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CRISIS, CLIMAX, RESOLUTION

CRISIS

_Crisis_ is the third of the five-part form. It means decision. Characters make spontaneous decisions each time they open their mouths to say "this" not "that." In each scene they make a decision to take one action rather than another. But Crisis with a capital C is the ultimate decision. The Chinese ideogram for Crisis is two terms: Danger/Opportunity—"danger" in that the wrong decision at this moment will lose forever what we want; "opportunity" in that the right choice will achieve our desire.

The protagonist's quest has carried him through the Progressive Complications until he's exhausted all actions to achieve his desire, save one. He now finds himself at the end of the line. His next action is his last. No tomorrow, No second chance. This moment of dangerous opportunity is the point of greatest tension in the story as both protagonist and audience sense that the question "How will this turn out?" will be answered out of the next action.

The Crisis is the story's Obligatory Scene. From the Inciting Incident on, the audience has been anticipating with growing vividness the scene in which the protagonist will be face to face with the most focused, powerful forces of antagonism in his existence. This is the dragon, so to speak, that guards the Object of Desire: be it the literal dragon of _JAWS_ or the metaphorical dragon of meaning-
lessness in TENDER MERCIES. The audience leas into the Crisis filled with expectation mingled with uncertainty.

The Crisis must be true dilemma—a choice between irreconcilable goods, the lesser of two evils, or the two at once that places the protagonist under the maximum pressure of his life.

This dilemma confronts the protagonist who, when face-to-face with the most powerful and focused forces of antagonism in his life, must make a decision to take one action or another in a last effort to achieve his Object of Desire.

How the protagonist chooses here gives us the most penetrating view of his deep character, the ultimate expression of his humanity.

This scene reveals the story’s most important value. If there’s been any doubt about which value is central, as the protagonist makes the Crisis Decision, the primary value comes to the fore.

At Crisis the protagonist’s willpower is most severely tested. As we know from life, decisions are far more difficult to make than actions are to take. We often put off doing something for as long as possible, then as we finally make the decision and step into the action, we’re surprised by its relative ease. We’re left to wonder why we dreaded doing it until we realize that most of life’s actions are within our reach, but decisions take willpower.

CRISIS WITHIN THE CLIMAX

The action the protagonist chooses to take becomes the story’s consummate event, causing a positive, negative, or ironically positive/negative Story Climax. If, however, as the protagonist takes the climactic action, we once more pry apart the gap between expectation and result, if we can split probability from necessity just one more time, we may create a majestic ending the audience will treasure for a lifetime. For a Climax built around a Turning Point is the most satisfying of all.
We’ve taken the protagonist through progressions that exhaust one action after another until he reaches the limit and thinks he finally understands his world and knows what he must do in a last effort. He draws on the dregs of his willpower, chooses an action he believes will achieve his desire, but, as always, his world won’t cooperate. Reality splits and he must improvise. The protagonist may or may not get what he wants, but it won’t be the way he expects.

Compare STAR WARS with THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: At the Crisis of STAR WARS Luke Skywalker attacks the “Death Star,” a manmade fortress as huge as a planet. But it’s not fully constructed. A vulnerable slot lies open on one side of the sphere. Luke must not only attack into the slot, but hit a vulnerable spot within it. He’s an expert fighter pilot but tries without success to hit the spot. As he maneuvers his craft by computer, he hears the voice of Obi-Wan Kenobi: “Go with the Force, go with the Force.”

A sudden dilemma of irreconcilable goods: the computer versus the mysterious “Force.” He wrestles with the anguish of choice, then pushes his computer aside, flies by instinct into the slot, and fires a torpedo that hits the spot. The destruction of the Death Star climaxes the film, a straight action out of the Crisis.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, by contrast, corkscrews its Climax: Face to face with Darth Vader, Luke is met by a Crisis of courage. Irreconcilable goods: He could attack and kill Vader, or he could flee and save his life. The lesser of two evils: He could attack Vader and be killed, or he could flee, making him a coward and betraying his friends. Luke musters his courage and chooses to fight. However, when Vader suddenly steps back and says: “You can’t kill me, Luke . . . I’m your father.” Luke’s reality splinters. In a flash he realizes the truth and now must make yet another Crisis Decision: whether to kill his father.

