THE PRINCIPLE OF ANTAGONISM

In my experience, the principle of antagonism is the most important and least understood precept in story design. Neglect of this fundamental concept is the primary reason screenplays and the films made from them fail.

THE PRINCIPLE OF ANTAGONISM: A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them.

Human nature is fundamentally conservative. We never do more than we have to, expend any energy we don’t have to, take any risks we don’t have to, change if we don’t have to. Why should we? Why do anything the hard way if we can get what we want the easy way? (The “easy way” is, of course, idiosyncratic and subjective.) Therefore, what will cause a protagonist to become a fully realized, multidimensional, and deeply empathetic character? What will bring a dead screenplay to life? The answer to both questions lies on the negative side of the story.

The more powerful and complex the forces of antagonism opposing the character, the more completely realized character and story must become. “Forces of antagonism” doesn’t necessarily refer to a specific antagonist or villain. In appropriate genres arch-villains, like the Terminator, are a delight, but by “forces of antagonism” we mean
the sum total of all forces that oppose the character's will and desire.

If we study a protagonist at the moment of the Inciting Incident and weigh the sum of his willpower along with his intellectual, emotional, social, and physical capacities against the total forces of antagonism from within his humanity, plus his personal conflicts, antagonistic institutions, and environment, we should see clearly that he's an underdog. He has a chance to achieve what he wants—but only a chance. Although conflict from one aspect of his life may seem solvable, the totality of all levels should seem overwhelming as he begins his quest.

We pour energy into the negative side of a story not only to bring the protagonist and other characters to full realization—roles to challenge and attract the world's finest actors—but to take the story itself to the end of the line, to a brilliant and satisfying climax.

Following this principle, imagine writing for a super-hero. How to turn Superman into an underdog? Kryptonite is a step in the right direction, but not nearly enough. Look at the ingenious design Mario Puzo created for the first SUPERMAN feature.

Puzo pits Superman (Christopher Reeve) against Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman), who engineers a diabolical plot to launch two nuclear rockets simultaneously in opposite directions, one aimed at New Jersey, the other at California. Superman can't be in two places at once, so he'll have to make the lesser-of-two-evils choice: Which to save? New Jersey or California? He chooses New Jersey.

The second rocket hits the San Andreas Fault and starts an earthquake that threatens to heave California into the ocean. Superman dives into the fault and fuses California back to the continent through the friction of his own body. But... the earthquake kills Lois Lane (Margot Kidder).

Superman kneels in tears. Suddenly, the visage of Jor-El (Marlon Brando) appears and says: "Thou shalt not interfere with human destiny." A dilemma of irreconcilable goods: his father's sacred rule versus the life of the woman he loves. He violates his father's law, flies around the Earth, reverses the spin of the planet, turns back time, and resurrects Lois Lane—a happily-ever-after fantasy, taking Superman from underdog to a virtual god.
TAKING STORY AND CHARACTER TO THE END OF THE LINE

Does your story contain negative forces of such power that the positive side must gain surpassing quality? Below is a technique to guide your self-critique and answer that critical question.

Begin by identifying the primary value at stake in your story. For example, Justice. Generally, the protagonist will represent the positive charge of this value; the forces of antagonism, the negative. Life, however, is subtle and complex, rarely a case of yes/no, good/evil, right/wrong. There are degrees of negativity.

First, the Contradictory value, the direct opposite of the positive. In this case, Injustice. Laws have been broken.

![Diagram of Justice and Injustice]

Between the Positive value and its Contradictory, however, is the Contrary: a situation that's somewhat negative but not fully the opposite. The Contrary of justice is unfairness, a situation that's negative but not necessarily illegal: nepotism, racism, bureaucratic delay, bias, inequities of all kinds. Perpetrators of unfairness may not break the law, but they're neither just nor fair.

![Diagram of Justice, Unfairness, and Injustice]

The Contradictory, however, is not the limit of human experience. At the end of the line waits the Negation of the Negation, a force of antagonism that's doubly negative.
Our subject is life, not arithmetic. In life two negatives don’t make a positive. In English double negatives are ungrammatical, but Italian uses double and even triple negatives so that a statement feels like its meaning. In anguish an Italian might say, “Non ho niente mia!” (I don’t have nothing never!). Italians know life. Double negatives turn positive only in math and formal logic. In life things just get worse and worse and worse.

