throughout the film, is pitifully weak in the face of the incomprehensible forces that inhabit our natures.

Step Five: Survey the Beats and Locate the Turning Point

1. Planning Her Escape/Concealing His Guilt
2. Escaping Her “God”/Helping Her
3. Searching for Karin/Helping Him Search
4. Praying/Rushing to Her and Preparing to Recapture Her
5. Preparing for Her Epiphany/Observing Her Madness and Fighting His Emotions.
6. Stopping Her Hallucination/Protecting Her Dream
7. Pulling Her Away/Standing Her Ground
8. Denying the Existence of God/Defending Her Faith
9. Ordering Martin Away/Retreating
10. Drawing Martin to Her Ritual/Surrendering to Her
11. Caressing Her/Fighting Him Off
12. Praying with All Her Power/Announcing “God’s” Arrival
13. Appearing to Karin/Receiving Her “God”
14. Attacking Karin/Fighting Off Her “God”
15. Restraining Her/Escaping Martin
16. Trying to Rape Karin/Battling “God”
17. Fleeing/Trapping Her
18. Sedating Her/Resisting the Needle
19. Calming Her/Calming Themselves and Trying to Understand
20. Warning Minus/Listening Quietly

Beats begin lightly, almost comically, then progress rapidly. Each action/reaction tops the previous exchange, demanding more from all the characters, and, in particular, demanding more and more willpower from Karin to survive her horrifying visions. The gap opens between Beats #13 and #14 when Karin’s expectation of God results in a sexual attack by a hallucinatory spider. Unlike the revelation that turns the scene from CASABLANCA, the Turning Point of this Climax pivots on action—in this case, an action of appalling power taken by the protagonist’s subconscious mind.

These superb scenes have been used to demonstrate the technique of analysis. Although they differ in levels of conflict and quality of actions, they share the same essential form. What is virtually perfect in them would be flawed in others of lesser worth. Ill-written scenes may lack conflict because desires are not opposed, may be antiprogressive because they’re repetitious or circular, lopsided because their Turning Points come too early or too late, or lacking credibility because dialogue and action are “on the nose.” But an analysis of a problematic scene that tests beats against scene objectives, altering behavior to fit desire or desire to fit behavior, will lead to a rewrite that brings the scene to life.