Luke confronts the agony of this decision and chooses to fight. But Vader cuts off his hand and Luke drops to the deck. Still, it’s not over. Vader announces that he wants Luke to join his campaign to bring “order to things” in the universe. A second Gap opens as Luke realizes that his father doesn’t want him dead, he’s offering him a job. He must make a third Crisis Decision, a lesser-of-two-
evils dilemma: to join the "dark side" or take his own life? He makes the heroic choice, and as these Gaps explode, the Climax delivers deep rushes of insight uniting two films.

Placement of the Crisis

The location of the Crisis is determined by the length of the climactic action.

Generally, Crisis and Climax happen in the last minutes and in the same scene.

THELMA & LOUISE: At Crisis the women brave the lesser of two evils: imprisonment versus death. They look at each other and make their Crisis Decision to "go for it," a courageous choice to take their own lives. They immediately drive their car into the Grand Canyon—an unusually brief Climax elongated by filming it in slow-motion and freeze-framing on the car suspended over the abyss.

However, in other stories the Climax becomes an expansive action with its own progressions. As a result, it's possible to use the Crisis Decision to turn the Penultimate Act Climax, filling all of the final act with climactic action.

CASABLANCA: Rick pursues Ilsa until she surrenders to him in the Act Two Climax, saying that he must make the decisions for everyone. In the next scene, Laszlo urges Rick to rejoin the antifascist cause. This irreconcilable-goods dilemma turns the act on Rick's selfless Crisis Decision to return Ilsa to Laszlo and put wife and husband on the plane to America, a character-defining choice that reverses his conscious desire for Ilsa. The third act of CASABLANCA is fifteen minutes of climactic action that unravels Rick's surprise-filled scheme to help the couple escape.

In rarer examples the Crisis Decision immediately follows the Inciting Incident and the entire film becomes climactic action.

JAMES BOND: Inciting Incident: Bond is offered the task of hunting down an arch-villain. Crisis Decision: Bond takes the assignment—a right/wrong choice and not a true dilemma, for it would never occur to him to choose otherwise. From this point on,
all Bond films are an elaborate progression of a single action: the pursuit of the villain. Bond never makes another decision of substance, simply choices of which ploys to use in the pursuit.

LEAVING LAS VEGAS has the identical form. Inciting Incident: the protagonist is fired and given a sizable severance check. He immediately makes his Crisis Decision to go to Las Vegas and drink himself to death. From this point on the film becomes a sad progression toward death as he follows his desire.

IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES: Inciting Incident: Lovers meet within the first ten minutes and decide to abandon society and normalcy for a life of sexual obsession. The remaining hundred minutes are devoted to sexual experimentations that eventually lead to death.

The great risk of placing the Crisis on the heels of the Inciting Incident is repetitiousness. Whether it's high-budget action repeating patterns of chase/fight, chase/fight, or low-budget repetitions of drinking/drinking/drinking or lovemaking/lovemaking/lovemaking, the problems of variety and progression are staggering. Yet mastery of this task may produce brilliance, as it did in the examples above.

**Design of the Crisis**

Although the Crisis Decision and climactic action usually take place in continuous time within the same location at the very end of the telling, it's not uncommon for the Crisis decision to occur in one location, the Story Climax later in another setting.