A story that progresses to the limit of human experience in depth and breadth of conflict must move through a pattern that includes the Contrary, the Contradictory, and the Negation of the Negation.

(The positive mirror image of this negative declension runs from Good to Better to Best to Perfect. But for mysterious reasons, working with this progression is of no help to the storyteller.)

Negation of the Negation means a compound negative in which a life situation turns not just quantitatively but qualitatively worse. The Negation of the Negation is at the limit of the dark powers of human nature. In terms of justice, this state is tyranny. Or, in a phrase that applies to personal as well as social politics: “Might Makes Right.”

Consider TV detective series: Do they go to the limit? The protagonists of Spenser: For Hire, Quincy, Columbo, and Murder, She Wrote represent justice and struggle to preserve this ideal. First,
they face unfairness: Bureaucrats won’t let Quincy do the autopsy, a politician pulls strings to get Columbo off the case, Spenser’s client lies to him. After struggling through gaps of expectation powered by forces of unfairness, the cop discovers true injustice: A crime has been committed. He defeats these forces and restores society to justice. The forces of antagonism in most crime dramas rarely reach beyond the Contradictory.

Compare this pattern to MISSING, a fact-based film about American Ed Horman (Jack Lemmon), who searched Chile for a son who disappeared during a coup d’etat. In Act One he meets unfairness: The U.S. ambassador (Richard Venture) feeds him half-truths, hoping to dissuade his search. But Horman perseveres. At the Act Two Climax he uncovers a grievous injustice: The junta murdered his son . . . with the complicity of the U.S. State Department and the CIA. Horman then tries to right this wrong, but in Act Three he reaches the end of the line—persecution without hope of retribution.

Chile is in the grip of tyranny. The generals can make illegal on Tuesday what you did legally on Monday, arrest you for it on Wednesday, execute you on Thursday, and make it legal again Friday morning. Justice does not exist; the tyrant makes it up at his whim. MISSING is a searing revelation of the final limits of injustice . . . with irony: Although Horman couldn’t indict the tyrants in Chile, he exposed them onscreen in front of the world—which may be a sweeter kind of justice.

The Black Comedy . . . AND JUSTICE FOR ALL goes one step further. It pursues justice full cycle back to the Positive. In Act One attorney Arthur Kirkland (Al Pacino) struggles against unfairness: the Baltimore Bar Association pressures him to inform against other lawyers while a cruel judge (John Forsythe) uses red tape to block the retrial of Kirkland’s innocent client. In Act Two he confronts injustice: The same judge is charged with brutally beating and raping a woman.

But the judge has a scheme: It’s well known that the judge and attorney hate each other. Indeed, the lawyer recently punched the judge in public. So the judge will force this lawyer to represent him
in court. When Kirkland appears to defend him, press and jury will perceive the judge as innocent, believing that no lawyer who hates a man would defend him unless he knew for certain that the accused was innocent, and is there on principle. The lawyer tries to escape this jam but hits the Negation of the Negation, a "legal" tyranny of high-court judges who blackmail him to represent their friend. If he doesn't, they'll expose a past indiscretion of his and have him disbarred.

The lawyer, however, battles through unfairness, injustice, and tyranny by breaking the law: He steps in front of the jury and announces that his client "did it." He knows that his client is the rapist, he says, because his client told him. He destroys the judge in public and wins justice for the victim. And although this stunt ends the lawyer's career, justice now shines like a diamond, for it isn't the momentary justice that comes when criminals are put behind bars, but the grand justice that brings down tyrants.

The difference between the Contradictory and the Negation of justice is the difference between the relatively limited and temporary power of those who break the law versus the unlimited and enduring power of those who make the law. It's the difference between a world where law exists and a world where might makes right. The absolute depth of injustice is not criminality, but "legal" crimes committed by governments against their own citizens.

Below are more examples to demonstrate how this declension works in other stories and genres. First, love:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{LOVE} \\
\text{POSITIVE} \\
\text{NEGATION OF THE} \\
\text{NEGATION} \\
\text{SELF-HATE} \\
\end{array}
\quad
\begin{array}{c}
\text{INDIFFERENCE} \\
\text{CONTRARY} \\
\text{CONTRADICTORY} \\
\text{HATE} \\
\end{array}
\]
To hate other people is bad enough, but even a misanthrope loves one person. When self-love vanishes and a character loathes his own being, he reaches the Negation of the Negation and existence becomes a living hell: Raskolnikov in CRIME AND PUNISHMENT.