The value of love in KRAMER VS. KRAMER turns negative at the Act Two Climax as a judge awards custody to Kramer's ex-wife. As Act Three opens Kramer's lawyer lays out the situation: Kramer has lost, but he could win on appeal. To do so, however, he'll have to put his son on the witness stand and make the child choose with whom he wants to live. The boy will probably choose his father, and Kramer will win. But to put a child at this tender age in public and force him to choose between his mother and his father will psychologically scar him for life. A double dilemma of the needs of self versus the needs of
another, the suffering of the self versus the suffering of another. Kramer looked up and said, “No, I can’t do that.” Cut to the Climax: a walk in Central Park and a river of tears as the father explains to his son how their life will be now that they’ll live apart.

If the Crisis takes place in one location and the Climax later in another, we must splice them together on a cut, fusing them in filmic time and space. If we do not, if we cut from the Crisis to other material—a subplot, for example—we drain the pent-up energy of the audience into an anticlimax.

The Crisis decision must be a deliberately static moment.

This is the Obligatory Scene. Do not put it offscreen, or skim over it. The audience wants to suffer with the protagonist through the pain of this dilemma. We freeze this moment because the rhythm of the last movement depends on it. An emotional momentum has built to this point, but the Crisis damns its flow. As the protagonist goes through this decision, the audience leans in, wondering: “What’s he going to do? What’s he going to do?” Tension builds and builds, then as the protagonist makes a choice of action, that compressed energy explodes into the Climax.

THELMA & LOUISE: This Crisis is masterfully delayed as the women stutter over the word “go.” “I say, let’s go.” “Go? What do you mean ‘go’?” “Well . . . just go.” “You mean . . . go?” They hesitate and hesitate as tension builds and the audience prays they won’t kill themselves but at the same time is thrilled by their courage. As they put the car in gear, the dynamite of compacted anxiety blasts into the Climax.

THE DEER HUNTER: Michael stalks to the top of a mountain. But with his prey in his sights, he pauses. Tension builds and tightens as the moment extends and the audience dreads the killing of this beautiful elk. At this Crisis point the protagonist makes a decision that takes him through a profound change of character. He lowers his weapon and transforms within from a man who takes life to a man who saves life. This stunning reversal turns the Penultimate Act Climax. The pent-up compassion in the audience pours into the story’s last movement as Michael now
rushes back to Vietnam to save his friend's life, filling the final act with rising climactic action.

**CLIMAX**

Story Climax is the fourth of the five-part structure. This crowning Major Reversal is not necessarily full of noise and violence. Rather, it must be full of meaning. If I could send a telegram to the film producers of the world, it would be these three words: "Meaning Produces Emotion." Not money; not sex; not special effects; not movie stars; not lush photography.

**MEANING:** A revolution in values from positive to negative or negative to positive with or without irony—a value swing at maximum charge that's absolute and irreversible. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience.

The action that creates this change must be "pure," clear, and self-evident, requiring no explanation. Dialogue or narration to spell out it out is boring and redundant.

This action must be appropriate to the needs of the story. It may be catastrophic: The sublime battle sequence that climaxes GLORY, or outwardly trivial: A woman rises from a quiet talk with her husband, packs a suitcase, and goes out the door. That action, in the context of ORDINARY PEOPLE, is overwhelming. At Crisis, the values of family love and unity tip toward the positive as the husband desperately exposes his family's bitter secret. But at Climax, the moment his wife walks out, they swing to an absolute, irreversible negative. If, on the other hand, she were to stay, her hatred of her son might finally drive the boy to suicide. So her leaving is then toned with a positive counterpoint that ends the film on a painful, but overall negative, irony.

The Climax of the last act is your great imaginative leap. Without it, you have no story. Until you have it, your characters wait like suffering patients praying for a cure.
Once the Climax is in hand, stories are in a significant way rewritten backward, not forward. The flow of life moves from cause to effect, but the flow of creativity often flows from effect to cause. An idea for the Climax pops unsupported into the imagination. Now we must work backward to support it in the fictional reality, supplying the hows and whys. We work back from the ending to make certain that by Idea and Counter-Idea every image, beat, action, or line of dialogue somehow relates to or sets up this grand payoff. All scenes must be thematically or structurally justified in the light of the Climax. If they can be cut without disturbing the impact of the ending, they must be cut.