A second variation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{LOVE} & \quad \text{INDIFFERENCE} \\
\text{POSITIVE} & \quad \text{CONTRARY} \\
\text{NEGATION} & \quad \text{CONTRADICTORY} \\
\text{OF THE} & \quad \text{HATE} \\
\text{NEGATION} & \quad \text{MASQUERADING} \\
\text{HATRED} & \quad \text{AS LOVE}
\end{align*}
\]

With whom would you rather have a relationship? With someone who hates you and honestly admits it, or with someone you know hates you but pretends to love you? This is what lifts ORDINARY PEOPLE and SHINE to the heights of Domestic Drama. Many parents hate their children, many children hate their parents, and they fight and scream and say it. In these fine films, although a parent bitterly resents and secretly hates his or her child, they pretend to love him. When the antagonist adds that lie, the story moves to the Negation of the Negation. How can a child defend himself against that?
When the primary value is truth:

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<tr>
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<td>CONTRARY</td>
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<table>
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<td>SELF-DECEPTION</td>
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White lies are the Contrary because they're often told to do good: lovers waking up with pillow creases branded across their faces, telling each other how beautiful they look. The blatant liar knows the truth, then buries it to gain advantage. But when we lie to ourselves and believe it, truth vanishes and we're at the Negation of the Negation: Blanche in A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE.

If the positive were Consciousness, being fully alive and aware:

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<th>CONSCIOUSNESS</th>
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<td>SELF-DECEPTION</td>
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This is the declension of Horror films in which the antagonist is supernatural: DRACULA, ROSEMARY'S BABY. But we don't have to be religious to grasp the meaning of damnation. Whether or not hell exists, this world provides its own Infernos, plights in which death would be a mercy and we'd beg for it.
Consider THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE. Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey) seems fully alive and aware. Then we learn that he's been brainwashed by posthypnotic suggestion, a form of unconsciousness. Under this power he commits a string of murders, including that of his own wife, but does so with a degree of innocence, for he's a pawn in a vicious conspiracy. But when he recovers his mind and realizes what he's done and what's been done to him, he's taken down to hell.

He learns he was brainwashed on the order of his incestuous, power-mad mother, who's using him in a plot to seize control of the White House. Raymond could risk his life to expose his traitorous mother or kill her. He chooses to kill, not only his mother but his stepfather and himself as well, damning the three at once in a shocking climax at the Negation of the Negation.

If the positive were wealth:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{RICH} & \text{MIDDLE-CLASS} \\
\text{POSITIVE} & \text{CONTRARY} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{NEGATION} & \text{CONTRADICTION} \\
\text{OF THE} & \text{POOR AND} \\
\text{NEGATION} & \text{SUFFERING THE} \\
\text{RICH BUT} & \text{SUFFERING THE} \\
\text{SUFFERING THE} & \text{PAINS OF POVERTY} \\
\text{PAINS OF POVERTY} & \\
\end{array}
\]

In WALL STREET Gekko feels impoverished because no amount of money is enough. A billionaire, he acts as if he were a starving thief, grasping for money at any illegal opportunity.
If the positive were open communication between people:

COMMUNICATION  \[\rightarrow\] ALIENATION  
POSITIVE \[\rightarrow\] CONTRARY

NEGATION OF THE NEGATION  \[\rightarrow\] CONTRADICTORY  
INSANITY \[\rightarrow\] ISOLATION

The Contrary has many varieties—silence, misunderstanding, emotional blocks. The all-inclusive term "alienation" means a situation of being with people, but feeling cut off and unable to fully communicate. In isolation, however, there's no one to talk to except yourself. When you lose this and suffer a loss of communication within your mind, you're at the Negation of the Negation and insane: Trelkovsky in THE TENANT.

Full achievement of ideals or goals:

SUCCESS  \[\rightarrow\] COMPROMISE  
POSITIVE \[\rightarrow\] CONTRARY

NEGATION OF THE NEGATION  \[\rightarrow\] CONTRADICTORY  
SELLING OUT \[\rightarrow\] FAILURE

Compromise means "settling for less," the willingness to fall short of your ideal but not surrender it completely. The Negation of the Negation, however, is something people in show business have to guard against. Thoughts such as: "I can't make the fine films I'd like to make . . . but there's money in pornography": THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS and MEPHISTO.
Intelligence:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{WISDOM} & \rightarrow \text{IGNORANCE} \\
\text{POSITIVE} & \rightarrow \text{CONTRARY}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{NEGATION} & \rightarrow \text{CONTRADICTORY} \\
\text{OF THE} & \rightarrow \text{STUPIDITY} \\
\text{NEGATION} & \rightarrow \text{PERCEIVED AS} \\
\text{STUPIDITY} & \rightarrow \text{INTELLIGENCE}
\end{align*}
\]

Ignorance is temporary stupidity due to a lack of information, but stupidity is resolute, no matter how much information is given. The Negation of the Negation cuts both ways: inwardly, when a stupid person believes he's intelligent, a conceit of numerous comic characters, or outwardly, when society thinks a stupid person is intelligent: BEING THERE.

Liberty:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{FREEDOM} & \rightarrow \text{RESTRAINT} \\
\text{POSITIVE} & \rightarrow \text{CONTRARY}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{NEGATION} & \rightarrow \text{CONTRADICTORY} \\
\text{OF THE} & \rightarrow \text{SLAVERY} \\
\text{NEGATION} & \rightarrow \text{PERCEIVED AS} \\
\text{SLAVERY} & \rightarrow \text{FREEDOM}
\end{align*}
\]

Restraint has many shades. Laws bind us but make civilization possible, while imprisonment is fully negative, although society finds it useful. The Negation of the Negation works two ways. Inwardly: Self-enslavement is qualitatively worse than slavery. A slave has his free will and would do all he could to escape. But to corrode your willpower with drugs or alcohol and turn yourself into
a slave is far worse. Outwardly: *Slavery perceived as freedom* impels the novel and films 1984.

Courage:

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  BRAVERY
    POSITIVE
  \      /  \
  |    |    |
  \    |    /  \
  NECATION OF THE NECATION
  COWARDICE
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A courageous person can be temporarily stifled when fear strikes, but eventually he acts. The coward does not. *The end of the line* is reached, however, when a coward takes an action that outwardly appears courageous: A battle rages around a foxhole. In it a wounded officer turns to a coward and says: “Jack, your buddies are running out of ammo. Take these boxes of shells through the minefield or they’ll be overrun.” So the coward takes out his gun . . . and shoots the officer. At first glance we might think it would take courage to shoot an officer, but we’d soon realize that this was an act at the sheer limit of cowardice.

In COMING HOME Captain Boy Hyde (Bruce Dern) shoots himself in the leg to get out of Vietnam. Later, at the Crisis of his subplot Hyde faces the lesser of two evils: life with its humiliation and pain versus death with its dread of the unknown. He takes the easier path and drowns himself. Although some suicides are courageous, such as those of political prisoners on a hunger strike, in most cases the suicide reaches *the end of the line* and takes an action that may appear brave but lacks the courage to live.
Loyalty:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{LOYALTY} & \quad \text{SPLIT ALLEGIANCE} \\
\text{POSITIVE} & \quad \text{CONTRARY} \\
\text{NEGATION} & \quad \text{CONTRADICTION} \\
\text{OF THE} & \quad \text{SELF-BETRAYAL} \\
\text{NEGATION} & \quad \text{BETRAYAL}
\end{align*}
\]

Contrary: A married woman falls in love with another man, but doesn’t act on it. Secretly, she feels loyalty to both men, but when her husband learns of it, he sees her split allegiance as a betrayal. She defends herself, arguing that she didn’t sleep with the other man, so she was never disloyal. The difference between feeling and action is often subjective.

In the mid-nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was losing its grip on Cyprus and the island was soon to fall to British rule. In \textit{Pascali's Island}, Pascali (Ben Kingsley) spies for the Turkish government, but he’s a frightened man whose bland reports go unread. This lonely soul is befriended by a British couple (Charles Dance and Helen Mirren) who offer him a happier life in England. They’re the only people who have ever taken Pascali seriously, and he’s drawn to them. Although they claim to be archaeologists, in time he suspects they’re British spies (split allegiance) and betrays them. Only when they’re killed does he discover they were antiquity thieves after an ancient statue. His betrayal tragically betrays his own hopes and dreams.
At the Inciting Incident of BIG the adolescent Josh Baskin (David Moscow) is transformed into what appears to be a thirty-two-year-old man (Tom Hanks). The film jumps immediately to the Negation of the Negation, then explores the grays and blacks of negativity. When Josh and his boss (Robert Loggia) tap dance on a toy piano at F.A.O. Schwartz, this is childish, but more positive than negative. When Josh and his coworker (John Heard) play "keep away" on the handball court, this is perfectly childish. In fact, we come to realize that the whole adult world is a playground full of children playing corporate "keep away."