If logic allows, climax subplots within the Central Plot’s Climax. This is a wonderful effect; one final action by the protagonist settles everything. When Rick puts Laszlo and Ilsa on the plane in CASABLANCA, he settles the Love Story main plot and the Political Drama subplot, converts Captain Renault to patriotism, kills Major Strasser, and, we feel, is the key to winning World War II... now that Rick is back in the fight.

If this multiplying effect is impossible, the least important subplots are best climaxed earliest, followed by the next most important, building overall to Climax of the Central Plot.

William Goldman argues that the key to all story endings is to give the audience what it wants, but not the way it expects. A very provocative principle: First of all, what does the audience want? Many producers state without blinking that the audience wants a happy ending. They say this because up-ending films tend to make more money than down-ending films.

The reason for this is that a small percentage of the audience won’t go to any film that might give it an unpleasant experience. Generally their excuse is that they have enough tragedy in their lives. But if we were to look closely, we’d discover that they not only avoid negative emotions in movies, they avoid them in life. Such people think that happiness means never suffering, so they never feel anything deeply. The depth of our joy is in direct proportion to what we’ve suffered. Holocaust survivors, for example, don’t avoid dark films. They go because such stories resonate with their past and are deeply cathartic.
In fact, down-ending films are often huge commercial successes: DANGEROUS LIAISONS, eighty million dollars; THE WAR OF THE ROSES, one hundred fifty million; THE ENGLISH PATIENT, two hundred twenty-five million. No one can count THE GODFATHER, PART II's money. For the vast majority doesn't care if a film ends up or down. What the audience wants is emotional satisfaction—a Climax that fulfills anticipation. How should THE GODFATHER, PART II end? Michael forgives Fredo, quits the mob, and moves to Boston with his family to sell insurance? The Climax of this magnificent film is truthful, beautiful, and very satisfying.

Who determines which particular emotion will satisfy an audience at the end of a film? The writer. From the way he tells his story from the beginning, he whispers to the audience: "Expect an up-ending" or "Expect a down-ending" or "Expect irony." Having pledged a certain emotion, it'd be ruinous not to deliver. So we give the audience the experience we've promised, but not in the way it expects. This is what separates artist from amateur.

In Aristotle's words, an ending must be both "inevitable and unexpected." Inevitable in the sense that as the Inciting Incident occurs, everything and anything seems possible, but at Climax, as the audience looks back through the telling, it should seem that the path the telling took was the only path. Given the characters and their world as we've come to understand it, the Climax was inevitable and satisfying. But at the same time it must be unexpected, happening in a way the audience could not have anticipated.

Anyone can deliver a happy ending—just give the characters everything they want. Or a downer—just kill everybody. An artist gives us the emotion he's promised . . . but with a rush of unexpected insight that he's withheld to a Turning Point within the Climax itself. So that as the protagonist improvises his final effort, he may or may not achieve his desire, but the flood of insight that pours from the gap delivers the hoped-for emotion but in a way we could never have foreseen.

The Turning Point within the Climax of LOVE SERENADE is a recent and perfect example. This brilliant Gap hurls the audience back through the entire film to glimpse with shock and delight the
maniacal truth that has been lurking beneath every scene.

The key to a great film ending, as François Truffaut put it, is to create a combination of "Spectacle and Truth." When Truffaut says "Spectacle," he doesn't mean explosive effects. He means a Climax written, not for the ear, but the eye. By "Truth" he means Controlling Idea. In other words, Truffaut is asking us to create the Key Image of the film—a single image that sums up and concentrates all meaning and emotion. Like the coda of a symphony, the Key Image within the climactic action echoes and resonates all that has gone before. It is an image that is so tuned to the telling that when it's remembered the whole film comes back with a jolt.