At the Crisis Josh faces irreconcilable goods: an adult life with a fulfilling career and the woman he loves versus a return to adolescence. He makes the mature choice to have his childhood, expressing with a fine irony that he has at last become "big." For he and we sense that the key to maturity is to have had a complete childhood. But because life has short-changed so many of us in youth, we live, to one degree or another, at the Negation of the Negation of maturity. BIG is a very wise film.

Lastly, consider a story in which the positive value is sanctioned natural sex. Sanctioned meaning condoned by society; natural meaning sex for procreation, attendant pleasure, and an expression of love.

Under the Contrary falls acts of extramarital and premarital sex that, although natural, are frowned on. Society often does more
than frowned on prostitution, but it's arguably natural. Bigamy, polygamy, polyandry, and interracial and common-law marriage are condoned in some societies, unsanctioned in others. Chastity is arguably unnatural, but no one's going to stop you from being celibate, while sex with someone who has taken a vow of celibacy, such as a priest or a nun, is frowned on by the Church.

Under the Contradictory, humanity seems to know no limit of invention: voyeurism, pornography, satyriasis, nymphomania, fetishism, exhibitionism, frottage, transvestism, incest, rape, pedophilia, and sadomasochism, to name only a few acts that are unsanctioned and unnatural.

Homosexuality and bisexuality are difficult to place. In some societies they're thought natural, in others, unnatural. In many Western countries homosexuality is sanctioned; in some Third World countries it's still a hanging offense. Many of these designations may seem arbitrary, for sex is relative to social and personal perception.

But common perversions are not the end of the line. They're singular and committed, even with violence, with another human being. When, however, the sexual object is from another species—bestiality—or dead—necrophilia—or when compounds of perversities pile up, the mind revolts.

CHINATOWN: The end of the line of sanctioned natural sex is not incest. It's only a Contradictory. In this film the Negation of the Negation is incest with the offspring of your own incest. This is why Evelyn Mulwray risks her life to keep her child from her
father. She knows he's mad and will do it again. This is the motivation for the murder. Cross killed his son-in-law because Mulwray wouldn't tell him where his daughter by his daughter was hiding. This is what will happen after the Climax as Cross covers the terrified child's eyes and pulls her away from her mother's horrific death.

The principle of the Negation of the Negation applies not only to the tragic but to the comic. The comic world is a chaotic, wild place where actions must go to the limit. If not, the laughs falls flat. Even the light entertainment of Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers films touched the end of the line. They turned on the value of truth as Fred Astaire traditionally played a character suffering from self-deception, telling himself he was in love with the glitzy girl when we knew that his heart really belonged to Ginger.

Fine writers have always understood that opposite values are not the limit of human experience. If a story stops at the Contradictory value, or worse, the Contrary, it echoes the hundreds of mediocrities we suffer every year. For a story that is simply about love/hate, truth/lie, freedom/slavery, courage/cowardice, and the like is almost certain to be trivial. If a story does not reach the Negation of the Negation, it may strike the audience as satisfying—but never brilliant, never sublime.

All other factors of talent, craft, and knowledge being equal, greatness is found in the writer's treatment of the negative side.

If your story seems unsatisfying and lacking in some way, tools are needed to penetrate its confusions and perceive its flaws. When a story is weak, the inevitable cause is that forces of antagonism are weak. Rather than spending your creativity trying to invent likable, attractive aspects of protagonist and world, build the negative side to create a chain reaction that pays off naturally and honestly on the positive dimensions.

The first step is to question the values at stake and their progression. What are the positive values? Which is preeminent and turns the Story Climax? Do the forces of antagonism explore all shades of negativity? Do they reach the power of the Negation of the Negation at some point?
Generally, progressions run from the Positive to the Contrary in Act One, to the Contradictory in later acts, and finally to the Negation of the Negation in the last act, either ending tragically or going back to the Positive with a profound difference. BIG, on the other hand, leaps to the Negation of the Negation, then illuminates all degrees of immaturity. CASABLANCA is even more radical. It opens at the Negation of the Negation with Rick living in fascist tyranny, suffering self-hatred and self-deception, then works to a positive climax for all three values. Anything is possible, but the end of the line must be reached.