GREED: McTeague collapsing into the desert, chained to the corpse he just killed. THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE: Fred C. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) dying as the wind blows his gold dust back into the mountains. LA DOLCE VITA: Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni) smiling good-bye to his ideal woman—an ideal, he realizes, that doesn't exist. THE CONVERSATION: The paranoid Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) gutting his apartment in search of a hidden microphone. THE SEVENTH SEAL: The Knight (Max von Sydow) leading his family into oblivion. THE KID: The Little Chap (Charlie Chaplin) taking the Kid (Jackie Coogan) by the hand to lead him to a happy future. SLING BLADE: Karl Childers (Billy Bob Thornton) staring in blood-chilling silence out of the window of the lunatic asylum. Key Images of this quality are rarely achieved.

RESOLUTION

The Resolution, the fifth of the five-part structure, is any material left after Climax and has three possible uses.

First, the logic of the telling may not provide an opportunity to climax a subplot before or during the Climax of the Central Plot, so it'll need a scene of its own at the very end. This, however, can be awkward. The story's emotional heart is in the main plot. Moreover, the audience will be leaning toward the exits, yet forced to sit through a scene of secondary interest.
The problem can be solved, however.

THE IN-LAWS: The daughter of Dr. Sheldon Kornpett (Alan Arkin) is engaged to be married to the son of Vince Ricardo (Peter Falk). Vince is a crazed CIA agent who virtually kidnaps Sheldon out of his dental office and carries him off on a mission to stop a lunatic dictator from destroying the international monetary system with counterfeit twenty-dollar bills. The Central Plot climaxes with Vince and Sheldon fending off a firing squad, bringing down the dictator, then secretly pocketing five million dollars each.

But the marriage subplot has been left open. So writer Andrew Bergman cut from the firing squad to a Resolution scene outside the wedding. As the party waits impatiently, the fathers arrive by parachute, wearing tuxedos. Each gives his respective son and daughter a cash gift of $1 million. Suddenly a car screeches up and an angry CIA agent gets out. Tension tightens. It looks as if the main plot is back and the fathers will be busted for stealing the ten million. The stern-faced CIA agent stalks up and is indeed angry. Why? Because he wasn’t invited to the wedding. What’s more, he took up a collection at the office and has a fifty-dollar U.S. Savings Bond for bride and groom. The fathers accept his lavish gift and welcome him to the festivities. FADE OUT.

Bergman tweaked the main plot in the Resolution. Imagine if it had ended in front of the firing squad, then cut to a garden wedding with happy families reunited. The scene would have dragged on as the audience squirmed in its seats. But by bringing the Central Plot back to life for just a moment, the screenwriter gave it a comic false twist, yoked his Resolution back to the body of the film, and held tension to the end.

A second use of a Resolution is to show the spread of climactic effects. If a film expresses progressions by widening into society, its Climax may be restricted to the principal characters. The audience, however, has come to know many supporting roles whose lives will be changed by the climactic action. This motivates a social event that satisfies our curiosity by bringing the entire cast to one location where the camera can track around to show us how these lives have been changed: the birthday party, the picnic at the beach,
an Easter Egg hunt in STEEL MAGNOLIAS, a satiric title roll in ANIMAL HOUSE.

Even if the first two uses don’t apply, all films need a Resolution as a courtesy to the audience. For if the Climax has moved the filmgoers, if they’re laughing helplessly, riveted with terror, flushed with social outrage, wiping away tears, it’s rude suddenly to go black and roll the titles. This is the cue to leave, and they will attempt to do so jangling with emotion, stumbling over one another in the dark, dropping their car keys on the Pepsi-sticky floor. A film needs what the theatre calls a “slow curtain.” A line of description at the bottom of the last page that sends the camera slowly back or tracking along images for a few seconds, so the audience can catch its breath, gather its thoughts, and leave the cinema with dignity.